

Putting education into educational leadership – the main challenge of contemporary educational leadership

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Abstract

Regardless of more than two decades of the presence of leadership concept in educational field, there is still need of educationally adequate understanding of educational leadership. Most theories of leadership in education and their practical applications simply transfer leadership theories from general management theory without any deeper attempt of educationally contextualised reflection whether they really suit the needs of educational organizations. Their main disadvantage is the fact, that they are built originally on values that are not necessarily central or important for educational purposes. The author argues that the contemporary dominant understandings of educational leadership in their main dimensions are grounded in context external to education and influenced by values that are not (or should not be) central for educational organizations and purposes. Showing that the author proposes educationally adequate understanding of the main dimensions of leadership and a set of values that should be central when building theory and practice of contemporary educational leadership.

Keywords: education, leadership, educational leadership, educational values

Introduction

During the last two decades, the concept of leadership has become popular in educational field gradually replacing educational management in the same way as management had replaced educational administration in the 1980s and 1990s (Gunter, 2004). It seems that the main reason for this shift from management to leadership was the insufficiency of more traditional managerial approaches in facing the challenges of contemporary schools and school systems. Numerous examples of research showing the importance of educational leadership in raising educational effectiveness of schools and student's achievement have strengthened such trend (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, Hopkins, 2006; Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005). The problem is that most theories and practical applications of educational leadership have at least three important defects: Firstly, they are built on the theories of leadership developed in the field of the general management theory where the understanding of leadership is different from educational understanding and highly contaminated with managerialism (Dorczak, 2009). Secondly, such understandings of leadership are developed basing on values that are not necessarily educationally important or are not in the heart of educational values hierarchy (Bottery, 2004; Dorczak, 2012b).

Thirdly, in the end, they are mostly developed in the English-American neo-liberal ideological context, not necessarily adequate for other cultures and/or the educational culture of schools as specific organizations (West-Burnham, 2011). In this light, it may be argued that there is not much (or not enough) education in most contemporary theories of educational leadership. It, therefore, seems necessary to bring education back to educational leadership (or/and educational management or/and educational administration).

1. Educational leadership – current state or dominant picture

Theory of leadership in education (or educational leadership) and more significantly the practice of educational leadership since its beginnings uses concepts and definitions developed in general management theory to understand leadership in business organizations. Such understandings were and still are transferred to education with little or no at all understanding of the specificity of educational organizations and educational processes (Doreczak, 2012a). Most authors simply try to adjust well known and popular theories to the needs of educational organizations and educational leadership, focusing on those aspects that suit best the needs of educational context. It seems that in most cases, even authors that understand well educational context, use unconsciously the understanding of leadership that is inadequate in educational context. To show the most important aspects of that problem, we have to look at the key elements or dimensions of leadership. Bush (2011), trying to answer what is educational leadership, have proposed three dimensions important for its definition: influence, vision and values. We can then try to look at the dominant way of understanding educational leadership through such lens.

Influence

Most definitions of leadership treat **influence** as the central element of its nature. Leadership involves social influence of one person or a group over other persons or groups of people to reach goals within the context of an organization (Yukl, 2002; Northouse, 2007). Influence as leadership dimension is purpose-

ful, being intended to lead to certain outcomes defined by formal leaders and/or authorities (Cuban, 1988). The ability to influence others is also understood by most authors as a special quality of few personalities (leaders) who have mental powers to influence others (Kets de Vries, 2008). Such strong connection of understanding leadership with thinking that personal features needed for leadership are unique rather than universal is present not only in most theories of leadership (and educational leadership) but also in thinking of people playing central roles in educational institutions as it was shown for example in the recent research on thinking of Polish school leaders about their understanding of leadership (Mazurkiewicz, 2012).

Bush (2008) stresses that influence is different from authority connected with formal positions important in management. In that sense, not only formal school heads can be leaders but every other member of school community. It is worth noticing that, from the educational perspective, this is a very important and promising advantage of leadership theory contrary to management that connects strictly authority and possibility to influence others only with formal position. It opens the possibility to define leadership as something broader than personal quality of formal leaders or few members of an organization only. There is, therefore, no surprise that the concept of distributed leadership become so popular in the attempts of describing educational leadership (Harris, Spillane, 2008). Unfortunately, it is usually seen as leadership that is distributed, which implies the idea of distribution that is always an act controlled by someone else than a person who receives distributed powers. Again, the role of few people who are leaders with a special power (the power of distribution of leadership within a group or an organization) is stressed and the promising feature of distributed leadership concept is wasted.

Vision

Connecting leadership with a **vision** has been a significant element of numerous theories in the field of educational leadership since its appearance. Theories of *visionary*, *charismatic*, *inspirational*, *transformational* or *transformative* leadership were easily transferred to the educational leadership theory as the necessity of a clear and appealing vision is especially

important in educational processes that are (or should be) in their nature focused on individual, group and social transformation and development (Precey, Jackson, 2008; Shields, 2009). Educational research also shows that having a clear vision and being able to achieve it is very high on the list of expectations towards school heads expressed by teachers, parents and others involved in school life (Dempster, Logan, 1998).

