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STY Pedagogiczne

Jolanta Szempruch
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3739-3288
University of Rzeszow, Poland
jszempruch@ur.edu.pl

Joanna Smyła
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2675-8421
Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, Poland
joanna.smyla@ujk.edu.pl

The School Principal as an Educational Leader

Dyrektor szkoły jako przywódca edukacyjny

Summary: The article focuses on the educational leadership of the school principal. This issue is particularly important in an era of intense changes in the world that create new challenges that modern schools must face. The currently observed social, economic and cultural phenomena and processes affect new expectations towards the teacher related to their openness to these changes and the readiness to face them. This will only be possible under appropriate conditions created by the school principal, whose roles and tasks have also evolved. The main direction of these changes is the transition from the administrative management of the school-institution to the model of the principal as an educational leader. The process of educational leadership is particularly important in school practice, where the main task is to create conditions for the development and operation of teachers and build the culture of a learning organization.

Streszczenie: Podjęte w artykule rozważania koncentrują się na przywództwie edukacyjnym dyrektora szkoły. Jest to problematyka szczególnie istotna w dobie intensywnych przemian świata stwarzających coraz to nowe wyzwania, z którymi musi się mierzyć współczesna szkoła. Obserwowane obecnie zjawiska i procesy społeczne, gospodarcze oraz kulturowe rzutują na nowe oczekiwania kierowane wobec nauczyciela, związane z otwartością na te zmiany oraz gotowością do ich kreowania. Będzie to możliwe jedynie w odpowiednich warunkach stwarzanych przez dyrektora szkoły, którego role i zadania również uległy ewolucji. Głównym kierunkiem tych zmian jest przejście od administracyjnego kierowania szkołą-instytucją do modelu dyrektora jako przywódcy edukacyjnego – lidera. Proces przywództwa edukacyjnego jest szczególnie ważny w praktyce szkolnej, gdzie podstawowym zadaniem staje się stwarzanie warunków do rozwoju i działania nauczycieli oraz budowanie kultury organizacji uczącej się.

Introduction

Contemporary schools face many educational challenges related to the increased pace of change and events in the present-day world and the intensity of their various impacts. Learning – by both individuals and entire societies – is a necessary response to the rapid and dynamic changes because new phenomena and processes require specific qualifications and competences of their participants. The ability to learn is shaped primarily at school, which becomes an important place of education for change – of both, oneself and the world. The role of the teacher, therefore, takes on a new dimension as their task is to shape the ability to experience change responsibly. The teacher is expected to inspire the development of skills and abilities that enable individuals and organizations to survive in a knowledge society, to make people open to and ready to create change, and, at the same time, to protect learners from the risks posed by this society and care for their social life.

The new roles and functions of the teacher can be effectively implemented under the appropriate conditions created by the school principal. Their role is particularly widely discussed in the literature on organization and management

in education, which stems from the belief that they play a significant role in the improvement and development of activities aimed at the harmonious functioning of the education process at school. Their role is not merely one of a coordinator and economic leader – someone who takes care of finances and is a good administrator – but also one of an educator, therapist and mediator in smoothing disputes between students, teachers and parents. Increasingly, the school principal is expected to combine qualities of intellect and character, and be distinguished by the specific psychological, moral and volitional professional predisposition necessary for the role of an educational leader. They are expected to promote and inspire change, have a sense of responsibility for the work of the school team and be able to create a culture of educational responsibility in the school and its surroundings (Szempruch, 2013, pp. 159, 243).

The school principal who uses leadership skills at work finds ways to inspire, engage and support teachers in their creative work and discovers their skills and abilities. As genuine leaders, they have a better chance of motivating teachers to formulate goals more effectively, create strategies developing the school and making them a reality; they can also establish a work environment that encourages school commitment and innovation.

