

Educational leadership - the necessity for development

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Abstract

In this paper, I will briefly describe the concept of educational leadership and its context and approaches to the development of educational leadership but my main purpose will be discussing the potential directions and aspects of educational leadership and its development in Poland.

Keywords: educational challenges, educational leadership, leadership development

Introduction - contemporary context

It should not be a surprise that school principals are seen today as the most important actors in the world of education. Putting school principals in the center of every change and reform aiming at improving school quality is one of the most promising ideas for supporting governments in answering to the needs of modern societies and educational systems (Schleicher, 2012). In the situation of gradually increased decentralization of decision making processes concerned with curricula, teaching methods and resources, school principals play a complex role and their tasks exceed simple administration¹ of school. They need to become leaders ensuring learning and development of students, teachers and all school employees.

It is important to be aware that the change in educational leadership should happen in accord with the contemporary world of constant change and massive political, economical and social crises, in the world that lacks stability, in which not stable institutions but rather flexible networks gain power and are able to create knowledge. It is difficult to achieve what we plan in that shaky environment.

¹Understood as maintenance and supervision of the institution leading to implementation of government policy, or the management of different programs.

Moreover, contemporary democracy struggles to maintain safety and prosperity but also has to face new challenges such as decreasing trust and increasing corruption. It is a reason for the need of “inventing” democracy again, reinvigorating dialogue and community, rebuilding autonomy, responsibility, and cooperation instead of obedience or hierarchy. It is an ambitious task for education, which needs leaders who would be able to help our societies build new knowledge, maintain supportive values and could lead processes of learning and development.

In order to achieve the expected state of leadership we need to change the way school principals are prepared and trained. An effective system of school principals development requires:

- clearly defined range of responsibilities,
- adequate opportunities for career-long development,
- awareness of the principal’s key role in supporting students’ learning and in improving the quality of schools’ work (Council..., 2013).

In the face of the significant trend of decentralization present in the European Union, it is important to be aware that school autonomy is able to bring higher quality only when certain conditions are fulfilled. Principals’ and teachers’ professionalism is the most important among those conditions because school autonomy will bring positive results only with the appearance of effective educational leaders and a proper support system.

Challenges of educational leadership

Since the political transformation in Poland in 1989 the model of school management has been changed and accompanied by a discussion about the principal’s role that might be shortened to one question: teacher or manager. In practice, nowadays, a principal is usually both: the first teacher and the manager (Więśław, 2011). Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of coherent policy, understood as systemic and regular actions resulting from strategic thinking and professional discourse, in the area of educational leadership. Moreover, only incidental attempts of discussions or research initiatives on leadership can be noticed. It might be stated that there are two key needs in the Polish system: first, creating space for deliberation on education and educational leadership that

should lead to the common awareness of its necessity, second, constructing a system of preparing and training for school leaders. Putting educational leadership in the global context, we need to be aware that there are three serious obstacles in its development:

- systematically growing list of school principals’ duties,
- aging of the personnel (51% of principals in OECD countries will retire during the next 10 years),
- unattractive work conditions (Schleicher, 2012).

The Polish system of the selection of school principals lacks clear criteria of that selection. The description of the selection process mentions the quality of the school work conception prepared by the candidate. It is difficult to find formal or informal criteria used by local governments during the selection process. So, in reality, there is no one, general model of the selection of school principals in Poland and their career paths are also strongly diverse. It is symptomatic that in Mazurkiewicz’s research more than 50% of the one hundred interviewed school principals admitted that they had become principals “by accident” or under peer pressure (Mazurkiewicz, 2012). It might mean two things (at the same time): low esteem for that position and lack of middle leadership structures and preparation which results in people being surprised that they are asked to be principals.

To be able to react according to school context, educational leaders should increase their impact on the way of teaching (understood also as influencing teachers teamwork, promoting interdisciplinary approach, monitoring and supporting teachers work). Leaders in schools need autonomy in decision-making but, more importantly, they also need skills to make those decisions and supportive governmental educational policy allowing for useful professional development and involvement in deep dialogue about educational and social issues.

