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Creative leadership for quality in education in Latvia

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Abstract

The quality of education largely depends on the effective, strong and creative leader. Thus the school leader's role today activates the role of cooperation in the leadership as well. The aim of the study is to form understanding about being a creative leader, what the leadership is, how schools can function and work differently and how exact distributed leadership expressions could look like in practice. The paper reflects on interviews with 232 Deputy Directors and 8 school Directors (2010-2012) about leadership in the school and how to prepare teachers for the role of leadership.

Keywords: *Challenges in leadership, collaboration, leadership, distributed leadership, creative leader.*

Introduction

The quality of education in school today largely depends on an effective, strong and creative leader. This paper draws on interview data from School Directors and Deputy Directors in Latvia in order to reflect on the role of School Director and how to prepare teachers for future leadership positions.

The role of a school leader and the context of Latvia

Leadership is not a constant quality and not all leaders are the same. James and Biest (2007) note a paradox in that in many cases people can agree upon the term "good practice", though with regard to professional action, quite often one thing suitable for one place does not fit in the other, or in another is not suitable at all (James and Biest, 2007). Nevertheless, the importance of effective leadership is paramount and identifying the nature of the role is important to this, especially considering the rapidly changing situation in education in Latvia with an agenda of school reform.

Those people who took care of youngsters' education in Latvia since regaining independence in 1991 have withdrawn from functioning as administrators whose main task was to follow the accomplishment of regulations. Of course regulations exist but guidelines set by the state for school leaders have changed regarding spheres of responsibility, consistently raising the feeling of autonomy and trust about the quality and content of the offered education.

Importantly, Latvia's partnership in the EU has served as stimulus in the process of social alterations.

Lambert (1998) states that leadership is connected with cooperative learning that makes possible targeted changes. This learning is directed to higher efforts and common goals. Such linkage between leadership and cooperation is significant. Eventually, leadership is democracy in action. This means to add value to all those voices that make alive the experience of school, so staff and students' voices will be, inevitably, heard. Leadership in this connection is a collective work and changes at school are a common task. To go on a long, sustainable way of improvement, capacity is needed which is based on shared, collaboration action. To this end, leadership demands devolving power and authority within a structured decision-making process.

Greater meaning is paid to common goals and coordination when leadership is realised in this way. Common values, opinions and targets provide a framework for coordination at the highest level. Formal leaders (Directors) will express these values in life and in practical work either as leaders or as followers. They will look seriously at their own learning - in educational, pedagogical work and in mutual relationships. They will be trainers and assistants, architects and builders of community.

These leaders will design the architecture of the organization, they will foster social capital helping them to embody leadership and cooperation based on mutual confidence and "coexisting dependence". In its turn, confidence in relationships makes possible transparent joining and sharing with knowledge. These kinds of leaders will consolidate school, basing change on common values and higher goals. They will be able to express themselves accurately to encourage identification and coordination of values as well as defining and approving viewpoints. They will "propagate rhetoric" (Karl Weick, 1976) and will make people to be responsible for commonly adopted values. They will have enough moral courage to restructure their schools gradually based on the double pillars of higher goals and school values. Leaders in organizations wishing to learn this way devolve leadership, and support others in order to attain success.

Communication is key to developing and sustaining a vision, to foster a sense of belonging, a sense of membership that in turn co-creates a cooperative and purposeful environment in which values and standards, significant for the whole society, are preserved. During the times of rapid changes each individual's skills to adjust to variable demands will become the topic of the day. With this the tasks of each educational establishment becomes more complicated so skillful (creative) action of the school leader has the crucial meaning of making the organization able to react to the demands of the society (Ešenvalde, 2007).

Restructuring of the whole organization is a necessary demand for forming contexts where leadership and learning can go on naturally. However, it is difficult to lead this process either due to unfavourable outer circumstances or almost unavoidable inner opposition. Moreover, although school leaders are often exceptional people it is unreal to hope that school Directors

of Latvia will be able to do it individually, “We can't save education saving schools one by one” (Lambert and Harris, 2003).

