Leadership for Transforming Greek Schools into Learning Organizations

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Abstract

Several scholars have highlighted leadership, as one of the most important factors influencing the development of a learning organization. The aim of this study is to explore leadership types in Greek primary schools, based on Bass’s model (1985), and investigate whether school principals’ leadership styles have significant impact on the level of their school operating as a learning organization. A quantitative survey was conducted in Athens, Greece. Findings showed that principals, in Greek primary schools that operate as learning organizations, incorporate the transformational leadership style into their leadership profile to a high degree, despite the bureaucratic and intensively centralized Greek educational system and the socioeconomic crisis that this country has been going through the last six years. In addition, educational leadership in these schools, quite often takes the dimension of “contingent reward” transactional dimension. Modern age challenges require the combination of educational leader’s transformational leadership style and “contingent reward” transactional dimension so that educational institutions can acquire the ability of continuous evolution, of being vibrant, competitive and to constitute organizations which learn lifelong.

Keywords: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, leadership outcomes, learning organization

Introduction

Entering the third millennium marks the start of a new era, characterized by intense global competition, rapid development in technology and information, and the emergence of a knowledge-based econ-
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The change in fast pace is now the status quo (Wald & Castleberry, 2000). Organizations that are open to continuous learning are more capable to control and prevent crises but also to actively adapt to change (Kontogiorghes, Awbrey & Feurig, 2005).

Research evidence reveals that the most effective schools operate as organizations that “learn”. Therefore, educational institutions should establish a system of structures and policies, which encourages and facilitates continuous and collective learning of all school members (Fullan, 1993; Silins, Mulford & Zarin, 2002; Schechter, 2008). However, limited research has focused on the role of leadership on promoting organizational learning in public organizations and particularly in schools (Silins & Mulford, 2008). In Greece relevant research has been carried out only in the area of commercial shipping (Georganta, 2009). Therefore, in what ways different educational leadership styles and leadership outcomes support continuous learning at all levels, in Greek primary schools and what percentage of learning organization’s variance is explained by the two leadership styles?

Theoretical framework

Learning Organization for Individual, Team and Organizational Development

The development of a learning organization has emerged as an approach that helps organizations to build their own learning capacity at all organization levels (Senge, 1990, Davis & Daley, 2008). In such organizations members are involved in a continuous learning process that is directly linked to organizational goals, improving continuously their individual performance; thus, they contribute to enhancing organizational performance (Dekoulou, 2012; Marquardt, 1996; Nadler & Nadler, 1994; Senge, 1990; Rowden, 2001).

Watkins and Marsick (1993; 1999) developed an integrated approach for the learning organization, known as The Integrative Perspective. They define learning organization as that organization characterized by continuous learning for continuous development and the ability to be transformed, involving employees in a process of jointly conducted and collectively responsible change directed towards shared values (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, 1996, 2003). According to Watkins and Marsick’s theoretical framework, a learning organization involves (Fig. 1):

I. Specific features: continuous learning at the system’s level, Knowledge generation and sharing, systemic thinking capacity, greater participation and accountability by a larger percentage of employees, culture and structure of rapid communication and learning.

II. Three levels of learning (individual, team, and organizational learning).

III. Four systemic levels (individual, team, organization and global environment).

IV. Seven distinct but interrelated dimensions which constitute practices applied in the four different systemic levels:

A. At individual level
   1. Create continuous learning opportunities
   2. Promote inquiry and dialogue
B. At team/group level
3. Encourage collaboration and team learning
C. At organization’s level
4. Establish systems to capture and share learning (embedded systems)
5. Empower people toward a collective vision
D. At global level
6. Connect the organization to its environment

Why Schools should operate as Learning Organizations?

Human learning in the 21st century is much different from 20th century’s learning. Schools start to discover that new ideas, as well as creating and exchanging of knowledge are essential elements within the rapidly changing society in which they operate. It is impossible to create a learning society without students who learn and it is not possible to have students who learn without teachers who learn. Therefore, quality improvement of student learning can be achieved since it is linked to teacher development (Fullan, 1993). Fullan (1991) points out that educational change depends on what teachers do and what they think. It is so simple but at the same time so complicated (p. 117).

