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Ambivalence toward bureaucracy: Responses from Korean school principals

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Abstract

Purpose – Given the context of accountability-driven policy environments, research has shown that school leaders perceive bureaucratic rules and protocols in negative ways, but they also utilize organizational structures and routines to lead changes. To better understand both enabling and hindering mechanisms of bureaucracy in schools, this study explores how Korean school principals understand and perceive bureaucratic structures using a lens of ambivalence. The authors draw on Weber's theory of bureaucracy, with a particular focus on the paradoxical aspect of bureaucracy that might be experienced by individuals within the system.

Design/methodology/approach – This study analyzed qualitative data collected from 26 in-depth interviews with 10 Korean school principals between 2013 and 2015. The authors used the multiple cycles of coding to explore patterns and themes that emerged from the participants' responses.

Findings – The analysis of this study showed that the participants' ambivalent responses toward bureaucracy were particularly salient in

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three areas where formal organizational structures were changing through policy initiatives: teacher evaluation, electronic approval system and school-based management promoting decentralized decision making. The study participants reflected on how such changes can enable and/or hinder schools to achieve organizational goals and collective values, from the viewpoints of multiple aspects, which led to their ambivalent responses to bureaucratic structures in school settings.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the understanding of school organizations by revisiting Weber's theory of bureaucracy in school settings. Using the lens of ambivalence enabled us to reconcile school principals' contradictory perceptions toward bureaucracy, which complicates analyses of tensions and paradoxical responses found in leadership practices within school systems.

Keywords: Leadership, South Korea, Bureaucracy, School principal, Organizational structure, Ambivalence

Introduction

While bureaucracy has been often described as an evil in schools (Labaree, 2020), Weber's theory of bureaucracy has influenced a broad range of educational research, such as developing formal models in organizational theories (e.g. Scott and Davis, 2015) and role of organizational routines in making changes in schools (e.g. Datnow *et al.*, 2020; Hubers *et al.*, 2017; Sherer and Spillane, 2011). From the perspective of school management, existing studies have suggested that individual leaders understand and perceive bureaucratic structures in schools as enabling and hindering simultaneously. For example, Hoy and Sweetland (2001) analyzed enabling and coercive structures as part of school bureaucracy. They found bureaucratic structures that can be characterized as formalization and centralization in schools are on a continuous axis from enabling to hindering. In enabling schools, school principals and teachers work cooperatively beyond status lines, confirming that hierarchy and rules function to support teachers work rather than to increase the power of the school principal. At the same time, blinded obedience to rules and protocols may decrease individuals' job satisfaction and productivity (Hoy and Sweetland, 2000), which can force alienation of individuals (Kakabadse, 1986).

More recently, given the context of accountability, researchers have framed a bureaucratic model relying on standardized assessment and prescribed curriculum as undermining professional autonomy and creativity in education (Darling-Hammond, 2004). In response, research in educational leadership has examined school leaders' perceptions of and responses to bureaucratic rules, protocols, formalized evaluation and laws that are imposed by accountabilities. Findings of these studies suggest that, while school leaders perceive externally mandated rules in negative ways, they also utilize these structures and organizational routines to lead changes in schools (Datnow *et al.*, 2020; Hubers *et al.*, 2017; Kim, 2020a; Kim *et al.*, 2021). In such contexts, leaders' utilization of routines is described as a critical tool to navigating tensions between accountability forces and autonomy in leading changes (Datnow *et al.*, 2020; Hubers *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, research on equity leadership informed by organizational improvement has shown that leaders can promote equity, social justice and democracy through organizational routines—formal roles, division of labor, professional development, meetings—as part of the organizational improvement (Dowd and Liera, 2018; Irby, 2018; Welton *et al.*, 2018), although the existing routines can also hinder realizing changes that leaders intended. These findings imply that school leaders may often face both positive and negative feelings toward bureaucracy in schools.