Education Management Project

It is within the above context that the project "Education management: motivation of the Director and the Deputy Director of comprehensive schools to improve management competence" was established to create understanding of what it means to be the school Director nowadays. It considered questions such as: Who determines choices to become a leader of a school? What education and level of qualification is needed to become the school Director? What are the greatest successes and the biggest difficulties in successfully school management? Is it necessary for the leader to be strong and creative at school?

This paper presents data obtained from interviews with school leaders. Respondents included 232 Deputy Directors and 8 school Directors with 10 years of experience (which was considered significant to understand the reasons and psychological factors determining the Director's readiness to hold this position).

Interviews were carried out in a number of locations: Riga, Jurmala, Majori, Babīte, and Dobele. Questions sought viewpoints of the Deputy Directors and Directors in relation to (among other areas):

- Prior experience in the management of education,
- Their educational background and qualifications
- Problems encountered and successes
- The characteristics of leadership

This paper primarily has focus on the problems they encountered and their successful achievements as well as considering education that could potential support their becoming a School Director.

Findings

In considering experience and qualifications needed prior to taking up the post of School Director 36% of Deputy Directors suggest that the higher education in educational management has to be acquired, with 48% stressing the need for professional development courses; while 10 % think that they do not need any such education; 6% think that attendance on a course unnecessary but suggested training could be a conversation, involve information from the internet and paper documents.

Data from school directors shows varied experience prior to taking up post, as summarized below:

Table 1. Respondents ' work experience and characteristics of work

Before you became the Director of this school were you the Deputy Director here?	Previous work experience	Length of service as Director in this school
(A) No	(no data)	6 years
(B) Yes	Teacher (11), the Deputy Director (9)	2 years
(C) No	Work in local government in the field of education	3 years
(D) Yes	Deputy Director	1 year
(E) No	Teacher (1), the Director (10 years), work in local government, work with the private sector (1,5 years)	1 year 8 months
(F) Yes	Deputy Director (10 years)	7 years
(G) Yes	Deputy Director	5 years
(H) No	Work in the Education department (28 years), including position of a specialist in education	1 year

Four respondents have experience as Deputy Directors. This rate could correspond with the common situation in Latvia as half of directors have got the experience of Deputy Directors. Respondents give varied information about the previous work experience – either broadly or modestly. Respondent (E) describes his life even since his childhood when

“[...] father worked as a Director of the school economic management and mother was the second at school, and I was at school from one year of my age when I started to walk.”

This respondent's way to the position of the Director is clearly intentional. In both cases when he became the school director he had participated in serious competitions. He resigned from the position when he realized it will be the best solution for him and for his school staff.

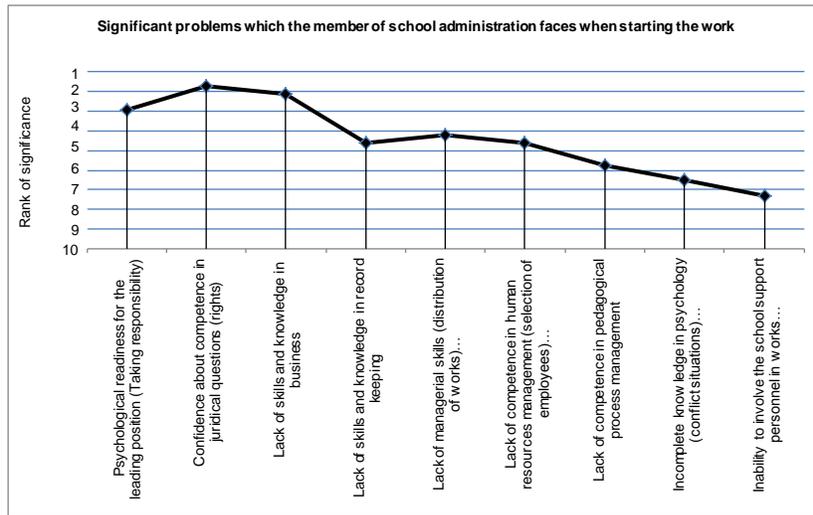
“I had my vision, I felt that the ten years in one place [...] and there is a bit of routine.”