The Specificity of Leadership

A review of the literature on leadership reveals a rich theoretical and empirical background of this concept and, at the same time, points to problems with its precise definition. It is an interdisciplinary category with a huge cognitive load. Differences in understanding this term result from the diverse scientific orientations of researchers and the different ways of thinking about its essence and tasks. This issue has been analyzed by representatives of many academic disciplines, assigning a special value to leadership which is understood as a driving force that can lead an institution to success. Leadership is also widely discussed in relation to politics and economy.

In psychological terms, the definition of leadership most often refers to needs (Harvey, 2006, p. 41) and to the concept of power in the personality and situational context (Reber, 2000, p. 580). From the sociological perspective, leadership is the exercise of power or exerting influence, and it is related to the implementation of three general functions: setting the goals of a given community; establishing structures that would carry out these community goals in the form of various tasks; and maintaining structures (Tannenbaum, 1968,

pp. 101–105). Piotr Sztompka's sociological definition of leadership defines it as the "spontaneous, bottom-up endowing of one of the group members with decision-making and coordinating powers in relation to the others" (Sztompka, 2004, p. 385). Leadership here is located within the scope of power and the relation between submission and decision making.

In its pedagogical aspect, leadership is concerned with the processes of teaching and learning. Its specific goals depend on the learning context, but the learning process of individuals remains the primary goal. When talking about educational leadership, it is important to remember that it is not an individual or even a group characteristic, but an organizational quality – the result of many people working together.

Ralph M. Stogdill aptly noted that leadership is both a process and a property (Michalak, 2007, p. 64). On the one hand, it focuses on expressing a certain vision, influencing the achievement of goals by others and encouraging cooperation, while on the other hand, it focuses on the personal qualities of the leader. Gayle C. Avery (2009) has rightly recognized that the concept remains elusive and enigmatic despite many efforts to develop an intellectually and emotionally satisfactory interpretation of leadership.

There are thus different ways of defining leadership. Most often it is defined as a form of influencing others (Michalak, 2014; Kwiatkowski, 2010); the ability to influence group behavior in order to achieve the intended goal; a process (using influence to shape the goals of a group or organization, motivating behaviors aimed at achieving those goals, helping to establish the culture of a group or organization); and/or a property (a set of traits attributed to individuals who are perceived as leaders) (Griffin, 2004), as well as the art of persuading people to work together to achieve a common goal (Stolarska, 2012, pp. 187–188). Thus, leadership can be interpreted as the ability to influence the behavior of other people in the context of achieving set goals. Usually, leadership is based on a person's authority and charisma as well as on their command that others willingly accept. The essential features of leadership highlighted by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee (2002, pp. 22–23) include developing a vision for the future of the organization, as well as giving direction to people's actions, motivating them, inspiring them and releasing energy within them. It is also important to build teams, to lead by example and be accepted. These definitions show that we should associate leadership not so much with function and social position, but rather with the ability to win followers (Mroziewski, 2005, pp. 24–25). Leadership is essential to create and effect change.

Theories of Leadership

The concept of leadership has been refined over the years, which is evidenced by the following theories:

- Trait Theory – focuses on the traits a leader should be endowed with. The starting point is that you have to be born a leader: the charisma they manifest is the result of both individual properties and social factors (Armstrong, 2005, pp. 214–219), that is, a specific leadership ability resulting from the personality traits of a given individual. In practice, this means exploring the qualities of the ideal leader and distinguishing them from those who are not the leader type. The focus is on physical characteristics (height, weight, appearance, age, gender), abilities and skills (intelligence, knowledge, the ways of communicating and persuading one's ideas, analyzing, making decisions and solving problems), and personality traits (conservatism, intro-, extrovertism, assertiveness and self-confidence) (Pocztowski, 2007, pp. 187–188).

- Behavioral approach – focuses on the behaviors and actions in which an effective leader is a participant. It describes a set of specific ways of proceeding and the methods used by a leader. It assumes learning about effective methods of conduct and then training them in people who manage the work of others (Pocztowski, 2007, pp. 188–189). Two dimensions of leadership emerge from the behavioral approach – a people-oriented and a task-oriented one.

