

Educational leadership a necessity of understanding schools as social systems

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Abstract

The article describes schools as a social system with three fundamental systemic features: high complexity, self-reference and loose coupling. Accepting these theoretical basics, the article explains the organizational logic of teaching and learning, comparing and contrasting schools with other organizations, such as factories, bureaucracy, “creative organizations” (e.g. marketing agencies). Finally, the article describes the logic of schools as a “mixed logic.” On the basis of this thesis, the article describes educational leadership as a leadership focused on the teaching and learning processes but switching between these processes with different logics. Further, it presents fundamental qualities, capacities and leading capabilities for success-

ful educational leadership in schools.

Keywords: educational leadership, school, social systems

Introduction

There are numerous publications on educational leadership from different perspectives: pedagogical, psychological, social, political, best practices and so on. Based on the theory of social systems and the functional logic of schools, educational leadership is an integral element of school. On the other hand, every public school is a part of a huge bureaucratic system, dominated by expectations determined by the logic of administration. Moreover, the methods and instruments of school inspections are improvisationally adapted from those mostly made for the logic of factoring or project manage-

ment. In this “systemic schizophrenia,” the principal of the school is the central figure to decide as to the direction and the kind of interactions inside the school: the school as a house of learning, teaching and friendly cooperation or a “penal institution for education.” In fact, the decision is not trivial for principals and much empirical research shows us that the real activities and the mental models of principals are often characterized by managerial and, even more often, administrative thinking (Mazurkiewicz, 2012). Choosing the first direction, we have to look for three “main chain links” for educational leadership:

- Clearly communicated principles and values,
- Leading an organization as leading people with their special skills, aims and motives,
- Professional development and self-reflection and learning in collegial settings and networks.

The ideas and theses of the paper are based on existing empirical studies on leadership and real experiences of the author, who has worked for more than twenty years as a principal in two different schools and as a consultant for organizational development in schools.

1. School as a social system – a description based on the theory of social systems

1.1. Does educational leadership need a theory?

Looking at the literature on leadership, we will find a lot of models, metaphors and descriptions of best practices. We find significantly less valid empirical studies that examine the relationship between leadership and quality of schools. There are some notable exceptions from Northern America, such as the work by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004). We find even less attempts of theoretical studies. This is because leadership in schools is a very young idea. Until the 1980s, the perception of leading schools in German lands was more or less the idea of a principal who is a teacher with special tasks in administration. It was only in the context of the discussions about “self-efficacy” and “autonomy of schools” in the early 1990s that we can observe an increasing interest in “leading schools” as a topic for specialised research.

The call for a theory, delivering clear models and verifiable hypotheses can be found for instance in Fend (2008) and Schlee (2014). We follow the basics of the theory of social systems because of its subject-specific and interdisciplinary universality (Willke, 2000). This fundamental, abstract and universal theoretical basis promises interesting conclusions with respect to our subject, but it may not

be the best place here to discuss the empirical validation of the theoretical basics.

1.2. “Complexity” as a trait of schools

Contrary to a simple machine with “input-processing-output” logic (such as the behavioristic theories of the 1960s), a large number of inner sense-finding processes, based on mental models of the members of the system, occur in schools as social systems. The first important distinctive mark is “complexity.” Schools consist of many “parts” (students, teachers, leaders, office workers, employees...). They are connected by networks (classes, staff, staff divisions, conferences, courses, formal and informal groups, etc.), either separate or overlapping each other. All of these parts will be explored further in sections 3.3. and 3.4. Therefore, we can observe the following consequences:

- School does not work in the logic of cause-effect relationship. Most of the processes in schools are “out of control” from outside. Direct and detailed steering is only possible in acts of administration and separate processes such as projects.

- The number of degrees of freedom is high and diverse. So the alignment of the activities is a central problem of leadership in school. On the other hand, it is essential to find fields of activities for diverse interests, talents and motivations of teachers and students to allow them to fulfill themselves.