Educational leaders already serving their communities and candidates for leaders need a slightly different development – with different aims and in different forms. In the first place, they need support in thinking about their roles, about teaching and learning and about their schools in a much more broader sense than today. They need constant reflection on their practice in the context of beliefs they hold about their work, education and learning, as well as in the context of

beliefs owned by their co-workers and members of the society. Being involved in permanent reflection is a key aspect of leaders development. It allows for constant evolution of practice adequately to the situation in the world, responsible actions and building trust both inside and towards the organization.

Educational leadership will be effective when leaders are focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning and on securing equality thanks to precisely defined roles, cooperation, distributed leadership, autonomy and also responsibility and accountability. Because of that, we need to support educational leaders professionalization offering clear career paths and professional development they need. We need a more innovative approach to leadership including bigger involvement of teachers, flexibility, autonomy, responsibility and actual and useful competencies.

Recommendation and initiatives

Educational leadership is an object of scrutiny, research and reflection in the European Union countries and also globally. Results of these considerations are often presented in the European Council documents and publications. In 2009, the European Commission stated that effective leading of schools was one of the most important factors which shaped the conditions of teaching and learning, inspired students, parents and teachers and supported them in the improvement of learning outcomes. It was also underlined that a critical task of policy makers is to secure a situation in which educational leaders present and develop appropriate abilities in order to successfully meet the challenge of the increasing number of duties.

The conclusions from the European Council meetings in December 2012 and in February 2013 included, as it was stated earlier, the appeal to all member states to verify and improve the professional status of management staff in schools and to fully use the potential of cooperation and partnership. The European Council pays attention to the fact that educational leadership needs high professional competencies based on key values. Educational leadership demands strong involvement, motivational skills, sound management, pedagogical and communication skills. An efficient leader inspires constructing a strategic vision of the institution, serves as a role model and

plays a critical role in preparing attractive conditions for learning. Moreover, it is the leader's responsibility to care about relations with other educational institutions, families, labor market and local environment in order to support learning process. So, selection, recruitment, preparation and keeping appropriate people in the positions of educational leaders as well as creating positive conditions for development have a key meaning and need special attention of policy makers and governments. In general, the European Council expects from the member states a few things in the area of educational leadership which are: assuring, in new ways, the responsible autonomy of educational leaders, increasing the attractiveness of educational leadership and promoting an innovative approach towards effective educational leadership (Council..., 2013).

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is another organization closely focused in its research and actions on educational leadership and points at four potential directions for improvement: 1/ redefining leaders' responsibilities, 2/ supporting distributive leadership, 3/ supporting the development of leadership skills, 4/ increasing the attractiveness of work conditions (Schleicher, 2012).

Taking under consideration the global, European and Polish context, the latest research, the policy documents and the needs of the contemporary school, we should create environment supporting educational leaders in Poland through few basic actions:

- 1) Defining educational leaders' key tasks and competencies,
- 2) Agreeing which values are especially important in leading, teaching and learning,
- 3) Building a mental model of educational leadership focused on chosen values, learning and development of students, professional and organizational development of school and teachers,
- 4) Creating a conception for restructuring the system of training and development for educational leaders which will offer methods and content supporting educational leadership,
- 5) And also reconstructing the selection process and work condition of school principals.

Additionally, thinking about a systemic solution for leaders' training and development, it is worth to mention that the beginning of the principal term during the first or second year is one of the most fragile stages in

educational leaders' career. Unfortunately, professional development for school principal is rarely designed to answer beginners' needs. In consequence, there is a lack of understanding of novice principals' problems and also lack of support in solving those problems that are so different that they demand specific forms and methods for their development (Elsner, 2011).

Defining educational leadership

It is difficult and also irrational to start building a new training system for leaders before defining the desired outcome of that system. It is crucial to start with a discussion about the mental model of educational leadership closely tied to the needed competencies and values. It would also be beneficial to make a step back and agree on how we understand the education process (while we are trying to create an image of ideal and effective leadership model). Polish education needs constant, public discourse about the key concepts connected to the strategies and development plans of the educational system. Reflection on educational leadership and school principals' role should be the key element of this discourse.

Educational leadership is especially important for developed and matured educational systems because it allows to reach a higher level of development. Well established educational systems need more than standardized approaches to solving problem, they need autonomy, contextual actions, intelligent design, cooperation and flexibility and these are the conditions that might be secured by good leaders (Mourshed, Chijioke, Barber, 2010). In the democratic societies the aim of education is not imposed but is a subject of discussion and deliberation.