To better understand both enabling and hindering mechanisms of bureaucracy in school contexts, we turn to Weber's theory of bureaucracy in which he argued that bureaucracy is indispensable to all social organizations in modern life. In particular, we focus on the paradox of bureaucracy: its methods of bureaucratic administration composing *formal rationality*— specialization, authority and formalization that are developed to achieve organizational goals efficiently—work against the realization of *substantive rationality*—the realization of ultimate values such as freedom, democracy and creativity, which can cause tensions and changes (Jeffee, 2001). The paradoxical elements residing in the bureaucracy often lead individuals to counter ambivalent perceptions (e.g. Gouldner, 1954; Adler and Borys, 1996; Sinden *et al.*, 2004). However, little has been known about how leaders experience and reconcile contradicting feelings and perceptions toward the bureaucratic structure in schools.

This study aims to explore how school leaders, particularly school principals, understand and perceive bureaucratic structures as they lead changes and improvement at the school level. We use the lens of ambivalence (Ashforth *et al.*, 2014) to reconcile contradictory perceptions toward the same subject of bureaucracy to complicate individuals' paradoxical responses, which has been overlooked in existing research. Using ambivalence as an analytic lens will provide a new perspective of interpreting elements of Weber's bureaucracy in school organizations that are often understood as professional bureaucracy having more flexibility for actors in the system, compared to other business organizations or purely administrative organizations.

We chose to analyze interview data collected with school principals in South Korea (hereafter Korea). The context of Korea offers a unique setting for bureaucratic structures as all public schools are government institutions ruled by a centralized educational authority at the national level, the Ministry of Education. While the Korean education system has been traditionally centralized, the government has made efforts to decentralize school management for the recent three decades (Kim, 2020b). It can be assumed that school principals experience dynamic changes in bureaucratic structures in the middle a series of school reforms, thereby encountering both positive and negative orientations toward such changes (Joo and Kim, 2015; Ryu and Kim, 2012). Therefore, the Korean context is relevant to examine individual principals' responses toward bureaucracy using the lens of ambivalence.

Theoretical perspectives

Weber's view on bureaucracy

For Weber, the concept of bureaucracy is an ideal type, an abstraction constructed to underline the rational properties of bureaucratic administration. Weber (1968) distinguishes the features of bureaucracy from those of traditional rules and processes in that bureaucracy favors "precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction, and of material and personal costs" (p. 973). Waters and Waters (2015) summarized three foundations of Weber's bureaucracy:

> There is a rigid division of labor for the purpose of performing regular daily tasks as official duties in the functioning of the bureaucratically governed system; second, chains of commands are fully established and divided, their capacities to coerce is firmly restricted by regulations; and third, regular and continuous fulfilment of these duties, and for the execution of the corresponding rights is systemically secured by hiring people with certified qualifications. (p. 76)

Weber (1968) viewed the bureaucratization process as the process of rationalization with the mechanism, depersonalization and oppressive routine. He assumed that once bureaucracy is established, it becomes a permanent machine and bureaucracy can work for anyone in control of it. Although Weber (1968) assumes bureaucratization is inevitable and the most efficient form of organization, he worried about depersonalization problems of bureaucracy. To solve this problem, he suggested having a charismatic leader in the system, arguing that the top of a bureaucratic organization is needed to have an element which is not entirely bureaucratic (Weber, 1947, 1968).

Individuals in bureaucracy. One of the main questions for Weber was rationalization (Habermas, 1984). From an administrative perspective, it can be considered as a process of territories of bureaucracy replacing those of politics, which is viewed as a *clash between formal rationality of bureaucracy and substantive rationality of politics*. Under the formal rationality, instrumentally rational actions seek to find the most effective means in order to achieve given aims, by utilizing means-ends calculations. Regarding substantive rationality, value-rational actions seek to maintain the internal consistency in interpreting systems which determine values in pursuing goals. Thus, the problem in bureaucracy from Weber's view is that there is no means to realize substantive rationality; bureaucratic rationality is always instrumental, which makes it impossible to enable responsible politics (Lee, 2008).

Given this, officials in bureaucracy are considered as technicians who are responsible for means to achieve given goals, not for goals themselves. Officials are forced to ignore rationality of end-results through training and socialization in the organization (Weber, 1968).