- Interactive and situational theories – focus on the conditions under which certain skills, leadership styles and behaviors are effective. They assume that the leader should determine which method in a given situation, under given conditions and at a given moment will best contribute to the achievement of the intended goals (Griffin, 2013, pp. 565–566).

- Theories of transformational leadership – focus on finding answers to the questions of what makes us lead others and what makes us effective in action. According to them, a transformational leader motivates subordinates to do more than initially intended, awakens a sense of the value and importance of their tasks, makes people aware that they are going beyond self-interest for the benefit of the team, organization or society. A transformational leader is a mentor and a guide for employees, and their effectiveness is positively influenced by the use of their own vision and energy to inspire subordinates (Pocztowski, 2007, pp. 200–202).

Recent leadership studies focus primarily on the relationship between leadership style and organizational culture, hence the focus of researchers on transformational leadership.

Leadership Styles

Styles are an indispensable component of leadership. Three main groups of leadership/management styles can be identified:

1) *personality* – the criteria considered here are personal characteristics, attitudes, views on the nature and philosophy of management and the gender of the manager;
2) *situational* – take into account such factors as the extent of interference in the work of subordinates, ways of exerting influence, the participation of subordinates in making decisions and the flexibility of the manager's behavior;
3) *personality-situational* – they are a synthesis of the first and second group (Mroziewski, 2005, pp. 69–70).

A slightly different division of leadership styles is proposed by Bill Reddin (2005, pp. 176–177), who distinguishes between the following styles:

- related – focuses on employee problems, to a lesser extent on tasks. Such a leader enjoys contact with subordinates and has the ability to resolve conflicts, but not to stimulate subordinates;
- integrated – focuses on currently performed tasks and appreciates the importance of the individualization of employees. For such leaders, group meetings are a form of task setting, and they judge people for their usefulness. They are farsighted and guide people by showing them ideals and setting ambitious tasks;
- separated – less oriented towards tasks and people. Such leaders apply penalties in the form of withdrawing decision-making powers. They avoid innovations, preferring well-known and proven methods. They have difficulty establishing contact and interacting with people. They value rationality and consider succumbing to emotions as disastrous;
- dedicated – task-focused. Such leaders want to gain dominance over others by providing subordinates with instructions and guidelines. They work with short-term goals in mind and assess subordinates in terms of their suitability for the performance of tasks. They consider rewards and punishments to be the best management tools.

One of the most popular typologies that derive from the analysis of styles of leadership associated with how one exercises power is the distinction between the following:

- Autocratic leaders: they make decisions on their own without consulting the group they lead. They are the "face of the group" and the main implementers of the idea that unites the group;
- Democratic leaders: together with the other members of the group, they make decisions that result from a compromise obtained through consultations and communication;
- Laissez-faire leaders: they give their subordinates a lot of freedom in making decisions and restrict their own activities to the functions of advisor and expert (Kwiatkowski, 2011, p. 14).

An interesting classification of leadership styles is presented by Rensis Likert, pointing to the following styles:

- exploitive-authoritative – limiting the flow of information between the superior and subordinates, centralizing decisions, detailed goal setting by the manager and meticulous control of the results, motivating employees mainly through penalties and threats;
- benevolent authoritative – limiting cooperation between the manager and employees, limiting the possibility for subordinates to comment on the supervisor's orders, rewarding employees' loyalty above all (privileges in exchange for subordination);
- consultative – encouraging a two-way flow of information, the manager's interest in employee problems, emphasis on an atmosphere of cooperation and trust in the team as the main factor motivating subordinates to work;
- participative – a high degree of cooperation in a team, the joint making of most decisions related to developing in employees a sense of shared responsibility for them, employee participation in management as a motivating factor to work (Mentrak, 2004, p. 8).