Through a strong learning culture in schools, students’ personal development, teachers’ professional development and organizational development can be achieved, improving school as a whole and making it more effective as to its goal and objectives (Wald & Castle-
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The most effective schools operate as learning organizations developing learning processes, strategies and structures that strengthen their ability to respond effectively and manage change in uncertain and dynamic environments (Fullan, 1993; Silins, Mulford & Zarins, 2002; Schechter, 2008). Therefore, just like other sectors, educational sector must focus on a change strategy, treating learning, as the only and the most important source for organizational renewal in modern era, in order to be able to respond to current challenges and changes (Hargreaves, 1995).

Educational Leadership and Operation of Greek Schools as Learning Organizations

Greek educational system is characterized by extensive centralization, intense bureaucratization, strict hierarchical structures, extensive legislation (polymony) and “formalism” (Markou, 1991; Andreou & Papakonstantinou, 1994; Kazamias & Kassotakis, eds. 1995; Koutouzis, 1999; OECD, 2001). However, there are some signs that Greek schools are making efforts to explore and expand their relative autonomy. If that is the case, one of the challenges that schools face is to create an internal educational policy transforming the dominant bureaucratic culture to a strong learning culture.

In order for schools to operate as learning organizations, they need school leaders dedicated to continuous learning and development, who can motivate teachers to transform schools into learning organizations (Wald & Castleberry, 2000). Bass and Avolio (1993), Vera and Crossan (2004) suggest that transformational and transactional leadership are the leadership types that influence more a learning organization. However, they argue that transformational leadership is the key factor for promoting organizational learning.

According to Avolio, Bass, and Jung (1999) transformational leadership comprises four basic dimensions: (a) idealized influence or charisma, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation and (d) individual consideration. A transactional leader avoids risk, pays special attention to the time limitations and efficiency and he is effective in a stable and predictable environment. This type of leadership can take two dimensions: (a) contingent reward and (b) management by exception (Bass, 1985).

The relationship between leadership and organizational learning has gained increased attention during the last decade. However, most empirical research has focused in private organizations and businesses (Pimapunsri, 2014; Rijal, 2010; Chang & Lee, 2007). In Greece relevant research has been carried out only in the area of commercial shipping (Georganta, 2009). Interestingly no relevant research has been carried out in the area of Greek educational sector and especially in the primary schools.

Research Focus and Questions

The above theoretical arguments serve as the basis for this research paper. The aim of this study is to investigate the dynamic relationship among leadership style / leadership outcomes and learning organization dimensions for Greek primary schools, through teachers’ perceptions. In
the statistical analysis, six control variables are included. The following questions a used as guideline:

1. How teachers describe leadership in the educational institutions where they work?

2. In what ways, the two styles of educational leadership – transformational & transactional leadership- and leadership’s outcome, identified in Greek primary schools, correlate with organizational learning characteristics?

3. What percentage of learning organization’s variance is explained by the two leadership styles?

**Research Methodology**

For the purpose of this empirical research, two research tools were used:

1. **Leadership style** was measured with the aid of Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which is a 45-item scale based on Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) developed by Bass and his colleagues (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Yammarino & Bass, 1990). It assesses the seven different leadership dimensions (types) that were mentioned in previous section. It also evaluates the frequency of leadership outcomes’ three dimensions: (a) extra effort, (b) effectiveness, and (c) satisfaction with leadership.

2. **Learning organization** dimensions were measured with the use of the Dimensions of the Learning Organizations Questionnaire (DLOQ), a scale constructed, validated and revised by Marsick and Watkins (1994; 2003) and Yang, Watkins and Marsick (2004). It contains 21 items (improved version) grouped in seven subscales corresponding to learning organization’s seven dimensions that were described above.