Unfortunately, we lack the language and vocabulary needed for that discourse. We have never established standards for dialogue; our values, emotions and logic are detached from the reality. We have never created a platform for discussion about the contemporary challenges and expectations towards school. Bits and pieces of that discussion might be observed in the media but, usually, it is led by non-professionals in a hysterical tone of searching for errors or misconduct. We need to start the discussion about the vision of democratic education in Poland. Education open for everybody, securing high quality learning

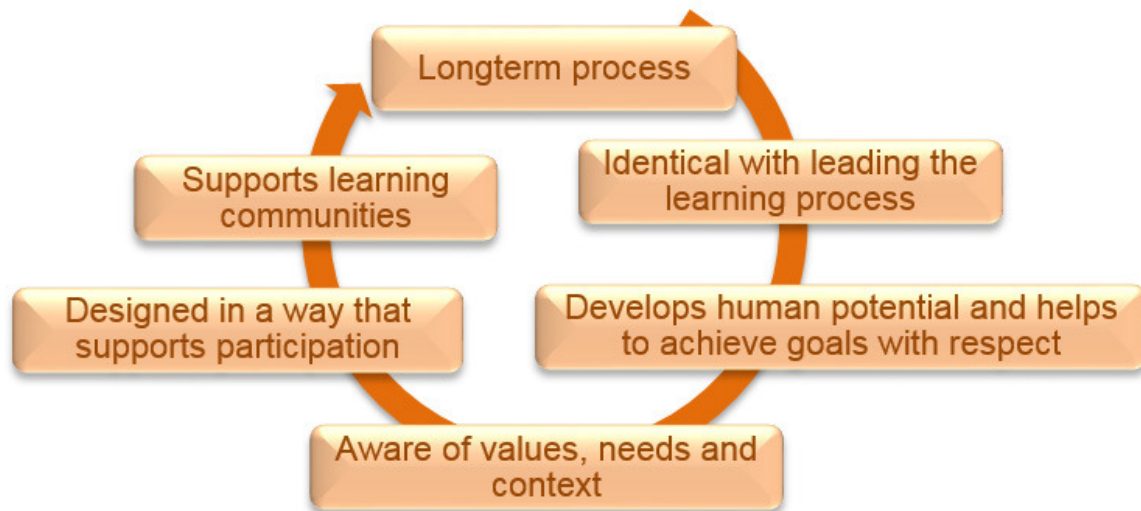
and development adequate to individual and common needs and also to the changing reality, organized with diverse values, aims, content and methods.

After creating a broadly common understanding of education, we may start to discuss and to define educational leadership, to identify educational leaders, their competencies and values, to construct structures, institutions and systems supporting training and development. During this process, we should be aware of the contemporary climate around educational leadership characterized by narrow managerial and economical approach and also of the threats coming from the rational model of reality – we often forget about accidents, intuitions or emotions when we are convinced that everything might be measured and analyzed.

It is significant how leadership in education is “filtered” through historical and cultural norms. It might be that we need to be more concerned with the anthropology of leadership rather than seek to replicate the prevailing culture in successful corporations working according to quite distinct norms (West-Burnham, 2013). Today, we are strongly convinced that the quality of educational processes is determined by the efficiency of organizational structures, by the financial costs of the educational initiatives and also by the possibility of rational planning, conducting and evaluating every possible project, which is not necessarily true. Additional problem that we face while defining educational leadership is the strong paradigm of leadership we are using today – elitist, individual, based on the conviction that real leaders are charismatic individuals who are able to force, manipulate or fascinate their followers. In attempt to understand what drives leadership, we have overemphasized bureaucratic, psychological and technical rational authority, seriously neglecting professional and moral authority (West-Burnham, 2013).

