

School leader ideal - what young European educational leaders expect from educational leaders

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Abstract

There are a lot of different expectations towards school headteachers as educational leaders. They depend from the point of view and level of awareness how school leadership have to look like in order to meet demands of schools as educational organizations. It is then especially interesting how people entering teaching profession interested in educational leadership define “ideal school leader”. Paper presents results of small research on thinking about “ideal” school leader among students working in the field of educational leadership taking part in international Erasmus Intensive Programme “Leadership for Democratic Citizenship in European Schools” that was run in 2013 with participation of more than 50 students from six European countries. Author asked them about their understanding of school leadership and expectations towards school leaders. It turned out that young people define it in terms of organic leadership, stressing such features or competencies of school leadership as honesty, openness, trust and other values important from educational point of view.

Keywords: school head, educational leaders, leadership competencies,

Introduction

Leadership concept becomes very popular during the last period of time as the answer for challenges of contemporary educational systems. There is also strong evidence that it is a key element in positive changes in education supporting raise of school effectiveness in terms of students learning and development (Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005; Mazurkiewicz, 2011). Many authors have tried to develop understanding of leadership adequate to specificity of schools as educational organizations. They usually refer to leadership theories developed in broader context of general management theory (Bush, Bell, Middlewood, 2010). More recently they tend to value approaches underlying more participative and transformative understanding of leadership that in practice can lead to higher levels of synergy stimulating organizational development and innovativeness of schools which is expected in highly demanding contemporary world (Precey, Jack-

son, 2008). Some authors in the field, try to develop understanding of leadership which is not only adequate to challenges of contemporary world but also relevant to basic nature of schools as educational organizations with specific core values defining them. Most such theoretical attempts try to define educational leadership starting from basic educational values such as teaching and learning or individual human development of students (McBeath, Dempster, 2009; Dorczak, 2012). All those attempts to develop specific educational leadership theory are very important for transformation of schools and educational systems but not sufficient enough. Looking from the point of view of the practice of educational leadership in schools it is also very important to take into account existing ways of thinking about leadership among school leaders and teachers as they may be a very important factor hindering or stimulating positive changes in educational organizations and educational systems in general.

Ways of understanding leadership

Leadership can be understood differently and as a consequence of that, the role of a leader can be defined with use of different features of character, skills and competencies. There are many different classifications and typologies of leadership paradigms. One of the best attempts to classify those different ways of understanding leadership is the proposal of Gayle Avery (2004). She refers to general leadership theories but her attempt can be applied to understand educational leadership too. Describing development of leadership theories and leadership practice she presents four paradigms of leadership named: classical, transactional, visionary and organic leadership paradigms.

In classical leadership paradigm, the leader is defined as strong and charismatic personality dominating followers and ruling them with use of formal (legal) rules and force. Such leader is autocratic, despotic; he/she gives orders and requires unconditional subordination. In such leadership, there is no place for discussion, negotiation, cooperation and

group decision making. Such leadership limits its potential to the potential of the leader only, who does not allow potentials of others to be expressed and used. Such leadership style does not serve well needs of educational organizations that deals with complex and challenging problems of contemporary world.

Leadership understanding that is called transactional, requires the leader who is a strong and charismatic personality with high level of interpersonal skills that allow her/him to create relations with followers that allow to reach different organizational goals. Such leader is a highly competent negotiator with very good communication skills, able to influence and sometimes even manipulate others within and outside the organization. Reaching agreement such leader very often resigns from ambitious aims in order to satisfy needs of those with whom he/she negotiates at the moment. As it is strongly focused on needs of followers of the leader it can lead to the situation when interest of students in schools are neglected in order to reach agreement with teachers. It seems to be not a very good way of thinking about leadership in educational context.

Visionary or transformational leadership needs a leader that is a strong and charismatic person with high level of creativity and intelligence that allows her/him to invent and design appealing ideas that seduce followers and make them do what leader expects from them, because his/her vision is perceived as the best possible from the point of view of followers. Such leadership is appealing and seems to be adequate to needs of education. It is in fact very popular among those trying to find leadership understanding that is adequate to educational context of contemporary schools. They very often use transformational or more educationally grounded transformative leadership concepts (Precey, Jackson, 2008; Shields, 2009). It seems that it is unfortunately still not good enough understanding from the point of view of needs of contemporary schools as through domination of creative and intellectually attractive vision of leader (one person) it limits potential of organization which is not good from the

perspective of needs of contemporary schools.