The present research was carried out in 31 institutions of primary education situated in Athens. Structured questionnaires were distributed in 620 teachers of these schools and 255 valid questionnaires were returned. The response rate achieved was 41%. The majority of respondents are female (76.5%) and their age range from 41 to 50 years old (53.7%). Most of them hold a university degree of Pedagogical Department (48.6%), and their total work experience exceeds 15 years (54.9%). Concerning the collaboration experience with current educational leader the majority of the participants (58.8%) cooperate with current school manager from 1 to 5 years. In most educational institutions (53.3%) the number of students ranges from 100 to 250 students.

**Results**

The analysis of the collected data was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22.

**Descriptive Statistics of Leadership in Greek Primary Schools**

School leaders in Athens have adopted the transformational leadership style quite satisfactory (Table 1). *Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intel-*
intellectual stimulation and individual consideration constitute transformational leadership dimensions with particularly strong presence. However, it seems that relatively limited emphasis is given by educational leaders to intellectual stimulation and mostly to individual consideration for teachers.

According to participants’ descriptions, school managers incorporate the transactional style into their leadership profile, in a moderate degree. Leadership dimension of contingent reward appears significantly increased, whereas management by exception seems to be particularly weak.

The overall educational leadership outcome is characterized as satisfactory. Teachers’ motivation by managers for extra effort is the most vulnerable dimension of leadership outcome. On the other hand, effectiveness and mostly satisfaction with leadership appear as the strong dimensions.

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

The path relationships between transformational leadership, transactional leadership and leadership outcome with learning organization dimensions were estimated performing Multiple Regression Analysis. Six control variables were included in the analysis namely gender, age, educational level, working experience, number of students in the school and collaboration experience with current educational leader.

Transformational leadership displays a statistically significant correlation with all learning organization dimensions (Table 2). The dimensions most affected by transformational leader are strategic leadership and system connection, whereas the dimension least affected is inquiry & dialogue. As for the control variables, teachers’ collaboration experience with current educational leader is positively correlated with continuous

### Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Leadership Styles and Leadership Outcome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Mean (Scale 1–4)</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idealized Influence</td>
<td>2,707</td>
<td>0,842</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational Motivation</td>
<td>2,704</td>
<td>0,905</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Stimulation</td>
<td>2,635</td>
<td>0,899</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Consideration</td>
<td>2,445</td>
<td>0,879</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transformational Leadership</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,640</strong></td>
<td><strong>0,827</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contingent Reward</td>
<td>2,671</td>
<td>0,837</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management by Exception</td>
<td>1,695</td>
<td>0,574</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transactional Leadership</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,020</strong></td>
<td><strong>0,836</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laissez-Faire Leadership</td>
<td>0,973</td>
<td>0,763</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Effort</td>
<td>2,610</td>
<td>0,687</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
<td>2,897</td>
<td>0,621</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Leadership</td>
<td>2,937</td>
<td>0,665</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership Outcome</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,815</strong></td>
<td><strong>0,639</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEADERSHIP</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,492</strong></td>
<td><strong>0,766</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid questionnaires: 255
learning. Number of students in school – another control variable – strengthens inquiry & dialogue, but acts as a constraint to strategic leadership. Obviously, the large number of students, in the school unit, creates needs and problems which promote exchanges and research among teachers. On the other hand, school leaders’ increased responsibilities and duties reduce their time and willingness for guidance and learning opportunities searching.

Because of the large difference in the means of the two transactional dimensions contingent reward and management by exception, the correlation between transactional leadership and learning organization characteristics was estimated separately for each dimension.

Regression analysis reveals a statistically significant negative correlation among management by exception and all learning organization characteristics (Table 3). The more the school leader utilizes correcting, negative feedback, reprimand and sanction, the more learning organization weakens. The dimension that receives the most negative effect is system connection, while the dimension less affected is embedded systems. However, getting a second university degree (control variable) strengthens significantly continuous learning, empowerment and system connection.

