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THE ROLE OF A TEACHER-LEADER IN SLOVAK SCHOOLS

Abstract

Currently, school leadership is a high-profile issue. A school environment is characterized by specific conditions, frequent social interactions and often, by minimal distinction between the workload of a manager (meant in an administrative sense above all) and that of a leader. Teacher-leaders are people willing to share their specific knowledge, specialised skills and experiences with their colleagues, thus supporting and maintaining the constant development of education. Under their influence, classes are transformed into an environment in which pupils engage themselves in a relevant educational process. The following article is concerned with some important tasks of leaders in schools. It focuses on pupils' learning skills, support from the school director, interpersonal relationships and cooperation in school environments.

Kľúčové slová: Teacher-Leader • School • Pupils • Students • Educational Process.

ROLA NAUCZYCIELA-LIDERA W SŁOWACKICH SZKOŁACH

Streszczenie

Przywództwo w szkole jest obecnie szeroko dyskutowane. Środowisko szkolne charakteryzuje się specyficznymi warunkami, częstymi interakcjami

mi społecznymi i zwykle minimalnym rozróżnieniem między obciążeniem pracą kierownika (rozumianego przede wszystkim w sensie administracyjnym) a pracą nauczyciel-lidera. Nauczyciele-liderzy to osoby, które chcą dzielić się swoją specyficzną wiedzą, specjalistycznymi umiejętnościami i doświadczeniami z kolegami, wspierając w ten sposób ciągły rozwój szkolnictwa. Pod ich wpływem w klasach tworzy się środowisko, w którym uczniowie sami angażują się w proces edukacyjny. Artykuł omawia niektóre ważne funkcje liderów w szkołach, koncentrując się na nauce uczniów, wsparciu dyrektora oraz relacjach i współpracy między ludźmi.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczyciel-lider • szkoła • uczniowie • studenci • proces edukacyjny.

Introduction

The teaching profession is often labelled as “a shallow one” because in most professions, the worker’s responsibility increases alongside their specialized knowledge. In fact, education is not shallow (Danielson, 2007). Most teachers are aware of existing problems related to school leadership like managing the budget, management issues, work level evaluation, social relationships between the school and its wider environment etc. Though many teachers attend different instructional programmes and workshops, receiving additional tools and guidance which improve their work performance, we still need to ask how and whether their engagement in the school’s leadership is increasing.

In surrounding countries (Czech republic, Hungary, France), the leadership concept aimed at improving the educational process has already been implemented for some years. To our knowledge, only members of the research team led by Professor Sollárova are involved in the leadership of education in Slovakia. Due to the absence of theoretical and empirical anchoring of leadership in education in our conditions, this paper brings one of the first findings on the definition of basic areas in which the teacher-leader can engage.

Teacher-leaders cooperate with their colleagues in order to improve their professional skills. In addition to that, they undertake

tasks not usually performed by teachers who are not leaders, like improving the school environment, mentoring colleagues, solving other school issues etc.

Currently, teacher-leaders have taken the role of collaborative leaders. Within this paradigm, they work with other teachers intensively, discuss everyday issues and share their methods with regard to managing different educational situations. They find ways of overcoming time, spatial, resource and regulatory limits and follow motivational strategies that help pupils to engage in the learning process. Teacher-leaders may help the director in sustaining and improving the school's development or in enhancing the teaching process by sharing their knowledge, specialized skills and practical experience with other teachers. Therefore, developing the key leadership competencies of all teachers should be the main priority in order for them to perform well as mentors, coaches and facilitators in countless areas of school life. Together with teachers, leaders are skilled in transforming every single class into a participative environment with students themselves engaging in the educational process.

Leadership in the school environment

Leaders should be respected role-models for others; innovative, organised, willing to cooperate, trustworthy and serving as self-confident facilitators within the educational process. Leaders' integrity should be exemplary, their interpersonal and communicational skills ought to be strong, their professionalism should be at the highest level together with their work competence, they must be committed to their pupils and their education and act as important initiators of changes at school (Muijs & Harris 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Bowman, 2004; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Danielson, 2016; Huřová, 2020; etc.). While making decisions, leaders are able to process different sources of information. They can recognize a timely opportunity and get started on their work. They can get excited and mobilise people for a common goal,

they are able to define the current status and take measures, direct the development process and adapt to changing conditions. They are good at keeping other teachers' work rate high, including their direct engagement in the educational process (Danielson, 2016). Leaders are self-confident teachers who naturally take over (or are asked to take over) the leadership at the level of the class.

Among other things, this article aims to describe basic areas typical for teacher-leaders especially in the contemporary context of Slovak schools; their main focus on the pupils' learning process, the direct engagement of pupils in their own education, accepting responsibility, cooperation and interpersonal relationships.