Last paradigm of leadership described by Avery, called organic one, needs completely different way of thinking about the role of a leader. In that approach leader and leadership is understood as distributed or dissolved among all (potentially) members of organization. In other words – everybody is or can be a leader. Those playing formally the role of leaders have to be personalities with high level of relational competencies, empathy, ability to understand and help others with focus on development of other individuals and the whole team. Such way of thinking about and practice of leadership seems to be especially adequate to the needs of schools as organizations as it gives possibility to express and use potentials of all members of organization. It creates condition for team work and as a consequence, allows higher level of synergy needed to solve complex and challenging problems of contemporary schools.

As it was presented above there is the way of thinking about leadership that would be especially welcomed among school leaders as it best suits needs of schools as specific organizations. Unfortunately, when we look at research on thinking of existing school headteachers (at least in Poland) they most frequently represent thinking is close to such paradigms as classical or transactional. Visionary leadership, which is closer to needs of educational organizations and organic, which would be the best, are much less present according to some recently undertaken research (Mazurkiewicz, 2012; Dorczak, 2013). It must be argued than, that transformation of those paradigms present in heads of school leaders is needed and the best way is to transform it through promotion of leadership concepts closer to organic paradigm among those who will enter teaching profession and prepare themselves to leadership roles in schools.

Research on thinking of young educational leaders on leadership

Research that is presented in that paper was carried out in 2012 with participation of 32 students from six European universities (Eng-

land, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Spain, Turkey). They took part in the Erasmus Intensive Programme summer course focused on school leadership entitled “Leadership for democratic citizenship in European schools”. It was designed by a group of academics from university faculties or institutes that offer courses in educational management or leadership at master level. Participants went through ten days long intensive course built, generally speaking, on the basis of organic, participative, democratic paradigm of educational leadership with stress on educational values such as learning, development, inclusion, etc. It was also run with use of active, participative methods allowing students to take roles of those who lead the process of learning and teaching together with academics designing the course, which was developed basing on long development of such way of international work on leadership training between partners involved in the project (Precey, Rodrigues Entrena, 2011).

At the end of such organized course participants were asked to take part in small research. They were asked about their expectation towards school leaders. There were 60 students in 2013 cohort of the programme and 32 of them agreed to take part in the study. It was interesting that quite a big group of participants refused to take part in research or did not agree to include their answers in the research material (approximately 20 % of the cohort). Those who agreed to take part in the research were asked to fill in the questionnaire assessing their understanding of leadership. It consisted of two different parts. First part was built on the model of paradigms proposed by Avery. It consisted of ten questions about different aspects of school leadership, with four possible answers to choose in each question, describing those aspect of school leadership from the perspective of four different paradigms (classical, transactional, visionary, organic). Second part of a questionnaire consisted of a long list of different leadership features, with a request to choose those that are the most important when being the educational leader.

It turned out that students asked to fill in the questionnaire assessing leadership paradigm

Table 1. Results of questionnaire assessing paradigm of leadership

Countries (no of stu- dents)	Frequency of choices			
	Classical leadership	Transactional leadership	Visionery leadership	Organic leadership
Spain (2/20)	0	2	0	18
Ireland (5/50)	0	15	5	30
Norway (6/60)	4	7	8	41
Poland (6/60)	3	18	24	15
Turkey (6/60)	0	12	16	32
England (7/70)	3	16	20	31
Total (n-32/320) 100%	10 3,15%	70 21,86%	73 22,81%	73 22,81%

Source: Own findings

most frequently selected descriptions built on organic understanding of leadership (167 choices; 52,18%). Descriptions based on transactional and visionary paradigms were selected much less frequently (70 choices; 21,86% and 73 choices; 22,81%) and descriptions based on classical understanding of leadership were selected only in few cases (10 choices; 3,15%).

There were some differences and interesting results in answers of students from different countries (for example Polish students most frequently selected description based on transformational leadership understanding), but due to the fact that research group was very small it cannot be generalized. Detailed results with distribution of choices of students from different countries are presented in Table 1.