In addition to the classifications indicated above, task-oriented (task/goal-oriented) and personalistic (people-oriented) leadership should also be mentioned. Task-oriented leadership is primarily related to the implementation of assigned tasks, while personalistic leadership pays attention to the needs of subordinates and their job satisfaction (Leżucha, 2020).

In practice, leadership styles mix, overlap and complement one another. Rarely does one talk of pure leadership style. Currently, researchers believe

that the effectiveness of a leader is determined by having a wide repertoire of management styles and the ability to choose the right style for a given situation.

Educational Leadership

Today, the need for effective leadership at all levels of education is increasingly recognized. Educational leadership is limited to the impacts occurring in educational institutions and defined by the area of activity of groups (and subgroups) functioning in these institutions (Kwiatkowski, 2018, p. 58). The role of the principal as the leader of the school community is crucial here. The success of all activities related to the development of the school depends to a large extent on their competences and system of values.

Educational leadership is important already at the stage of designing learning-friendly situations, preparing tasks for implementation and detecting problems to be solved. It includes the ability to build a cooperating team and focuses on achieving the goals set within the institution. By developing a vision and strategy of action together with employees, the leader helps them to believe in themselves and see and use their own potential; he or she convinces them of the right direction of their work and the correctness of decisions made by them, and helps them combat uncertainties associated with gaining autonomy and independence (Mazurkiewicz, 2010, pp. 127–128).

Educational leadership reveals the potential of people involved in specific activities. The goals and methods of carrying out educational tasks usually depend on the value system adopted in a given community (Mazurkiewicz, 2018, p. 113). The visions created by leaders are less important than the visions negotiated and agreed upon in a group. The potential of educational leadership, unlike that as traditionally understood, differs in that it is not related to the charisma of individuals or their authority, but to the organization's ability (often designed by smaller teams) to increase the participation of its members in the decision-making process and in learning. In this way, through leadership, a community of learners is formed.

It can, therefore, be concluded that educational leadership should be considered as the process of involving others in the education process, triggering their ability to achieve a high level of performed tasks on the way to obtaining agreed upon goals and objectives, proceeding with a sense of satisfaction and respect for others based on an agreed system of values.

An interesting model of educational leadership was proposed by Grzegorz Mazurkiewicz (2015). It consists of five elements:
- relevance to the context;
- reflectivity and servitude towards people and institutions;
- respecting the autonomy of diversity;
- continuous support for participation and dialogue;
- special focus on learning and development.

No matter what the leader sets out to achieve, success depends on how they do it. Even when everything else is properly prepared, if the leader lacks the basic ability to manage emotions, they will not be successful (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002, p. 20). Therefore, primal (emotional) leadership, as analyzed by Goleman, meaning shaping the feelings of other team members, is essential. If these feelings are directed towards enthusiasm, the work will be great, and when there is resentment or anxiety, employees will stop focusing on their tasks. This is the fundamental aspect of primal leadership. Subordinates expect the leader to create a bond which will provide them with emotional support (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002, p. 23).

Educational leadership can be viewed in two dimensions:
- the effectiveness of the leader and the way they function – as a set of personality traits of the leader and their social competences;
- the immediate environment in which the leader operates – an organization with its culture in which the leader practices, the experience of individuals and the set of their personality traits (Czarnecki, 2007, p. 19).

The Role of the School Principal

Definitions of the roles and responsibilities of the school principal have been evolving. The main direction of these changes is the transition from the administrative management of the school as an institution to the model of the principal as an educational leader. There are clear differences between the traditional and new understanding of the role of the school principal. Traditionally, as viewed by Peter M. Senge, this role is limited to setting the course of action, making key decisions, and activating others to action. This stems from an individualistic understanding of the world. The new view on the role of school leadership, however, is related to the perception of the school as a learning organization. In such an organization, the leaders are its designers, organizers, and teachers. They are responsible for building a place

in which teachers constantly broaden their understanding of the school's complexity, define its vision and are responsible for organizational learning (Senge, 2006, p. 379).