Educational process

Educating pupils is seen by school workers, students or managers as the main mission of any good teacher. The most dominant opinion in Slovak schools says that teachers themselves together with their professional knowledge are the best source of expertise available in every school. Yet, it often happens that teachers work separately behind the classroom door. Slovak education needs teacher-leaders who will focus on leading their pupils to successful learning. According to Margolis and Huggins (2012), there is an unceasing need for real educational leaders capable of targeted and ambitious changes on the level of classes as well as for leaders who are able to spark other teachers' interest in class issues. They are the key to successful education of every single pupil. Introducing a type of hybrid leadership model which would combine direct teaching activity with professional development of other colleagues seems essential. These leaders should provide their colleagues with coaching classes, observe the education process at the same time and give feedback or proposals for effective solution of already existing problems. Leaders are facilitators of changes which should focus attention on the pupils' learning.

Many authors (Barth 2001; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001; Gordon, 2004) point out that every teacher has hidden leadership

abilities and these should be uncovered and used for the benefit of pupils. Therefore, all teachers have the right, the ability and the responsibility to become leaders. The role of society is not to decide who is a leader and who is not, but rather to create conditions that would allow development of leadership predispositions in every single motivated teacher. One of the key preconditions in developing leadership competencies is based on creating some kind of professional community that would provide space for sharing teachers' personal development. Thanks to this sharing, teachers could undertake coaching and mentoring roles thus gradually becoming leaders.

Support for teacher-leaders from school directors

The synergy between visions and values of both the teacher and the school serves as an initial investment especially if both parties participate in the same curricular, teaching and assessing school goals. If the agreed goals are accepted by the teachers, it is much more likely for them to accept different levels of responsibility bound to their role as leaders. Subsequently, they can dedicate themselves completely to their professional development, therefore facilitating the implementation of systematic and sustainable changes to improve pupils' educational activities.

It would be desirable for school directors to improve their ability to assign these management competencies, that is, the directors, having school development in mind, should invite their teachers to cooperate with them. Supporting leaders managing activities on all levels of the educational system is a basic condition for triggering school reform. There needs to be a shift from "I" to "We". Cooperation and concern for others is the cornerstone of everything. Teacher-leaders will therefore be able to continually look for ways of engaging parents and the entire school in creating a community that would support the educational process. If teachers get personally involved in improving the functioning of schools, the needed change from "below", that is, from ordinary people, may come.

If the director invites teachers to cooperate in the decision-making process, they become more inclined to creative thinking, accept the responsibility for change and take the opportunity of helping pupils with their studies. It's exactly the school director who should seek the hidden leadership potential in teachers and develop it further and also empower teachers to grow. A director must provide time for leaders, develop mutually dependent teaching roles, let the teachers speak while making decisions and create opportunities for their professional development.

Interpersonal relationships

According to Kaliska (2019), emotionally intelligent leaders attract talented people because these enjoy working by their side. Leaders with higher emotional intelligence (EI) are characterized by personal and social competencies, self-control and their willingness to improve the interpersonal relationships on relevant occasions. Emotionally intelligent leaders develop their leadership skills related to four domains of emotional management of other people.

- **Understanding our own emotional and cognitive state** leads us to recognize how our decision making and behaviour is influenced by our consciousness. Teacher-leaders can assess themselves very objectively, recognizing their weaknesses and limits and as a result, their self-confidence grows and they know their own value and capabilities.
- **Self-discipline and self-control** allows each individual to keep their inappropriate behaviour and impulses under control. Teacher-leaders are characterized by always-present flexibility in adapting to changing situations or obstacles; they meet the personal standards for excellent behaviour; their optimism helps them to see only the positive side of their work.
- **Social awareness** is manifested by both empathy and understanding of the experiences, opinions and issues of school community members.

- By influencing interpersonal relationships through their inspiring vision, teacher-leaders **motivate and prompt** their colleagues, support other teachers skills with their feedback, their mentoring casts light on misunderstandings and they build team work and cooperation.

Necessarily, all four EI domains are subject to features of individual teacher-leaders value systems. The better the leader's skills in transmitting emotions are, the more efficiently these emotions are spread (Gasparova & Hulova, 2020). The more open and authentic the leaders are (e.g. the more openly the leaders can manifest their own enthusiasm), the easier their zeal is passed on to other teachers. Leaders with these features are emotional magnets that attract people naturally.

For leaders, qualities like interpersonal relationships, the emotional capital and the capacity to connect with other people are more important than the titles obtained, good looks, or the salary. Leaders can win other teachers' interest and engagement by building interpersonal relationships with colleagues based on respect and appreciation. To preserve the mentioned qualities, a future teacher-leaders training programme centred on managing and team skills is needed, like for instance **active listening** (*focusing on the speaker without any need to judge or respond, using open non-verbal communication, empathizing with other people and seeing through their eyes, sensitivity to speaker's non-verbal communication etc.*), problem-solving, appreciation for ideas of different group members.

Teacher-leaders who look after interpersonal relationships serve as positive examples of hope and they can lead the school through system-changing challenges thanks to their strength and unshakable faith in the developing system. Yet, this would be impossible without cooperation.