It is then quite clear that students preparing themselves to work in educational context and pretending to play roles of educational leaders in future, prefer organic paradigm when thinking of ideal school leaders. Classical paradigm of thinking, most frequent in mental models of existing school leaders as research of Mazurkiewicz (2012) and Dorczak (2013) shows, was selected only in few cases. It means that young educational leaders

think differently than experienced ones, which gives hope that they will also act differently as school leaders in their future practice.

Second research question was concerned with assessment of features of the “ideal educational leader”. Students that took part in the research had to select up to 5 (from a list) features that are the most important for contemporary school leader. The list consisted of different features of character, skills and abilities. They were mixed on the list randomly. Participants of the study could not only select from the list but also add their own features. The only limitation was that they could only select 5 different features. Detailed results of that part of research are shown in Table 2.

As it can be seen, young educational leaders value most frequently such features as honesty, openness, reliance, creativity and courage. At least first three of them are, no doubt, connected with understanding of leadership that is close to organic paradigm in Avery’s model. Most of features selected by participants as important, can be called “soft features” and even if “hard features” such as intelligence (9), rationality(3) or appearance (1) were selected, they were pointed less frequently which means that they

Table 2. Results of questionnaire assessing paradigm of leadership

Features important for „ideal leader”	Frequency
Honesty	18
Openness	17
Reliability	15
Creativity	15
Courage	15
Foresight	11
Self assurance	11
Resistance to stress	10
Intelligence	9
Determination	9
Optimism	8
Charisma	8
Ability to anticipate	7
Rationality	3
Communicativeness	2
Psychological resistance	1
Appearance	1
Professional knowledge, decisiveness, negotiation skills, organizational skills	0

Source: Own findings

were perceived as less important which can also be seen when looking at features that were not selected from the list given in a questionnaire such as professional knowledge, organizational skills, decisiveness or negotiation skills. No one from participants of the study added own feature, different that those proposed on the list.

Conclusions

Results of presented small research on thinking of young educational leaders entering teaching profession as students of educational courses on management and leadership showed that most of them think using paradigm of thinking that is close to organic one. Such understanding values leadership style that is different from traditional ones represented by classical, transactional and visionary leadership

paradigms. It seems that young educational leaders when thinking about “ideal educational leader”, value more features and skills that allow to built positive interpersonal relation through trust, honesty, openness and empathy rather than through communication and negotiation skills, intelligence and visionary ideas or simply formal authority and force that was typical for classical approaches to leadership. It also seems that they are focused more on such human interpersonal abilities as the basis for leader’s authority rather than professional knowledge, organizational skills or force.

Such results is quite striking if compared with results of research on thinking of existing school heads active in leadership roles (see. Mazurkiewicz, 2012; Dorczak, 2013) which show completely different picture, where majority of subjects present thinking closer to classical understanding of leadership and traditional vision of leadership role, competencies and features of a good leader. It raises the question why the result of presented study is different. Desired answer for that question is, that there is a change in thinking of young educational professional about leadership and we can expect transformation of educational leadership practice that will come together with generational change of those working in schools. But such answer is of course not the only possible. Observed difference in results between presented research and research on existing school leaders may also come from the fact that practice may influence thinking. Young students of educational courses at universities may built their understanding on their personal experience that was not “real” experience of leading educational processes in schools. Maybe existing leaders had similar “ideal” expectations and ways of understanding when they were preparing themselves for teaching and leading in schools at universities and when they started to play leadership roles “reality” of school practice made them change their thinking. It also may be true ,that presented results are specific because of specific group that took part in that research. They were students who had voluntarily chosen summer Erasmus course that was described

as promoting special approach to school leadership. When making decision to take part in such an event, students with different approaches to leadership did not consider to take it and they were not among participants of that course. Final group of students attending Erasmus Intensive Programme focused on “Leadership for democratic citizenship in European schools” may not be a representative for young people entering teaching profession and thinking about taking leadership roles in education.

Author of that paper took part in the Erasmus course and basing on personal experience argues that there is also very positive and strong influence of teaching and learning approach of team that prepared described Erasmus course on thinking of participants. They had chance to go through a process of participative leadership of learning processes. They were trusted, activated, empowered to make decisions and take responsibility for their own learning which made them understand the value of such style of leadership in educational context. That experience resulted in profound change in mental models of participants, whose thinking about leadership was much different before than after such experience. That gives hope that it is possible to transfer thinking of people involved in educational processes through such educational experience.

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