Regardless of critics of bureaucracies, a *bureaucratic self* is created through continuous compliances to rules and regulations voluntarily. Also, rules and regulations sometimes become tools to esteem emotions of honor and status in a society where the status of officials is high. That is, Weber (1968) described micro-psychological changes in bureaucracy, which transfers individual officials into functionary human beings, by using rules, compensation and cultural symbols. Based on this view, bureaucracy as a dominant system exerts power to fetter individuals internally and externally in modern society, like an "iron cage," achieving a level of efficiency at the expense of alienation (Weber, 1958).

Ambivalence of bureaucracy: organizational perspectives

According to Weber, bureaucracy is described as "a Janus-faced organization, looking two ways at once. On the one side, it was administration based on expertise; while on the other, it was administration based on discipline" (as cited in Gouldner, 1954, p. 22). Research has expanded Weber's views on "Janus-faced organization" by exploring both positive and negative effects of bureaucratic organizations experienced by individuals within bureaucratic systems (e.g. Gouldner, 1954; Adler and Borys, 1996; Sinden *et al.*, 2004). In reviewing findings from such empirical studies, Adler (2012) pointed out that, individuals experience a specific bureaucratic structure as both enabling and coercive, thereby the same policy or structure appears to be having "simultaneously contrary effects" (p. 245).

    To reconcile these different aspects, ambivalence has been a useful lens to capture both positive and negative sides of bureaucracy experienced by individuals. Ambivalence refers to "simultaneously oppositional positive and negative orientations toward an object, which includes cognition (I think about X) and/or emotion (I feel about X)" (Ashforth *et al.*, 2014, p. 1,455). Ashforth *et al.* (2014) distinguishes behavioral tendencies and behavior itself from ambivalence in that former ones are regarded as outcomes of ambivalence, by focusing on a cognitive-emotional dimension of ambivalence. In addition, unlike inconsistency or uncertainty, ambivalence is understood as having oppositional orientations toward an object (Ashforth *et al.*, 2014). For example, Merton (1976) suggests that this ambivalence is pervasive

in organizational lives, particularly for those of leaders in a hierarchal system because they have power to lead followers while being responsible for the impacts of their actions on the future of the organization that they lead. They live with "troubled doubts" and have to deal with "the contradictions" of their positions (Merton, 1976, p. 73). Increasing complexity in today's organizations, particularly in education, expect individual leaders to play multiple and contradictory roles, deal with multifaceted goals and problems (Kim, 2020a; Keddie, 2014; Stone-Johnson, 2014). Therefore, ambivalence is a useful lens to analyze leaders' contradicting perceptions toward organizational structures in their complex work life.

Contradicting views on school bureaucracy

Research in education has often described bureaucratic structures having negative influence on teachers and administrators in schools, but some researchers recognize its enabling features depending on positionality that individuals take (Labaree, 2020). For example, in his historical investigation of bureaucracy in American education, Labaree (2020) argued that bureaucracy of schools are the "contradictory values of liberal democracy" (p. 54). From the perspective of education as private good, bureaucracy as hindering individuals' pursuing private interests that may promote unequal outcomes, while from the perspective of education as public good, bureaucracy can hinder a dominant group sustaining privilege by treating everyone within the system as equal (Labaree, 2020). This ambivalent views on school bureaucracy can be often found in school organizations.

Regarding organizational perspectives, Hoy and Sweetland (2001) analyzed enabling and coercive structures as part of bureaucracy in schools. They found bureaucratic structures in schools are on a continuous axis from enabling to hindering. To analyze these features, formalization and centralization are frequently used for criteria. Formalization refers to "the system of written rules, regulations, and procedures that specify routine practices" (Wu *et al.*, 2013, p. 117). Formalization can help or hinder organizational operations. For example, enabling rules or procedures provide a set of guidelines that reflect the "best practices" and assist followers in dealing with confronting difficulties (Adler and Borys, 1996). In addition, flexibility in

general rules to substitute professional judgment can enable than hinder finding solutions (Kim *et al.*, 2021; Sinden *et al.*, 2004; Wu *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, these enabling functions can support educators' motivation to learn, job satisfaction and organizational learning. On the other hand, researchers have reported that formalization can be coercive when rules and procedures are used to punish and force blind obedience. For example, instead of promoting, coercive rules punish mistakes and breaking the rules, demand uniformity and force to compliance (Sinden *et al.*, 2004). In consequence, work productivity decreases (Hoy and Sweetland, 2000), individuals feel high rates of stress (Rousseau, 1978), and they can experience alienation (Kakabadse, 1986). This shows that more restrictive rules and procedures can further hinder, especially in dynamic situations of today's schooling, which requires flexible and adaptive strategies.