Cooperation

Scholars agree on the fact that teachers „serve” as agents of change in and outside of classes by cooperating with colleagues thus improving the educational praxis. Teacher-leaders work with

other teachers, investing their time and energy into the search for effective teaching strategies and their implementation. Coaching and mentoring are tools for developing cooperation at school as they are the integration of discussion, feedback, training and participation in extra-curricular and out-of-school events. If cooperation is deeply rooted in the school culture, transparency in the classes becomes a norm. Teachers would then become adapted to a new approach „they all are our students” instead of „only these 20 are my students”. This is a challenge for teacher-leaders: to open up their teaching and informally share with others their „driving force” hidden behind the success of their pupils. For instance, they can share their ideas, time and resources during the entire day at school or even outside working hours as volunteers who would lead other teachers by developing their teaching praxis step by step. These leaders share their time selflessly to support their colleagues in their professional development. They are approachable and willing to share their experiences and skills at every occasion and provide their positive feedback and support in a completely natural and non-formal way. Most commonly, this interaction takes place before and after classes spontaneously while teachers are passing through school corridors or during lunch breaks or at scheduled meetings. These types of leaders fully understand that growth outside of classes is needed and they take the role of informal leaders through helping their colleagues by short, yet meaningful conversations.

Conclusion

Teacher-leaders go beyond the area of their competence by departing from the prescribed approach in order to create more effective and innovative programmes that can allow them and their colleagues to improve the learning performance of the pupils in the school. They are characterized by a high degree of cooperation with the wider social environment of the school. They mentor, cooperate, create practices or help in deepening others’ knowledge. The teaching leadership serves as a logical model of mutual help

for both teachers and managers (administrators) applied to school transformation.

For the last two decades, the research findings stress that teaching leadership is an inseparable part of a successful school reform. The effective teacher-leaders contribute considerably to better academic performance of pupils but they play the key role in motivating and supporting other teachers as well. In literature, we can find many different scientific studies concerned with the effectiveness of leadership styles (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001).

According to Jackson and Bruegmann (2009), teachers gain knowledge from other effective teachers by being surrounded by them. In this way, teachers contribute towards improving their pupils' and students' study results and play a part in developing the school culture. As well as the already mentioned activities, teacher-leaders make decisions with regard to professional development and they are helped in this process by effective communication skills, the ability to take risks, positive interpersonal relationships and by an unambiguous philosophy of life (Leitwood, Beatty, 2008).

Duricova (2020) claims that successful leaders work together on proposals regarding teaching strategies; they identify problems with the praxis and search for solutions; they lead and assess the professional development; they evaluate the students output; they recruit and hire the teachers; they act as mentors and coaches and evaluate the professional praxis outside of school; they elaborate strategic plans that propagate diversity and they support their students' development by distributing resources equitably. According to Kaliska (2019), a complex outline of the required skills for effective leadership has many dimensions. Similarly, Danielson (2007) claims that teacher-leaders need to deepen their specialised knowledge even in fields like curriculum planning, evaluation proposal, data analysis and listening ability. These same factors mirror the standards, but are still missing in the Slovak context (Hulova, 2014).

Clearly, teacher-leaders activity is focused on students, on cooperation between teachers and on their devotion to teaching.

Leaders are the best equipped teachers as proved by their extensive experience in the area of the „great trinity”: curriculum, teaching and evaluating. These workers have understood the school culture since they initiate and encourage changes and support their colleagues' development in various educational activities. Leaders work optimally if they respond to pressing needs, if they cooperate with teachers directly in classes, if they are focused on teaching their pupils and are supported by the school management itself.

Achieving future school development will depend on assessment, appreciation and evaluation of both teacher-leaders' and teachers' work since they improve the teaching process resulting in better performance of the pupils. We can support leaders' self-assessment and self-esteem by evaluating the teaching process of every teacher, the learning of every pupil and the results of continual educational progress positively.

Teacher-leaders are able to potentially lead their colleagues towards optimal performance if they are devoted to teaching their pupils, if they are sufficiently supported by the school management and if the quality of interpersonal relationships and cooperation is high. Integrity, devotion, good communication skills, professionalism, courage, discernment, concentration, generosity, initiative, enthusiasm, positive approach, ability to solve problems and responsibility; these are the characteristics associated with teacher-leaders and all are perfectly in line with the ones needed at Slovak schools. These schools deserve them. So what are the basic activity areas of a teacher-leader in the unchanged conditions of Slovak education? Unequivocally, the educational process and interpersonal relationships themselves are the broadest area. Several of our researches suggest that Slovak teachers are not very inclined to a leader's role (Pašková, 2019a, 2019b) and when forced, they prefer the type of behavior which enables the personal growth of their colleagues, which is a type of behavior whose pillar is to build trust and emotionally positive relationships. Therefore, another area of activity is the area of cooperation. On the contrary, the least used type of leadership behavior among Slovak teachers is inspiration by a common vision. It is the behavior where the

leader looks to the future trying to inspire others with a common vision. This points out the continued existence of formally given leaders rather than a teacher leader. Slovak teachers-leaders generally do not receive significant support from school principals, they do not show leadership ambitions and do not take the initiative, neither do they present the values to which they would try to pull other colleagues.

Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical approval procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Institutional research committee Matej Bel University.

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