- The central problem of educational leadership is to find the balance between

the required reduction of complexity and the alignment of activities on one hand and the spontaneity and diversity of activities on the other hand. There are many possibilities: through force (laws, regulations, directives, prohibitions,..), through agreements (quality standards, process descriptions, employment contracts, building regulations, and decisions of conferences, ...) or by “sense-making” (joint guiding principles, traditions, corporate identity, school programs, concepts, trainings, common festivals and celebrations, rituals...).

- Educational leadership seen from this perspective means the reduction of complexity by creating and handling internal regulatory instruments but it does not mean the “mastery” of all situations that occur in school or even of the actions of individual people. Leadership provides rather a means of processing the complexity for the actors in the system, thus, it enables the confident handling of uncertainties.

(Hammerschmidt, 2013, p.57)

1.3. “Loose couplings” as a characteristic mark of schools

In 1976, Karl Weick created the concept of „loose couplings” between the elements and the sub-systems of a complex social system, trying to characterize the special properties of systems, such as hospitals, schools, social societies and others (Weick, 1976). His considerations are plausible when we realize that for

more than 99% of the time, school lessons are “closed room events.” The possibilities of control and direct influences from outside are very rare. Another indicator of loose couplings is the frequently occurring great divergence of development levels between classes with comparable social and gender structure. That means:

- Loosely coupled systems cannot be directly controlled,
- The effects of actions can often be remarked with more or less delay.
- The importance of “inner guidance” (values, norms, ethos, responsibility, quality of communication) rises with weaker stringency of the couplings.
- Leadership is not possible in the traditional conception of stringency and comprehensive control. But the importance of leadership rises to the same degree with regard to the design of the possibilities of actions and the opportunities of development of the participants of the organization (aims, tasks, conceptions, projects...), the design of networks and

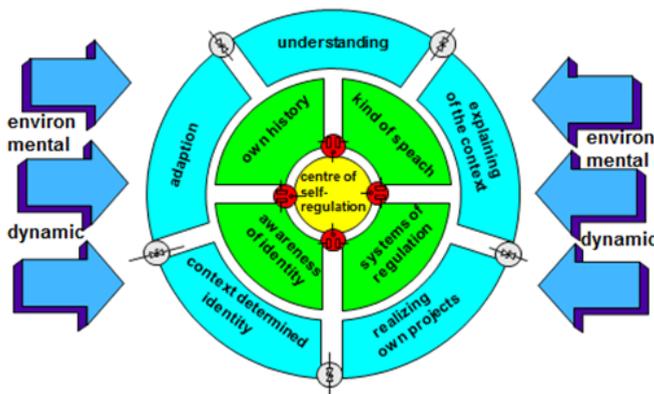
the safeguarding of a common sense in all actions that happen in the organization. Finally, it is important to secure the existence of the school in the context of the system environment (parents, inspection, administration, economy, commune, against concurrent schools).

(Hammerschmidt, 2013, p. 59)

1.4. “Operational closure” and mental models as bases of decision-making in schools

The third system property of schools to be considered here is the “operational closure” (also: autopoiesis) (Willke, 2000, p. 57; Krieger, 1998, p.38). Contrary to trivial machines, following the linear causality of cause-effect mechanisms in their work, operations occur in complex systems that create a specific “sense.” They reconstruct and adapt the environment to the special environment of the system. The model describes a social (a school or classroom) and psychic system (stake-

Figure 1. Model of a social system as „operational unity“



Source: Own elaboration according to H.Willke

holders such as teachers and students) as three concentric circles (Figure 1).

The outer circle presents the level of specific actions in direct contact with the environment of the system. Here, we can observe processes, in which the system tries to perceive the environment, to understand it considering the contexts, to define its own image against the environment, and to realize own projects or to adapt them to the environmental influences. This circle is responsible for the “self-defense” of the system. At the same time, it is flexible and resistant. We can call it school’s resilience against environmental influences (e.g., inspections, public critics, etc.).

The next circle contains elements important for the internal regulations: the history, the kind of speech (how relevant subjects are discussed), the internal regulation system (programs, concepts, shared visions, models, ideas, basics of leading, contracts etc.) and the self-understanding of the system (philosophy, ethics, understanding of quality etc.). Here, the system creates its own sense in contrast to the environment.