Centralization, another element of bureaucratic structures, refers to "the hierarchy of authority that controls organizational decision making" (Wu *et al.*, 2013, p. 117). In highly centralized organizations, such as in Weber's bureaucracy, the power and authority for making decisions are centralized at a few elites of the top level; flow directly from top-down. In contrast, low centralization relatively shares authority of decision making with more participants of the bottom level. Like the dual functions of formalization, centralization can also help or hinder the organizational operations. Enabling structures in centralization are flexible, cooperative and collaborative, which helps teachers and leaders solve the existing problems and improve their capacities. The administration supports work across recognized authority boundaries with their distinctive roles (Hirschhorn, 1997). Expertise is valued more than position and decision making based on professional authority is promoted. In contrast, hindering centralization can impede solve problems, which can be associated with the administrative hierarchy that relies on rigid controls and autocratic power. The hindering features are often caused by outside pressures to increase close supervision, over-standardized work and standardized outputs (Mintzberg, 1989).

Methods

In this study, we conducted a qualitative secondary analysis (Hinds *et al.*, 1997) using data collected for the broader research project about elementary school principals' difficulties conducted between 2013 and 2015 in South Korea. The initial project was an interview study exploring types of and responses to dilemmas that elementary school principals encountered in their daily practices. Throughout the analysis focusing on dilemma situations, we found that a large amount of data from the project provides narratives about school principals' perspectives on bureaucracy which is highly developed in the Korean school systems. Thus, for this current study, we decided to analyze the data using an ambivalence lens toward bureaucracy.

Context: bureaucratic structures in the Korean education systems

The Korean education system and cultural values are quite different from other countries. Being a school principal in Korea is extremely competitive because most of them are selected based on the rigorous promotion process. In general, applicants are required to have at least 15–20 years of experience in education—as teachers, assistant principals or district administrators. Due to the competitive promotion system, the longest term of being school principals is eight years. Under the centralized education system, Korean principals are restricted by the bureaucratic hierarchies, though they exert the powerful influence on the culture within their schools (Joo and Kim, 2015). For example, in public schools, principals are hired by the national government and evaluated by the Office of Education at the local or the provincial level. Under the personnel policies of the government, teachers and principals in public schools are in rotation between schools every four to six years within the region. In this unique situation, school principals are considered officials, within a massive bureaucratic chain and leaders holding the highest level of authority within their school organizations. Given this, we assumed that Korean school principals frequently encounter and deal with bureaucratic structures and experience various feelings including ambivalence.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Name[a]	Gender	Years of being principal	District Admin. experience	School size[b]
Kim, Suk-hee	Male	2	N	Small
Nam, Chul	Male	4	Y	Large
Park, Han-sik	Male	3	N	Small
Na, Yun	Male	3	Y	Large
Lee, Gi-Seok	Male	3	Y	Small
Kang, Hyuck	Male	2	Y	Medium
Noh, Hana	Female	2	N	Medium
Ryu, Eun-mi	Female	1	Y	Large
Woo, Min	Female	5	N	Large
Ha, Won	Female	1	Y	Medium

a. All names are pseudonyms.

b. Based on the number of total students in schools: small is below 100, the medium is from 101 to 1,500, and large is over 1,500.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected by the first author. The original study recruited 13 Korean principals working at elementary schools (public, *K*-6) across the country using purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), considering school size and region. Among these 13 school principals, for this study, we used data from 10 principals (26 interviews in total, two to four interviews per participant) who expressed their contradicting feelings and emotions toward bureaucratic structures. **Table 1** shows demographic characteristics of participant principals and their schools.