Leadership, despite many different interpretations (Northouse, 2007), is usually defined as a process of influencing others to reach together commonly negotiated goals of the organization (Alston, 2002). It might be understood as a specific group process in the interaction between people; sometimes leadership is treated as behavior (Northouse, 2007), sometimes as a particular personal feature, a set of characteristics – behavioral patterns and personal features that make some people reach their goals more effectively than

Figure 1. Features of educational leadership



Source: own elaboration

the others (Kets de Vries, 2008). On other occasions, leadership is analyzed from the perspective of specific skills such as reaching and processing information, problem solving, social skills, motivating others or knowledge. This approach emphasizes the meaning of competences and shows the perspective of growing to the role of a leader. It gives each person an opportunity to learn leadership, stressing its complexity, while, at the same time, presenting the elements it consists of (Mazurkiewicz, 2011). I suggest understanding leadership as a process occurring in groups of people characterized by several specific features.

Research on leadership shows a complex picture, significantly detached from the simplistic approach that is so visible in practice. In order to achieve leadership able to break through the frustrating status quo, I would suggest that we should see educational leadership as a process appearing within groups that can be characterized by few specific features:

- a) All actions are always focused on learning and development,
- b) All actions lead towards constructing learning community through intellectual and emotional involvement of individuals and awareness of key values,
- c) All actions attempt to increase the ability of group members participation in decision-making process and learning,
- d) Always focused on strengthening the potential of others through creating opportunities for learning.

In learning communities, all members learn thanks

to dialogue and climate of sharing where everybody is entitled to co-create a common vision. Leaders care about everybody’s ability to learn and adapt to current conditions because this is more important than things learnt in the past. Educational leadership is similar to learning process because it also helps others to show their abilities to fulfill tasks in the best way possible.

All employees need to be actively involved in reflection process over the key questions, important for the functioning of organization such as questions about aims, structures, powers and accepted paradigms (not only about procedures). The basic condition of professionalism is the awareness of complex contexts: political, cultural, social, economical and/or ecological. **[Figure 1]**

Educational leadership should be context-based and responsive towards the needs of individuals and community and, at the same moment, should help everyone understand their own situation and the consequences of their own actions. Focusing on values serves the learning process and develops culture of constant work on the improvement of cooperation and participation.

To summarize, educational leadership is a process concerning the processes of teaching and learning. Its specific goals depend on the context of education but the main goal is teaching people – which should result in enabling their learning. While talking about educational leadership, it is important to remember that education is a process in which a community of learning people is created due to involvement of mind, emotions, past experiences, sensitivity to conditions

or other people, with reference to the values accepted by a given community at the same time. It is a similar situation with leadership. It is not a characteristic of an individual or even a group but a quality of an organization – a result of cooperation of many people. Leadership potential has nothing to do with charisma, authority or visionary individuals but with the ability of increasing the participation of organization's members in decision-making process. An education leader improves the possibility of revealing the potentials of others so that they can transgress from an unfavorable situation (one leader in a group) to a desired situation – participation of many people in decision-making process and increasing the leadership potential of the group. A conscious leader, together with a group, should create situations enabling everybody to learn and solve problems (Mazurkiewicz, 2011).

There is no one model of educational leadership but there is a certain number of features and elements that might be used during developing particular leadership practice. Among those critically important for school functioning is the expectation that educational leaders share their powers and encourage others to actively use their potential. The more and more complex situation inside and outside schools indicates the future, not easier but rather more difficult, work of school principals, so close cooperation and support from co-leaders will be needed.

Educational leadership is characterized by a specific sensitivity of people engaged in the process. This sensitivity manifests in constant searching for ways of building a community, a vision of an organization and an approach to its tasks specific for every organization. These “ways of building an organization” refer to and manifest in various areas:

1. **ACCURACY:** reflection on conditions of functioning, community's needs, social trends, philosophy, and approaches to teaching process, which results in activities adequate to the context. In an organization with high leadership potential, there is a conviction about the rationale of action, the desire of searching new solutions and the acceptance of mistakes that might happen due to activity, not disregard.

2. **LEARNING:** concentration on the process of learning and development. In an organization with high leadership potential, a goal is clear and accepted. In every aspect of organization's activity, the priority

of members' learning is visible.

3. **PARTICIPATION:** constant support and demand for participation of all the employees in decision-making and dialogue that define the directions of activities. In an organization with high leadership potential, employee's talents are revealed, the desire of taking more responsibility than the necessary minimum can be observed, readiness to take part in all the events connected with institution's activity is visible.