The innermost circle is the “centre of self-regulation” and in psychic systems - a “mental models.” It is the part of ourselves that has an important influence on what we do and how we act. However, we do not have direct access to it. All these three circles are connected inside between their elements and outside between one another. The consequences

regarding our subject “leadership” are:

- The people we have to lead are active as to responding to their environment (and the requirements of the leader), while stable actions and motivations are strictly coupled to the definition of sense. We have to accept that the intentions of the leader and the teacher are not the same. Then, we must speak out our intentions and try to find an acceptable tradeoff.

- The mental models lead us whether we like it or not. In our communication, we must discover the intrinsic motivations of the teachers.

- We must try to connect organizational processes of sense-finding with the individual definitions of sense. This is moderated communication about what we do and why we do it

- The teacher’s profession and its development are different to other professions: changes in pedagogical actions are not only connected to some knowledge or skills. Professional changes for teachers are often connected to new definitions of sense and the disconcerting of their own mental models. Therefore, changes in teaching-learning cultures sometimes cause an existential disquiet. The leader can only support the teachers in finding their own ways.

- The way to support the common sense making is to support the collegial reflection about the lessons and the collegial consulting.

(Hammerschmidt, 2013, p. 60)

1.5. The logic of schools as a mixed logic

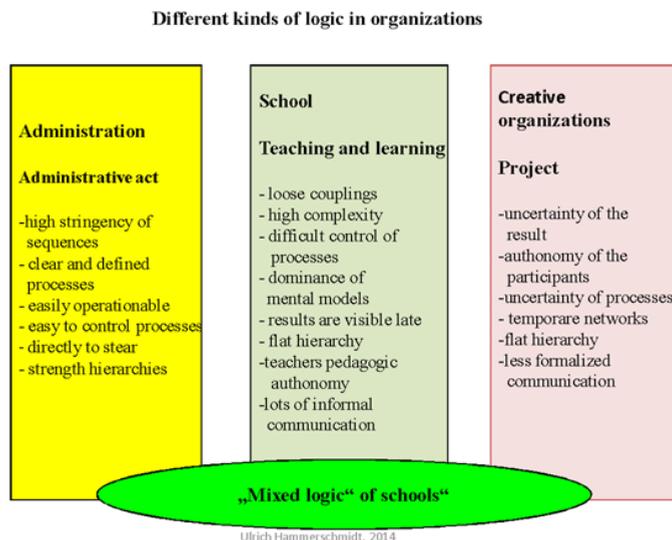
Trying to find the principles of educational leadership, we have to describe the typical functional correlates and processes in schools. Vertically, school typically is at the lowest level in the pyramid of hierarchies, with the ministry at the top and two or three levels of administration in between. The inner logic of this system is defined by and “administration act.” This function and the processes connected to it are stringent, controllable and easy to operationalize. The ways of communication are tight and strict, from the top downwards as instruction and back from the bottom as report. So in practice, we need to imagine schools as the lowest and smallest part of a giant bureaucracy. The central processes in schools do not play

an important role here: from the point of view of the bureaucratic hierarchy, the inner logic and function of school is a blind spot (Rosenbusch, 2005). There are many administrative processes in schools (management, budget, credentials ...) which follow the logic of administration but at the “heart of schools” are the learning/teaching processes that are the basis of teacher-student interactions. The characteristic of the logic of these processes is shown in figure 2. The most important for our study are: high complexity, loose couplings and dominance of mental models.

Finally, typical processes, following the logic of projects, take place in school as well (see figure no 2).

So in reality, we do not find only one logic in school: the logic of schools is a mixed one. But the central logic must be

Figure 2. Different kinds of logic in organizations



Source: Own elaboration

the logic of educational processes and to secure that is the central task for educational leadership (Hammerschmidt, 2014).

2. Conclusions for leadership

Overall, complexity, loose couplings and operational closure are the main three characteristics of school as a social system. The task and the objective of leadership must be to use these traits for the development of the organization on one hand and, on the other hand, to cope with the related challenges. We look after “main chain – links” of effective educational leadership, concluded from the systemic characteristic of our subject.