In the initial study, data was collected through in-depth interviews from November 2013 to March 2015. While the number of interviews was varied depending on each participant, the minimum was twice and the maximum was four times. The first round of interviews was done between November 2013 and February 2014 to reflect on the 2013 school year and the second round of interviews were done between December 2014 and February 2015 to explore changes in their perceptions and experiences in the 2014 school year. Each interview lasted approximately 45–120 min. The interview protocol included

both open-ended questions and semi-structured questions which consisted of six questions asking about: (1) participants' professional backgrounds and school contexts, (2) perceptions on principal roles, (3) experiences with school-based management, (4) challenges and difficulties they have faced as a school principal, (5) resources and strategies they use to overcome difficulties and (6) recommendations for policy making. While focusing on these six areas, follow-up questions were used to uncover more details about the participants' positive and negative feelings about challenges and dilemmas. The third and the fourth interviews were done for a few participants (two for each in this study) to explore more details about their dilemma incidents and responses. The interview protocol was developed by the first author informed by the literature focusing on Korean principals' leadership development (Joo, 2007; Park, 2008). All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Our data analysis of the initial project generated "dilemmas" as an overarching theme, accompanying several sub-themes which included tensions coming from bureaucratic structures focusing on centralization and formalization. For this current study, we decided to focus on participants' responses to bureaucracy to fully explore related aspects in our collected data using an ambivalence lens. To analyze data, we conducted two cycles of coding to identify themes (Miles *et al.*, 2015). We first conducted open coding by highlighting language and excerpts related to participants' emotions toward bureaucratic structures in schools. This process generated three areas that participants shared conflicting perceptions about formal, centralized policies: *Teacher evaluation, approval system* and *school-based management.* Under these themes, we then conducted axial coding focusing on participants' positive and negative orientations on each of them. The analysis involved revisiting our original data and collective debriefs on analytic memos.

Findings

This section presents Korean principals' ambivalent responses to bureaucracy in schools by presenting three themes: (1) teacher evaluation: "frustrating" but "schools can avoid the worst case"; (2)

electronic form of bureaucracy: efficiency vs depersonalization and (3) democratic decision making: "local needs" vs "responsibility." Participants consciously and unconsciously reported both negative and positive feelings in these three areas.

Teacher evaluation: "frustrating" but "schools can avoid the worst case"

Our participants tended to recognize formalized "protocols" and "evaluations"—teacher evaluation, school evaluation, standardized national assessment—as "products of bureaucratism." They often expressed negative feelings toward these formal process at the individual level, at the same time, however, recognized that these "formal systems" can contribute to achieving collective goals at the school level to some degree. These ambivalent perceptions seemed to be particularly salient when it comes to teacher evaluation.

During the last three decades, the teacher evaluation system in Korean schools has formalized under the accountability policies initiative by the Ministry of Education (MOE). However, since teachers are hired as government officials (not contract based), decisions of punishment and rewards for teachers by the school principals are still limited under their authority. Given the context, Principal Ryu, working at the biggest school among the participants, felt both positive and negative orientations about the newly developed teacher evaluation policy. She said,

> As a former teacher, I know how the teacher evaluation makes teachers feel frustrated . . . The policy itself undermines teacher morale and we have to spend much more time to plan the evaluation process and input data . . . . Thinking of the rationale behind this policy . . . you know what, there has been a tendency of "being nice" in schools, which leads to positive personal relationships in a day-today school life. However, in this large school, I can see a few teachers doing something that only benefit themselves or not being open to learn [for their teaching]. But it was hard to regulate those bad examples. In some ways, the teacher evaluation,

comments from their colleagues and parents, can help us set
a norm saying that is not okay. The policy exists to avoid the
worst case [shown by few teachers].

Other principals also expressed their negative feelings toward the
teacher evaluation policy. For instance, Principal Nam commented,
"Well, complying with the policy itself takes a lot of time and energy
of teacher leaders and school administrators . . . . but I do not think
the policy itself may not change anything in practices." Most partici-
pants pointed out "low-stakes" evaluation for teachers would not have
significant impacts. However, in another view, they agreed the "for-
malized evaluation" can at least challenge few teachers holding "tra-
ditional ways of teaching" and promote "equal allocation of admin
work" among teachers. Principal Na expressed the message behind
the policy let go veteran teachers who would not be part of the evalu-
ation, either for the reason to "avoid shame" or to keep their dignity
that they had held as a teacher. He said,

> Well, at least this evaluation sets the bottom line for teach-
> ers, giving a clear message that teaching job cannot be the
> same as it was for the previous decades. This actually let
> many teachers in their late 50s or early 60s apply for vol-
> untary early retirement. Of course, letting many of them
> go are really loss from the system perspective, but not ev-
> eryone . . .