4. **SERVICE:** ability to act as a service reflexive towards people and institutions. In an organization with high leadership potential, there is climate of trust and support. The desire to help solve problems is a visible priority. Official hierarchy is very flattened, respect and prestige is gained in relations with others, not due to position.

5. **DIVERSITY:** respecting autonomy and diversity, even if difficult and different from mainstream. In an organization with high leadership potential, the ability to use all the resources, also divergence and diversity, is clear. The rules of autonomy let treat this divergence as an asset, not a burden (Mazurkiewicz, 2011).

It is important to understand that the model of leadership, the developed practices and the values of leadership are closely connected to the key educational leaders' responsibilities, quite different from those that are perceived as the most important today (for example financial efficiency). In general, I would underline that learning and development is more important than the logistics of the organization functioning. I would point to a few important educational leaders' duties deciding about school character such as: securing the conditions in school for learning process, strengthening the conviction that learning is the main aim of all members of the organization, building trust, supporting moral goals, reflecting on practice and theory, encouraging participation and responsibility taking, building networks, sharing power, and critical thinking about work and its context.

Training and development system

Building a training system for educational leaders, we should take under consideration a few factors. First: the environment in which the graduates will work, their future tasks and needs. Second: the knowl-

edge about learning process, especially about adults' learning and the necessity of connecting their learning to everyday practice, experience, interactions with others and deep reflection. Third: the specific tasks the leaders have (or will have) which are supporting others in teaching and learning and which make their work different from other leaders and managers. Fourth: the fact that educational leaders are operating in the world of values which influence other people's lives. Values, which influence learning process, such as freedom, care, respect, cooperation, relations, awareness, transparency, reflectivity and more. All that takes us to the simple conclusion – the training system for educational leaders should be designed, created and operated in a specific way and only for them. It is impossible to prepare managers or leaders generally to lead all kinds of organizations, leaders (or the training) cannot be transferred from other areas, they need skills and competencies adequate to education. As Michael Fullan writes (following Henry Mintzberg), “having theoretical analysts trained generically to manage everything or to advise others how to manage seems risky” (Fullan, 2011, p. 8).

While thinking about the training and development model for educational leaders, we should remember about two vast issues. First is connected to the question how the process of learning and development will be organized, and second is connected to the question what the focus of learning and development will be. Both might be asked and answered only, as I underlined above, when the question why and what we need educational leaders for have been answered (about the aims, processes and structures of education).

The training and development system for educational leaders should be coherent, should take under consideration the needs of the future, novice and experienced leaders, should allow the use of the best practices and the use of different forms of interactions for learning such as coaching, peer coaching, mentoring and also action research or case studies. It is important to support connecting workshops, lectures, readings, individual learning and theoretical reflections to cooperation, conversations, group work, everyday school practice, feedback about that practice and implementation of change.

Answering the first question we cannot forget about the values, the key competencies and the skills

that should be developed, the awareness of the context and needs, the constant learning, the participation and the cooperation that influence leaders professionalism. Answering the second question, it is important to include leadership for learning, leadership for staff development, leadership for efficient organizational operation, leadership for social development and also leaders' self-development. School leadership has always been challenging but educational leaders nowadays face many additional challenges that should be mirrored in the preparation and professional development. They face among others: budget cuts, community involvement, ethnic and cultural diversity, technological change, frequent changes in educational systems, increasing expectations towards test results and accountability. However, we should be aware that creating lists of issues and competencies needed to be included in any course or training is not a successful strategy for leaders preparation. Certainly, it is valuable to take under consideration current flows, trends or necessities but what is more important is to prepare them ethically to the cooperation with people in changing the reality, to help them treat others with respect, state and solve problems, to increase readiness for self-development. Educational leadership is about the ability of understanding the reality, reflection and controversial decision-making in a group of cooperating people.

Conclusions

The awareness of leaders' role and their influence on teaching and learning processes, on the quality of school work and, what is tied to that, on the social development might be a promise and hope or a burden at the same moment. Both school leaders and decision makers might feel overwhelmed with responsibility but there is no choice – we need to change the current approach to educational leadership on different levels: mental, theoretical, political, and organizational. It is not an easy task but possible.

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