Schools as organizations need a vision and that dimension of educational leadership has the potential to transform schools. Unfortunately, there are at least four serious dangers connected with the presence of the notion of vision in the understanding of educational leadership. First among them is the fact that vision can (and frequently does) blind leaders and those who are led and results in indoctrination with all its personal, organizational and social consequences (Fullan, 1992). Second problem is similar to the one mentioned when talking about influence – a vision usually or most often comes from a leader and is presented to others. Leadership understood this way is again usually limited to those who are formally in leadership positions. Thirdly, there is also a universal problem of political influence and power in educational systems. Having a vision, frequently means in school reality - to conform to the centralized expectations of those who create educational policy. The vision is more often than not centrally designed by educational policy experts of the Ministries of Education or other educational authorities at different levels that decide about schools and has to be promoted and implemented by those who formally play leadership roles in schools and have to subordinate to educational authorities (Hoyle, Wallace, 2005). Last but not least, there is a problem of ‘depersonalization’ when the members of school community are ‘used’ to realize a vision that is good from the point of view of the interests of particular groups, school as an organization, other organizations around school or the society in general and disrespects or even neglects the interests of the individual development of students (Precey, 2011).

Values

Leadership is always grounded in values. It is not a surprise that the clearer and the more clearly expressed and visible is the set of leadership val-

ues, the more effective school leadership is (Day, Harris, Hadfield, 2001). Values are without doubt the necessary foundation of understanding leadership for its practical consequences at the level of decision making in an organization. At the same time, there are some threats connected with that aspect of leadership strongly visible in the theory, research and practice of leadership in education.

First threat comes from the fact that describing leadership most theories stress that it has to be built on personal and professional values of a leader (Bush, 2011). The problem is that leaders understood as strong personalities build their leadership actions more on their personal than on professional values which results in one-way influence and indoctrination, that is completely incompatible with the needs of contemporary democratic educational systems. Such picture can be found both in the numerous theories of leadership and the thinking of existing school leaders (Mazurkiewicz, 2012).

Another threat comes from the fact that values promoted in educational leadership are very often those of political forces, governments and educational authorities, not school leaders or school communities. It usually results in a slightly schizophrenic situation where the rhetoric of official school leadership is different from the beliefs and actions of school leaders and other professionals involved in educational processes as people tend to rather oppose and disagree with actions and changes based on values that are ‘external’ from their professional system of values and their understandings grounded in their particular and specific school communities with their unique needs (Hargreaves, 2004).

Another important problem in the area of the values of educational leadership is the list and hierarchy of those values. It can be argued that the list of values important in the discussion about educational leadership was and still is strongly influenced by the neo-liberal phraseology and hierarchy of values that invaded public and educational domain together with the managerial thinking of the late 1970s and 1980s. Such managerial language penetrated public and professional thinking about education and educational leadership to such an extent that most of people active in educational leadership research and practice do not even ask the question if their

professional language and values behind it are really educational. It can come as a big surprise how many educationalists will agree that we should put on the list of the core educational values important not only for school leadership but for education in general such values as: Quality, Accountability, Effectiveness, Innovativeness, Change, Productivity, Economic Growth, Teaching and Learning.

When we look at the statements expressing the educational policy of most governments, OECD reports and documents, periodicals devoted to school management and leadership, books and research papers in the field, we can find those values as most frequently used. But does it really mean that those are the core and the most important educational values? I will risk the statement that it must be argued that those values are not the core educational values to build on them the understanding of education and educational leadership. They are, obviously, important and worth taking into account when thinking about educational processes and leadership in education but they have to be subordinated to values that are more central for education. The fact that they are central for educational leadership that at the same time undervalues, ignores or even neglects 'educationally important values' is the main problem of contemporary educational leadership.

2. Educational leadership – what should it really mean ?

Trying to define the desired understanding of educational leadership we can use the same perspective of three main dimensions proposed by Bush (2008): influence, vision and values. However, it seems more accurate to start from the perspective of basic educational values.

Values of educational leadership

Contrary to the values listed as highly important in the dominant understanding of educational leadership influenced by managerial thinking one can try to formulate the 'educational' list of values such as: Individual Human Development, Cooperation, Inclusion, Trust, Responsibility and Learning.