Comments from Principal Kang also support Principal Na's view: "For
some teachers in my school, I can see this teacher evaluation is a
forced opportunity to learn from other young teachers. I really need
them to change their instructions!" These responses seemed to well
represent the intended goals of teacher evaluation policy advocated
by policy makers throughout the policy process, arguing there should
be a solution to identify "unqualified teachers." At the same time, Ko-
rean principals as educators who had been classroom teachers for a
long time also understood how teacher evaluation policy could under-
mine teacher morale and take energy for managerial work.

Electronic form of bureaucracy: efficiency vs depersonalization

Unlike teachers' personnel policies, the approval system has become more informal during the time of data collection. Schools in Korea are operated by the government system, so official documents from the Office of Education at the district, regional and national levels flow to the school level every day. In order to handle these documents and making decisions, teachers also have to participate in the school management processes and leadership activities—including budget decisions, curriculum planning and other aspects of schooling. This led school principals to review and approve each administrative document generated by teachers. In this work environment, some participants mentioned the newly adopted electronic approval system (instead of paper-based one) seemed to be helpful to improve "efficiency." However, interestingly, some participants showed negative orientation of the electronic system when it comes to "building relationships" with teachers and "knowing about the contexts" beyond the documentation.

Principal Nam, working at a large school, welcomed the increasing use of the electronic approval (authorization) system during the time of data collection because he felt it helped teachers and himself utilize time efficiently. However, like other principals, he expressed it also hindered having open conversations and opportunities to communicate with other teachers.

> As we are living in a digital age, the electronic approval process is common. Hoping that teachers can have enough time for their students and teaching, I minimized the number of formal meetings and we just communicate with the [computer] messenger. However, with this approval system, we rarely see each other [in person]. . . . I realized that the previous paper-based approval system allowed me to meet each of my teachers individually [one to one] at least once a year. Ha-ha.

Like Principal Nam, other participants (Principal Na, Principal Ryu, Principal Woo) working more than 40 teachers at large schools said that the electronic approval system added "convenience" by saving teachers' time to travel to visit principals' office and enabling them to

approve each decision at home after working hours or over the week-end. However, they also recognized such "electronic formality" re-duced opportunities for them to know more about individual teach-ers and talk about background or context of the decisions beyond the written document.

On the other hand, principals in small schools shared different sto-ries. Principal Park, working with only 11 staff members in his school, said,

> In small schools like us, we often talk and decide to what to do and how we spend money for it. We are more like a fam-ily. Since we started using the electronic system, teachers and I sit down and talk and make decisions based on the of-ficial document teachers drafted. Then teachers saying, "I will go back and upload the document to the approval sys-tem." I have to sit down on my desk and click to approve. We may save papers and trees eventually, but in this transition period, it's weird!

These responses show that school principals hold ambivalent feelings toward rules and protocols. In particular, their negative feelings of electronic approval system seemed to align with Weber's (1968) con-cerns about alienation within bureaucracy and his suggestions of hav-ing non-bureaucratic elements at the top level. One of the interesting points here is that participants saw the electronic system, more re-cent form of bureaucracy, being more negative for interpersonal ele-ments in schools as compared to the traditional form of bureaucratic approval system.

Democratic decision making: "local needs" vs "responsibility"

Another area the participants often commented for bureaucratic struc-ture was decision making within the system of school-based manage-ment. In the last three decades, the MOE have forced the distribution of authority to the lower level and loaded the idea of "consumer-centered" education, leading to decentralization of school. For exam-ple, school-based management policy was adopted in late 1990s in Korea, which requires an individual school organization to become

a unit of decision making for school-level policies. Aligning with this initiative, democratic leadership which values teacher participation and reflection of diverse opinions in school management has been expected in Korean schools (Joo and Kim, 2015; Wood, 2004). The participants in our study seemed to intensively experience both positive and negative orientations toward "democratic decision making" within schools on a daily basis.