Significant problems which the member of school administration face when starting their work are identified as follows:

1. Psychological readiness for the leading position (taking responsibility),
2. Confidence about competence in juridical questions (rights),
3. Lack of skills and knowledge in business,
4. Lack of skills and knowledge in record keeping,
5. Lack of managerial skills (distribution of works),

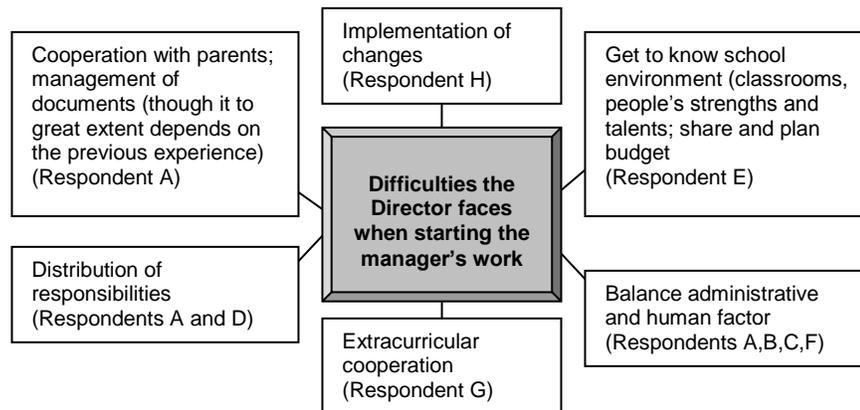
6. Lack of competence in human resources management (selection of employees),
7. Lack of competence in pedagogical process management,
8. Incomplete knowledge in psychology (conflict situations),
9. Inability to involve the school support personnel in works.

Diagram 1: Significant problems which school administrators face when starting the work.



School Directors cited the following as major difficulties with regard to school management:

Diagram 2: What are the biggest difficulties to manage the school successfully?



Respondent (A) describes the beginning of his career:

“The school comes along with its problems. [...] It always will be so that the former Director was better. [...] I decided not to change the administrative things for 3 years. [...] Shouldn't stand in opposition. [...] It may happen that the person is unable to run the delegated responsibilities. Then you need to change, but in a way not to hurt and not to lose things, work, function.

Another hard thing was cooperation with parents. It can hardly be taught. How deep I should go in, what to leave for the Deputies, what for the teachers? [...] About Management meetings. Different types. It is important not to lose priorities. The main should be kept in mind, not the details, though daily small matters are important as well. [...] The Director must have a lot of knowledge. Should it all be asked from one person? Shouldn't the Director (school), for example, be released from school economic management? ”

Respondent (B) notes that even if he began his job in a very difficult situation, it was good for him because

“...it was a good situation to make changes ”.

Respondent (E) in particular notes that the Director is lucky if entering the school if all processes are well organized, if cooperation with parents has been established, if the local authority is responsible for the development of the school and not only the control of it, through planning and support:

“I had not faced the fact that the municipality demands very detailed budget requests. Now I am happy and used to it because then you can plan and then it is

easier to do everything. [...] I entered the school which was accredited the same year and legal documents were in order.”

Cooperation with the authorities was not so successful in other places:

“Communication with people outside the school was the most difficult - in the City Hall, other institutions, even personally I had to have contacts.” (G).

The answers of all respondents are filled with anxiety about cooperation with the staff and trust. Some did better, some had difficulties with that.

“I perceive elder colleagues as cooperation partners. Not as friends. They each are as specialists in their field, the best at the moment.”(G).

“I felt that people were needed to work with and persuaded.” (H).

All mentioned that good cooperation is very important, but very difficult business, *“since a personality is not a joke.” (B), (C) describes cooperation with teachers:*

“There are many teachers now and each has got his own understanding of what is and what is not allowed .”

In his opinion, it is easier to establish good contacts with Deputy Directors.

Characterizes positively cooperation with Deputy Directors (H):

“My Deputy Director helps me in these questions...”

This respondent is the only one who particularly mentioned his concern about the methodical management at school:

“I organized the pedagogical meeting where one of the questions was to revive the school life and the lesson. [...]”

In addition to questions surrounding problems encountered, Directors were also asked to identify areas of success, with their responses summarized in the table below:

Table 2. What is your greatest success in your work as school Director?