The first conclusion, respecting the complexity, is to strengthen the “intrinsic leadership” (ethos, moral, motivation ...) on the one hand and to try to reduce complexity by lean administration through clear roles, functions and norms on the other hand. That means that classical management and administration are important supporters but not the essence of educational leadership.

The second conclusion is to strengthen couplings between the teachers by creating smart substructures, networks, and cooperative consultation. The object is to support professional reflection and advice.

The third conclusion is to assign for everybody to the most appropriate roles and activities, respecting individual aims, motivations, mental models and to align it with the mission and assignment of the own organization.

2.1. Principles and values of educational leadership

When we accept that classical leadership, based on control and direct influence on the processes inside the organization, is ineffective and not usable for leading schools as places of teacher-student interaction on its own, we must accept that the alternative principles evade measurability and operationalization. The central point is the triad of responsibility, trust and appreciation (Sprenger, 2000; Neubauer, Rosemann, 2006). The responsibility of everybody in a loosely coupled, complex system is the “main column” of alignment to the objectives of the organization activities of largely autonomously acting teachers. What are the basics of responsibility?

- Loyalty of the employees towards the organization and the leader and of the leader towards the employees
 - Professional competence and decision – making authority
 - Intrinsic motivation
 - Information and communication
 - Identification and integrated regulation (alignment between organizational objectives and self -concept)
 - Appropriate and inspiring tasks and empowerment coming from the leader
 - Readiness to do important things
 - Practicing a participative leadership
- (Neubauer, W., Rosemann, B., 2006)

Imagining responsibility as the “main column” of educational leadership, trust is the “groundwork” that gives the stability for standing. Reflecting on the literature, we can understand trust as a special quality of interpersonal relationships and trusting somebody as a personal social capability, connected with concrete situations and contexts (Neubauer, Rosemann, 2006). The empirical validation of conditions helping confidence-building in organizations is rare. But there are many experience-based outcomes:

- Professional and administrative competence of the leader
- Integrity and fairness
- Open communication
- The leader gives trust first
- Clear and communicated leadership mission
- Control as a helping feedback
- Not identifying those guilty for failures, but trying to solve the problem
- Failure as an opportunity for learning
- Open and straight information policy
- Not emphasizing the power-based distance
- Last but not least: “Power must risk trust so as not to lose it.”

(Neubauer, Rosemann, 2006, p.143)

The next stage of building our house of educational leadership is building the roof: appreciation.

Appreciation is tightly connected to trust and motivation. A feeling of mutual appreciation, respect and honoring the good results of others are the precondi-

tion for sustainable intrinsic motivation. High expectations of the leader towards the teachers are one of the strongest factors of appreciation. And at the other end – appreciative control and feedback.

We want to explain four other basic principles of educational leadership:

- Orientation on teaching and learning as the most important processes in the school, connected with high expectations concerning the quality of the lessons
- Long term thinking and strategy and clear aims for the short and middle term development
- Accepting the evolutionary character of school development, looking for the “flow”
- Take advantage of “the opportunities of the moment”, the most important changes and “jumps” in the school development are connected with unique chances.

2.2. Leading an organization as leading people

When we start a new series of trainings to prepare teachers to become principals we ask for their expectations. On the top there are “efficiency in administration,” “legal certainty” and “what can we do with weak teachers.” It is an indicator that structures, functions and failures are the most important things in the awareness of “young” principals. The agenda of principal meetings is mostly full of administration and legal questions. Issues of leadership – not at all. When

we speak about the staff, we sometimes forget that it is about people. We often forget that structures and functions are only the framework and the scaffolding for people to develop themselves and to discover their aims and motives in alignment to the aims of the organization.

Respecting the operational closure of psychic system (like people), we have to bear in mind that the strongest motivation is inner: we cannot motivate anybody, we can only try to avoid demotivation (Sprenger, 1999). Sprenger explains three dimensions of achievement: willingness, capability, and possibility. Further, he asks who is responsible for what. His answer is that the employee is fully responsible for his willingness to achieve something. The responsibility for the capability is shared: the leader is responsible for providing the opportunities to learn new subjects and skills and the employee has to spend time and energy to reach new aims and to develop his- or herself. At last, the leader is fully responsible for giving his employees the possibility to achieve something (Sprenger, 1999).