According to Principal Woo, democratic decision making involves students, parents and local communities, which is "a good way to lead" because it values the needs of "consumers." However, she also commented on "side effects" of this approach when it conflicts with "authentic values of school education."

> People say school needs to be consumer centered. I get it and agree with it to some degree because the traditional ways of schooling did not much value the local needs. I try to reflect the needs . . . from students, parents, and local communities . . . . However, if it goes too much, there are side effects. Some parents want to overrule school policies, asking for things that prioritize their own children, not seeing all students. This hinders achieving educational philosophies. We should not miss doing our best for the authentic values of school education.

Many other participants echoed what Principal Woo said. Principal Kim also argued that teachers and themselves are "educational experts" who can lead schools to achieve "educational values" or "authentic values" in education. In her interview, Principal Noh argued that "Parents' right is important for their children's education. However, the reason why they send their kids to school is that they need our expertise to achieve educational values." Our analysis suggest that these "educational" and "authentic" values were found to be "supporting holistic growth of all students and offering *equal* resources for student success while protecting "education as public goods" from the parents who seek individualistic "private interests" through school education.

The participants in our study also carried duality toward democratic decision making commenting on "responsibility" that they hold

as "school managers." Many of them expressed pressures of being responsible for any outcome at the school level, along with autonomy to plan and enact their own "educational philosophies and policies." For example, Principal Ha who just finished her first year as a principal said,

> In this system of school-based management, I can enjoy autonomy to pursue my educational value as a leader . . . . I had a dream of enacting my educational policies and values in this school . . . and the [policy] document says I can do it. So, I value democratic decision making initiated by school-based management. However, there is too much pressure for principals in terms of responsibility . . . They (the Office of Education in district and local areas) just give us standards we need to meet but not resources. All strategies to acquire resources are on me.

More experienced principals including Principal Na and Principal Woo also echoed this by expressing both appreciation and concerns about "democratic value" in making decisions. These responses show that our participants appreciated the distribution of authority from the upper levels (regional and national levels) to the school level in order to meet the local needs. However, when the needs from individual parents undermine interests of other students, principals seemed to prioritize their authority as "educational experts" over demands from "consumers." In addition, since school principals are responsible for all outcomes of decisions at the school level, it is seen that they have a broad range of ambivalence about decentralized school management. Unlike Weber's bureaucracy model, often described as a closed system in organization theories, today's school organizations reflect needs and expectations from outside environments, while holding bureaucratic principles of hierarchy. Our analysis shows that complexity arising from outside environments intensifies school principals' ambivalent perceptions about school bureaucracy.

Discussion

The findings revealed how school principals in Korea experience am-
bivalent perceptions toward bureaucratic structures in school settings.
Their ambivalent responses were particularly salient in areas where
formal technologies and organizational structures were changing. For
example, the centralized new policy initiative formalized teacher eval-
uation in schools while the newly adopted electronic approval system
and school-based management promoted decentralized decision mak-
ing. In experiencing changes in bureaucratic structures, our partici-
pants reflected on how such changes can enable and/or hinder schools
to achieve organizational goals and collective values, from the view-
points of multiple aspects, which led to their ambivalent responses to-
ward bureaucracy. While our study focuses on the Korean context, the
findings further extend the existing research and offer implications
that are applicable to other school systems in the world.

These results are supported by research on school leadership argu-
ing that school principals play multiple roles under the accountabil-
ity contexts (Keddie, 2014; Stone-Johnson, 2014; Wiseman, 2005). To
deal with the various demands and complexity, policy makers and ed-
ucational leaders have made efforts to divide and specify work pro-
cesses, develop new rules and regulations in school operation, which
can be understood as formal rationalization process according to We-
ber (1968). Under the formal rationality of the school system, indi-
vidual school principals also hold substantive rationality, such as de-
liberating on educational philosophies and pursuing values they have
(Jeffee, 2001). In this study, these two rationalities conflict each other
and trigger individuals' ambivalence.