Contingent reward is positively correlated with the seven dimensions of learning organization (Table 4). Providing teachers with contingent reward, school manager enhances organization’s learning capacity. The dimension more favored by contingent reward is strategic leadership and the dimension less affected is continuous learning. Regarding control variables, additional studies with second university degree have a positive effect on continuous learning and system connection. Furthermore, collaboration experience with school leader strengthens continuous learning. Instead,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Correlation between Transformational Leadership and Learning Organization’s dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent Variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry &amp; Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p<0,001, **p<0,01, *p<0,05
the large number of students in the educational institution acts as a constraint for strategic leadership.

Leadership Outcome is positively correlated in a statistically significant degree with all learning organization dimensions (Table 5). The organizational learning characteristic that is more enhanced by leadership outcome is strategic leadership, while the characteristic
less favored is *continuous learning*. As for the control variables, teachers’ collaboration experience with educational leader affects significantly *continuous learning*, *inquiry and dialogue* and *empowerment*. Additional studies with second university degree strengthen *continuous learning* and *system connection*. Finally, the large number of students in the school facilitates only *inquiry and dialogue*.

**Linear Regression Analysis**

Linear Regression Analysis reveals that transformational leadership explains 76.1% of learning organization’s variance, while transactional dimension of “contingent reward” explains 63.9% of learning organization’s variance (Tables 6 & 7).

**Hierarchical Regression Analysis**

Hierarchical regression analysis shows that transformational leadership explains 12.6% of learning organization’s variance, beyond the percentage explained by contingent reward. Interestingly, the combination of transformational leadership and contingent reward transactional dimension (2nd stage) explains a higher percentage of learning organization’s variance, than each leadership style separately. It is obvious that transformational leadership displays a positive regression weight, which is responsible for an augmenting variation on dependent variable, compared to the transactional dimension (Bass & Avolio, 1988; 1993).
Table 6. Regression Analysis for estimating the direct effect of Transformational Leadership on Learning Organization’s variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>Stand. Beta</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Organization</td>
<td>Transformational Leadership</td>
<td>.761</td>
<td>.873***</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>807.209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Table 7. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for estimating the proportion of Learning Organization’s variance explained by Transformational Leadership, beyond that explained by Contingent Reward (Transactional Dimension)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$DR^2$</th>
<th>Stand. Beta</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Step</td>
<td>Learning Organization</td>
<td>Contingent Reward (Transactional Dimension)</td>
<td>.639</td>
<td>.799***</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>447.009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Step</td>
<td>Learning Organization</td>
<td>Contingent Reward (Transactional Dimension) &amp; Transformational Leadership</td>
<td>.765</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>.127*</td>
<td>.760***</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Discussion

According to teachers’ perceptions, school managers in Greek primary educational institutions that operate as learning organizations, incorporate transactional leadership style, in their leadership profile, in a moderate extent, confirming empirical research of Diadou (2014). More specifically, educational leadership in Greece, quite often takes the dimension of contingent reward, as school leaders are oriented towards task fulfillment, guiding teachers to specific goals set by the school, clarifying the requirements, as to the role and the responsibilities, of each employee and rewarding teachers in exchange of their performance. Greek school managers utilize, to a quite lower degree, management by exception, namely supervision and taking corrective action (correction, negative feedback, reprimand or sanction) when teachers do not achieve their goals. Also, they do not expect very serious problems to arise, in order to take corrective action. These findings for the different relation between the two dimensions of transactional leadership and learning organization characteristics, confirm the findings of Georganta (2009) and Di Schiena et al. (2013).