The consequence of Sprenger's view is that we have to focus on the selection of people and tasks that we distribute among them. In schools, it seems to be clear: teachers have to teach and to educate learners. But there is a wide range of additional tasks and duties. We can distinguish between "explorers," who need new challenges and who like to discover unexplored areas and we have to find new "playgrounds" for

them. We should also try assign creative projects to them; like a teacher trying new methods of instruction to students.

The second type is the "racecar driver". He or she typically likes to drive with high speed straight to the goal. Teachers of this type like competition, risk and the most direct way to the "finish line." He or she does not like uncertainty, irregularities and contemplation. We should try to find typical management tasks like projects, cooperation with partners and organization of events and public relationship.

The third type is the "allotment gardener." He or she very much likes tidiness, routine, clear rules and full control. He needs tasks like: accountancy, long time and routine organization, control, organization of structures and planning.

Each type is necessary in schools. We need them to vary the methods of instruction beyond lecture activities but the students like all of these types for their personality development. The task for the leader is to give them all a chance, regardless of their own preferences and mental models. If we put the explorer in the small garden, he will die of boredom. If we give the gardener access to the highway, he will sit down at the border with resignation and wait for the next bus. If we put the racer in the jungle he will cut down the trees and... build a highway.

In conclusion, to lead a complex, loosely coupled system we must make sure that everybody in our organization is able to work with a maximum of self-reliance and in effective networks.

2.3. Professional reflection and self-reflection

The central point of school is the interaction between teachers and students in the teaching-learning process. When we ask what the “product” of school is, we believe it is competencies and education. But it is not! The first and foremost product of school is the act of teaching and learning. Indeed, this act tries to “produce” education but the effect is uncertain. We can only tell from our own experience and from empirical studies what works and what does not. And secondly, the teachers (and the students) are producers of that act themselves. So they are involved in the “production process” (instruction) as both subjects and objects at the same time. This is the reason of the difficulty of changing and developing processes in lectures. Changing the manner of teaching is not only training some methods but it is a deeper process which calls into question the inner regulation processes and, sometimes, the teacher’s own mental models. So it becomes an existential issue for the teacher to change his or her own actions. That includes professional and reasonable feedback and self-reflection, which are very important for the teacher to be a “researcher of his subjective theory.” But most of the feedback in schools is connected with hierarchy, control, and assessment. This kind of feedback rarely works! The reaction of the teacher is mostly to show the desired behavior temporarily. The best manner to organize a

helping environment for the teachers’ reflecting and self-reflection processes is to build a collegial network and routine of mutual class observations and shadowing as well as collegial consultation (Schlee, 2012, Hammerschmidt, 2015,) or building structures of learning in organizational contexts (Mazurkiewicz, G., 2011).

3. Conclusions

Educational leadership comes as a direct consequence when we understand school as a social system.

Accepting the topics of such kind of organization, we have to accept a wide range of indirect control, diverse processes, strong influence of mental models and different kinds of logic. School development as an evolutionary process and the role of leadership under these conditions are quite rarely researched. So the significance of “catching the chance of the moment,” using unforeseen, not planned conditions and possibilities and their systemic effects is rarely reflected in empirical studies.

It needs theoretical models and more empirical studies about the correlation between mental models of leaders, their basics of leadership, and the effects of concrete actions. The literature on leadership is commonly a compilation of best practice and receipts. But the behavior of the so-called educational leaders is often the behavior typical for an administrator, a controller, a lawyer or an inspector.

Considering the system environment,

we have to explore how school supervisors and inspectors have a functional or sometimes dysfunctional influence on educational leadership. In fact, quite often the attempts of the principals to realize educational leadership are nearly (systemic) subversion. One of the central questions is whether the tendencies in educational systems (not only in Germany) like output-orientation, focusing on law, new inspection systems, orientation on measurable competencies, and other issues of New Educational Governance support educational leadership in schools or damage it.

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