The new view of the role of the educational leader in school as a learning organization focuses on the following tasks of the educational leader (leadership qualities):

- designer – designs learning processes thanks to which employees effectively cope with existing problems and acquire proficiency in the learning discipline. Introduces systemic thinking, identifies specific assumptions, discovers dynamic organizational forces and gains respect through mentoring and coaching skills and thanks to helping others learn;
- the organizer/host – sees the purpose of the school and the reasons for its functioning as a tool that brings society the opportunity to learn and make changes. Indicates the overriding motivation for action and the needs that are not yet satisfied. Has a specific vision of school development which is determined by employees, teachers and students. Develops the school as a community of all employees;
- teacher – teaches people how to realize their visions and dreams, develops the learning process and systemic thinking of everyone at school;
- innovator – supports innovations at school, inspires teachers to implement these innovations.

Leadership is related to management. The practice of managing organizations shows that in order to achieve results efficiently, it is necessary to connect and relate management and leadership. The roles of manager and leader are never performed individually (see Czarnecki, 2010, p. 99). The school principal, as the head of the workplace and its manager, can and should be perceived as an educational leader whose primary task is to create conditions for the development of teachers and students. It is worth emphasizing that if in practice we give excessive attention to management or leadership, we may be dealing with either management dominance errors or leadership dominance errors.

In school practice, the process of educational leadership is particularly important. The changes, problems and crises that emerge create the need for learning and team problem solving. In this approach, the leader shares power, looks for answers with the team, sometimes arranging a problem situation and, thanks to giving others necessary tools, helps them in independent problem solving. Their basic task is to create conditions for the development and

activity of teachers and to build the culture of a learning organization (Senge, 2006, p. 21). In educational leadership, there is a shift away from authoritarian rule in favor of participation and involvement in school matters. Teachers, to whom the principal delegates powers and with whom they share authority, have a sense of independence and support; they create teams within the school, seek solutions and reflect on the goals that the school is striving to achieve. Such teachers have a sense of their own skills, opportunities, potential and responsibility for the school. School principals, as leaders, prepare the school to face difficult situations in order to deal with current and future challenges.

Nowadays, the work of the school principal is becoming more and more complex and, at the same time, it is subject to increasing social pressure. In the performance of complex functions and tasks, the principal cannot resort solely to conducting, controlling or evaluating employees. Their effectiveness grows when they build the organizational culture of the school where it is important to care for relationships in the team and create conditions conducive to learning for the entire school community. The quality of the educational leadership of the school principal is important, as it can contribute to inhibiting or encouraging change and thus to the development or stagnation of the school.

Conclusions

It is up to the school principal to create conditions for motivating teachers, delegating their own powers and entrusting teachers with responsibility, as well as for integrating employees on the basis of a passion for cooperation, mutual respect and satisfaction with the performance of assigned tasks.

It is not easy to be a school principal as an educational leader these days. This is due to the essence of leadership which should not be limited to the principal and selected teachers. It is extremely important to release the leadership potential of the entire teaching staff. The distribution of leadership is associated with broadening the field of teachers' autonomy and taking responsibility for their work. Through such activities, their involvement and sense of co-decision about the school increases, which, in turn, remains flexible and is able to accept the upcoming changes.

The real participation of teachers in educational leadership is treated as an opportunity to solve difficult problems of the school. If teachers gain more responsibility, authority and freedom of action, they contribute to shaping the vision of the school and its organizational culture. Awareness of the

importance of the role they play in improving educational leadership leads to reflection on changes in the area of their education, training and improvement. The framework for success and professional preparation to perform leadership functions is provided by leadership standards relating to the areas of moral leadership, instructional leadership and organizational potential and relationships (Michalak, 2007, pp. 26–27). An important challenge is to include content related to educational leadership and creating readiness for educational changes, meeting and anticipating changes in teacher development programs. Changing schools means moving from the obligation to learn to autonomy and satisfaction.

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