Defining an educationally adequate hierarchy of

values for building educational leadership understanding on it, we have to start from recognizing that the central educational value is **individual human development** (Kohlberg, Meyer, 1972). The main and the most important aim of schools and other educational organizations is to support the individual development of students and of all others involved in educational processes (Piaget, 1997; Łuczyński, 2011). A leadership understanding built on the recognition of the central position of that value can be called developmental leadership (Dorczyk, 2012) or person-centered leadership (Fielding, 2006a). All other values that constitute the hierarchy of educationally important values have to be subordinated to that central value helping create the best conditions for the individual development of students and of all others involved in educational processes. What are those other values that are more important than: Quality, Accountability, Effectiveness, Innovativeness, Change, Productivity, Economic Growth and Learning, listed as the most frequently present in the discussion around educational leadership?

Individual human development cannot really happen without social interaction and **cooperation** with others. The value of cooperation means not only putting stress on team work as it is in most theories of leadership valuing group or team work, such as transactional, distributed or participative leadership concepts. It means, first of all, the creation of such organizational environment of schools that allows (and going further - demands) for active involvement of all students and staff in all possible activities that take place in schools (Fielding, 2006b).

The value of cooperation understood this way brings another value of **inclusion**, stressing the necessity of active involvement of all members of school community in all its activities, regardless of personal features of individuals or, in other words, taking into account personal features and helping to overcome any internal or external obstacles preventing individuals from full participation in educational processes. Such element of leadership is best expressed in the concepts of *inclusive leadership* (Ryan, 2006; Mac Ruairc, Ottesen, Precey, 2013).

In order to build school as educational community that enables the individual human development of everybody through cooperation and inclusion of

everybody, it must be built on **trust** as one of the central values important for educational leadership. It gives confidence and constitutes a firm basis for safe development that sometimes must involve difficulties and conflicts. It is an especially important value in contemporary education that has to secure safe developmental environment in the challenging and competitive world (Fullan, 2003; Precey, 2012). Trust as educational value is connected with **responsibility**. It can be seen at different levels starting from individual, through group, organizational to social or political (or policy making) level of responsibility. It requires awareness of values, conviction that it is important to stand for them but also competencies and skills to act in their favor (Starratt, 2005).

Last on the necessary list, but not at all least, is the value of **learning**. It is with no doubt one of the core educational values, necessary to be taken into account when thinking about values important for educational leadership. Learning is, apart from individual development, one of the two core educational processes that constitute the specificity of schools as organizations. It is obvious, then, that it is so frequently used in the attempt of conceptualization of educational leadership that it is even called leadership for learning (MacBeath, Dempster, 2009; Mazurkiewicz, 2011).

It must be, therefore, noticed that there is a fundamental problem with the presence of value of learning in the discussions about the core educational values and educational leadership. The problem is connected with the fact that most authors overestimate the value of learning and underestimate or neglect the value of individual development. Such situation is caused mainly by the fact that learning started to be valued as important in the managerial context of school quality control, effectiveness, accountability or productivity of schools. Agents promoting the value of learning understand it mainly as the process of knowledge acquisition that can be monitored, measured and controlled in the same way as other organizational processes. The connection of learning with a broader process of development is less interesting for such approaches as more complex and not easy to be measured and shown in league tables or PISA results tables.

The value of learning, if we need to use its potential for building proper understanding of educational leadership, needs careful attention in order

to define it in educational context according to its socio-constructivist nature and its complex interrelations with broader processes of individual human development (Vygotsky, 1978; De Corte, 2010).

Influence and vision in educational leadership

In the context of such educational values as presented above, it is clear that the dimensions of influence and vision that are important for leadership understanding (at least in its more traditional concepts) have to be seen from completely different perspective. It can or even has to be called 'educational perspective'.

Educational leadership has to promote a **vision** of education that is built on educational values with the individual development of all people as the main and the most important value that has to subordinate all other values (Piaget, 1997). That vision treats school as a change agent that, through individual development, has the potential to transform groups, communities, organizations and society (Dewey, 1963). Such vision of school and educational leadership built on it can bring education back where it was or still is absent or not sound enough.

The same rethinking and redefinition is necessary when we look at the dimension of **influence**. In leadership theories, it is usually seen as the intended influence of leader(s) on others to help promote a vision and reach organizational goals. In the educational leadership concept, influence has to be understood as a mutual or multidirectional process of influencing each other that is the key aspect of learning processes and broader developmental processes of all individuals involved in educational processes that take place in schools being, as Fielding calls it (2006a; 2006b), person-centered communities.

Conclusions

Educational leadership theory and practice have a long history and an enormous amount of experience. As it was said, most of it is contaminated with the understanding of leadership that is grounded in contexts other than educational. On the other hand, there is a lot of theories that underline aspects or dimensions important for the educational nature of

school leadership. The main task of contemporary educational leadership theory and practice is to consolidate those different dimensions in a more complex and coherent picture of educationally adequate leadership. Another task that has to be undertaken is to promote such educational understanding and influence the public debate and policy in order to change the dominant language of discussion about schools and educational leadership into educational language sensitive to 'educational values'. The present article can be treated as a small step in that direction.

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