At the same time, responding to demands from diverse stakeholders
and "consumer-centered education" in pursuit of efficiency, authority
in decision-making process has been more decentralized. However, at
the school level, the participants seemed to feel that all responsibilities
are still on school principals regarding consequences of all decisions
made in schools. In the decentralized process, individuals can pursue
both the formal and substantive rationalities, but in terms of respon-
sibility based on outcomes, school principals in our study seemed to
be forced by the bureaucratic school system to follow only formal ra-
tionality to produce effectiveness (Weber, 1968; Jeffee, 2001). In the

conflicts between formal and substantive rationality, school principals are expected to play multiple roles in one situation; hence experienced a broad range of ambivalence about bureaucracy.

While bureaucracy can be differently experienced by individuals in the system depending on the context and individual capacities, one of the common assumptions among the participants implies that bureaucracy may hinder individual freedom in pursuit of their interests and value, but to some degree, it protects collective interests at the organizational level to help schools avoid the "worst case" and secure access to resources within the system (Labaree, 2020). In the Korean education system where *equality* is considered as one of the foundational values, it is possible to interpret that individuals within the system are more likely to hold positive orientations toward the role of bureaucracy when the structure enables schools to pursue education as public goods, as compared to those within the education system such as in the United States where choice is considered one of the top priorities in education (see Ravitch, 2016; Tobin *et al.*, 2009).

This study suggests Weber's bureaucracy is still valid in today's school organizations based on responses of individuals within the system. Unlike previous research on bureaucracy which overlooked individuals in the bureaucracy and ambivalent responses toward bureaucratic structures in schools, our study attempted to reveal individuals' complicated perceptions and responses underlying the bureaucratic structures. Aligning with Weber's argument, as societies are more complex, formalization in schools has been more strengthened, but centralization has been weakened throughout decentralization reform movements. Participants perceived a bureaucracy function in both positive ways and negative ways. In school organization settings, the ideal type of Weber's bureaucracy can be differently implemented because education itself has complexity in goals, processes and outcomes. School organizations are not as fixed as other bureaucratic organizations (Labaree, 2020).

To extend our findings, future research can explore how individuals in school systems can cope with their perceptions of ambivalence and utilize the bureaucratic structures in leading schools. Since our study is limited to Korean principals' perceptions of bureaucracy, examining their strategies found in daily practices will add another layer to the understanding of leaders and school organizations. Moreover, we

suggest future research examining possibilities of individuals' agency and subjectivity under the bureaucracy. Individuals' positive orientations of bureaucracy imply that bureaucratic-self may not be necessarily fettered by "iron-cage," but is able to create room for being flexible and utilizing the bureaucratic structures.

This study also provides implications for leadership development and policy making. Responses from our participants show that school principals encounter mixed feelings and experiences with the externally developed policies or systems. First, their ambivalent responses highlight that, depending on circumstances, school leaders can utilize bureaucratic structures as resources to enhance their organizational capacity. We suggest that leadership preparation and in-service training programs for school principals focus on strengthening leadership perspectives, skills and organizational capacities that can successfully navigate effective use of bureaucratic systems. Second, according to paradox theory and ambivalence perspectives (Lewis and Smith, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2017), such mixed feelings are natural and inherent to organizational structures. While the conventional leadership theories promote a linear way of, or a binary thinking (e.g. Is *A* or *B* more effective in the case of *C*), recent studies often highlight complexities of leadership work, such as dilemmas, contradictions and tensions that school principals often encounter in practices (DeMatthews, 2018). Given this, we argue that leadership preparation programs need to help aspiring leaders to embrace the ambivalent nature of organizations to some extent *and* analyze sources of the mixed feelings as well as multiple points of views on a certain subject or a decision. In doing so, school leaders can develop knowledge and skills that afford to make more effective decisions. Finally, policy makers need to reflect school principals' voices and experiences in developing policies. As the ways bureaucratic chains are utilized by policy makers and districts shape school principals' and teachers' responses to policy, process of policy making needs to consider creative use of bureaucratic structures in a way to support the needs of local schools and leaders on the ground.

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