Empirical findings of present research, as in the empirical research of Diadou (2014), show that managers of Greek primary schools have adopted transformational leadership style, in an appreciable
extent. It is worth noting that Greece, in the last five years, is going through a period of economic and social crisis. Bass (1998) found that transformational leadership, unlike transactional leadership, is more likely to emerge in unstable, uncertain and turbulent environments and especially in periods of crisis. This happens because under such circumstances, leaders feel the need to seize the opportunity, in order to identify the problems of current situation and to promote a vision of the future that organization members will “adore”. Leaders tend to allay employees’ fears in times of crisis, according to Bass (1998). Present findings agree with research of Di Schiena et al. (2013) and Lang (2013), which showed that organizations, in particularly complex and uncertain environments, develop faster and more flexible circles of information and knowledge transfer. Relation between transformational leadership and learning organization’s seven dimensions is undoubtedly intense. This study has found that strategic leadership of school leader is that organizational learning dimension, more influenced by transformational leadership.

Teachers describe leadership outcome, in Greek primary schools, as quite satisfactory. Employees’ satisfaction and leadership effectiveness appear as particularly strong points, whereas teachers’ motivation by school leaders for extra effort and success appears slightly weaker. The findings of this study highlight the strong positive relation between educational leadership outcomes with school operating as a learning organization.

Regarding control variables, we found that the long collaboration (in years) between teachers and school principal enhances the learning ability of the school unit. This finding contradicts the claims of Caldwell (2004), and Parish, Cadwallader & Busch (2006). They point out that people, who work for an organization for a long time, have an inherent resistance towards change and they are more reluctant to give up work practices and patterns of organizational activity, they have been used to. This happens because, according to Dervitsiotis (1998), Marsick & Watkins (1999), Martinette (2002), Thompson (2011), school’s transformation into a learning organization is a slow process of organizational culture change that requires considerable time and energy for a long period. To be effective, we must change the way people think, the ingrained beliefs, attitudes, assumptions and behaviors.

Moreover, educational institutions, with large number of students, are conducive to search and dialogue. Obviously, the increased number of students in a school creates needs and problems, which foster the ideas’ exchange and search among teachers. This finding contradicts with the view of Salaman (2001), and Dekoulou (2012), who emphasize that larger organizations have an increased possibility to develop systems and structures that discourage searching, learning and innovation.

Transformational leadership has the central role in transforming a school into a learning organization, since it significantly influences the development of organizational learning capacity. Therefore, findings of Bass and Avolio (1990), Waldman, Bass and Yammarino (1990) and Georganta (2009), for the augmenting
attribute of transformational leadership that enhances transactional leadership to achieve remarkably higher performance levels of employees, teams and organization itself, are confirmed (Fig. 1). By idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration, transformational leaders can build a learning climate and culture and lead to outcomes that exceed expectations, making changes in both people and organizations (Avolio & Bass, 2004, Bass, 1999).

Conclusions

In order for the educational organizations to survive and excel, they are invited to successfully integrate the “learning organization” model into their function. Leadership plays a crucial role in the transformation of a school into an organization that “learns”. However, Greek educational leadership functions within a highly centralized educational system. Nevertheless, the findings reveal that principals, in Greek primary schools, incorporate the transformational leadership style into their leadership profile to a satisfactory degree. Therefore, it seems that transformational leadership very easily emerges in these restrictive conditions that characterize the bureaucratic and centralized educational system and the uncertain environment of the intense economic and social crisis that our country has been going through the last six years.

Between transformational and transactional leadership types, transformational leadership is the key role in transforming a school into a learning organization. Indeed, if educational leadership is based only on an exchange and reward relationship with employees, then school loses all sense of vision, inquiry and change. However, when leadership adopts only transformational characteristics, without clarifying objectives, specifying roles, evaluating the achievement of these objectives and rewarding teaching staff’s efforts, then there is no effective organization of the school. As a result, any temporary improvement and development will soon collapse. Modern

Fig. 2. Leadership Style & Transformation of School into a Learning Organization
age challenges require the combination of educational leader’s rational / objective attitude provided by transactional leadership, with a bright vision for continuous learning and change provided by transformational leadership. That way, educational unit acquires the ability of continuous evolvement, of being vibrant, competitive and constitutes an organization which “learns” lifelong (Fig. 2).

References