(A) Director 6 years	Extended work outside the school: participation in Olympiads, methodical work and research. Improved communication with teachers during pedagogical meetings, they show greater self-dependence, the Director has no longer to talk as much as before. The school is economically put in order. E-medium was arranged for the school a year ago.
(B) Director 2 years	The number of pupils at school has increased as there is a good cooperation with two pre-schools. Evaluation system, work of methodical commissions, work with

	parents have improved. E-class is introduced. Projects are carried out, school environment is well-arranged.
(C) Director 3 years	Projects are worked out (choir costumes, installation of music equipment, ravine with lights and equipment for mountain climbers).
(D) Director 1 year	Well arranged environment. Positive staff.
(E) Director 1 year 8 months	Good administration team. School is open for new ideas, activities, works. E-school functions. Good results in final examinations. Outer and inner environment put in order. <i>"We are the only school in Latvia which has got the three dimensional board"</i> .
(F) Director 7 years	The greatest success – the Director supports international projects. Renovation made, equipment and technologies refreshed.
(G) Director 5 years	Renovation made. The school has been accredited.
(H) Director 1 year	Prevention of lessons' non-attendance. Expanded possibilities of interest education (21 program of interest education) to become the centre for children of the area, closer their homes.

The answers are very different – some concentrate on the analysis of the work done, some – pay more attention to characteristics of drawbacks. Evaluation of their own work is different:

(A) *"The link pupils - parents is complicated. Pupils frequently feel that parents just interfere, "...we have to start work with the new teacher as soon as he comes to school rather than criticize him for doing something wrong."*
"Project management and accounting should be taught to the Directors as well as office work."

Trying to imagine the desirable school in Latvia nowadays the Directors identified barriers, there is a sense of lack of individual agency, with a view that only when all difficulties are overcome will the school vision be realized:

(D) *"Think creatively, respond to non-standard situations, analyze them, make decisions, provide security."* *Can we do all this? I think not. We teach behaviour and attitude in conflicts, in competitions, in hikes. We wish the teachers worked creatively.*

(F) *"I would not want to see the school when books are eliminated, as it is in Sweden – everything is computerized, these technologies damage but not*

encourage. [...] future school [...] Lists of students can be digital but not the lessons... [...].”

“Learning! For this the knowledgeable, intelligent, tolerant teacher is needed. The teachers should be communicative, educated, well-dressed people with proper salary who are not ashamed to be in front of students.” (H)

Speaking at the end of the interview about the problems in teaching content in Latvia Respondent E notes:

“Without a doubt the Finns are ahead in the world. The first thing for them is education, the second – health. How do we arrange these things? These issues need to be sorted a bit different, say, in the system. [...] “

There are different views about two-language schools: respondent (H) dreams about school *“with a larger number of children – two-language school, night school classes as well.”*

It is important that directors evaluating their work mention qualitative and quantitative rates. This means that their view point is not one-sided, they put in order not only obvious matters (premises, teachers’ salaries, infrastructure, timetable of lessons, etc.) but also care about cooperation among staff members, atmosphere at school, problems between pupils and parents. This all does not directly affect Director’s work but in an indirect way strongly influences the learning process and school environment. The rate “number of pupils” can be valued in two ways as qualitative and quantitative because the increase of the number of pupils is affected not only by the demographic situation, but it also influences the prestige of school, professionalism of teachers, ways of cooperation with pre-school educational establishments, local authorities.

Directors differently assess what success at work is. (C) talks about infrastructure improvement works, but (D) says:

“I do not know if renovation is success. It is something you can accomplish practically.”

Particularly praises interconnection among staff members where from 56 people only 3 are men (D):

“It is great piece of luck if you have a positive staff. [...] And if you can maintain positive mood in the women’s staff... and the wish to work and express your ideas.”

Conclusions

Deputy Directors starting their work mentioned significant problems – lack of confidence about their competence in juridical questions, lack of skills and knowledge in business and financial questions and psychological readiness for the leading position as well.

The need for creative leadership necessitating cooperation at various levels, with senior managers, staff, parents, pre-school settings, local authorities etc. was clearly recognized by School Directors.

The need for professional development training with respect to the role of School Director was identified though there was no consensus over the form that this should take. We strongly suggested that such training should incorporate the skills necessary for creative leadership, involving frameworks for collaboration at all levels.

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