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Nurturing the leadership that matters in a time of uncertainty

Summary

This paper aims to challenge school principals, teachers and teacher educators to seriously engage with concepts that are deemed central to educational improvement, namely positive leadership and authenticity. It is argued that when teachers as leaders work with and for others to build communities that are relevant and meaningful they can have an impact on collective growth. The paper adopts a different approach, one that encourages the reader to engage not only at the conceptual level but to move from in inward to an outward perspective. The intention being to get the reader to make personal decisions that can have an impact at the personal and collective level. It is argued that only in this way can change be brought about.

Key words: authenticity, leadership, positive leadership, professional learning communities

Introduction

This article is based on a definition of leadership propounded by Gehrke and Claes: “Leadership is about constantly working on what one discovers about oneself in relationship to others” (2017: 382). We believe that our understanding of leadership will determine the way we engage with teacher

leadership. However, leadership is not just a question of influencing others but also one of self and collective discovery as people constantly come together to engage in varied innovative forms of professional learning (Bezzina & Michalak 2006).

As one of the authors has argued elsewhere “We are living in an uncertain, turbulent world, a world where issues of corruption, injustice, migration, poverty, and acts of terrorism affect many communities, many nations. As we witness such events they may make us feel helpless, vulnerable, or else we remain detached, oblivious of the realities that surround us” (Bezzina 2018: 1). In such an era we believe that the role of school leaders is to open opportunities for learning and growth and to nurture the internal capacity of all teachers in our schools.

In fact, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot argues that too many of the conversations we engage in about such events are reductionist or rhetorical in nature and encourages us to challenge the dynamics and the language used of such educational/social discourse (cited in Swaffield 2017: 493). She incites us to question what we take for granted, to question the unquestionable; to take a stand; to deliberate and engage with issues that affect us and future generations. This is the discourse of sustainability. This is the position that this paper will take. We will argue that if we are going to ensure that leaders and leadership leave an impact it is at the personal level that decisions have to be first taken. It is only then that we will be able to think of the impact at the collective and community level, hence a move from the personal to the collective.

In spite of the complexity surrounding the role of the school principal, the importance of the leader and her or his leadership for school improvement and student learning has become firmly established in the research literature, especially from research into successful and effective leadership in the context of current high-stakes accountability reform (e.g. Louis 2015; Leithwood & Louis 2012; Robinson et al. 2008; Day et al. 2000, 2011).

School principals are recognised as playing a critical role in school improvement and students’ academic success. While teachers have a direct impact on students in their classroom, a principal affects students both directly and indirectly as they influence teacher quality by the type of engagements they have with them; by the culture that is nurtured to empower and sustain development (MacNeil et al. 2009; Hayes et al. 2006).

Research demonstrates that nearly 60 percent of a school’s influence on student achievement is attributable to teacher and principal effectiveness,

with principals alone accounting for about a quarter of the total school effects (Marzano et al. 2005). The effects of good principals are most significant in schools with greatest need (Leithwood et al 2010). Moreover, virtually no documented instances occur where troubled schools are turned around without a talented principal (Leithwood et al. 2004).

Leaders and their leadership make a difference, a difference in the lives of others; a difference in the type of culture and climate we create in the organisations, the groups we form part of; in the achievement of young people. Deep down we all know what we would like leaders to manifest and how we would like them to live in communion with others. The critical question that we need to address at the personal level, before we can move towards the collective one, is what about us?

In this paper we would like to focus on the following issues which we consider fundamental to life, to our own existence and that of others: the context we are creating/living in, teacher leadership and positive leadership.

The context

Education is always affected by the context in which it is enacted. This context may be local or/and it may be impacted by regional, national or transnational social, economic, political, and historical factors. However, it is also impacted by global problems and tendencies – the growing use of social media and electronic devices, a rise in national, political, cultural and social divisions, a rise in anti-intellectualism in public life, migration, climate change, and the changing nature of the labour market.

The rapid transformations in different spheres of the public life and in economic, social and political systems that have occurred since the early 1990s, at least in Europe, demand a current, comprehensive and analytical review of how these reforms are reflected in and are impacting upon schools, teachers, and teacher education. Similar concerns related to school improvement, quality of teaching and to the education of children and young people may be found in different contexts. However, the pace and content of school reforms and changes in education may differ as the political, social, cultural and geographical elements are taken into the account. School principals, teachers and teacher educators, like the whole education system, “have to response to the growing complexity of the challenges that are encountered in the contemporary world.

These challenges range from the technological revolution, which is now part of everyday life, to the explosion of the knowledge economy, political instability in many regions, significant changes in migration patterns and the growth of refugee camps, to the rise in terrorism and violence in society” (Madalińska-Michalak et al. 2018: 567).

Our globalised, rapidly changing world is increasingly perceived as uncertain and full of risk. Such phenomena as political and economic crises, labour market upheaval, environmental disasters, violence are viewed daily. Old certainties are questioned and this leads us to uncertainty and ambiguity regarding, for example, political stability or social cohesion. Uncertainty plays out not only in broader dimension, but at the same time in our individual lives, careers, families and social networks. The contemporary context of the education with its developments is of utmost relevance to school education as it is responsible for providing learners with the skills and capacities to live and act under given social, political, economic and cultural conditions, but at the same time to shape these conditions.

Regarding the characteristic of present time, we should pay attention to the role of education and educational research in generating answers to such question as: “How can schools – operating under conditions of uncertainty – provide basis for the development of the skills and capacities that are needed in this given complex situation?”

Around twenty-three years ago White, Hodgson and Crainer (1996) described leadership as an act of white water rafting. We may paddle down the river and succeed in getting to our destination, fulfilling our tasks along the way but may do so whilst remaining unaware or untouched by the ‘scenario’ around us, the stories that are unfolding in our midst; the skills that were needed to navigate down the river; the strength of the team. Our focus has been on achieving the task at hand.

We can all notice a pattern in modern societies, a pattern in our lives. We are packing too much into one day; running after meetings, schedules, events. A life dictated by emails and social media. A certain restlessness, unease permeates our lives. We seem to have less time to focus on our needs, those of our family, our community/society. We need to ask ourselves – is this really our calling? Is this really us? What sort of life are we living? Are we leaving an impact on others, and if so, what type of impact? (Sharma 2018).

The importance behind teacher leadership

The question of leadership increasingly attracts the attention of theoreticians who focus on research into efficient team management; interpersonal relationships (especially in the work place); relationships between the characteristics of human activity and behaviour, the achievement of goals and harmonising actions aimed to ensure effective introduction of changes; and providing conditions conducive for important achievements. The body of research into leadership based on the humanities, social sciences, and economic sciences is impressive. Research problems which are analysed here are becoming more diversified and cover a wide range of phenomena.

The analysis of literature reveals a multitude of approaches associated with defining and describing leadership, including those relating to educational leadership. The existing theoretical knowledge gives us an insight into the nature of leadership and identifies factors determining its effectiveness. It forms the basis for studying and forecasting the complexity of leadership-related behaviours. The wealth of literature devoted to leadership is not only one of the visible signs of the popularity of this concept among theoreticians, but also a reflection of an established conviction that leadership processes play an important role in the development of societies, organisations and individuals (see: Madalińska-Michalak 2018: 31). Nowadays, we can observe a growing interest in teacher leadership. As one of the authors has argued “Because of the complexity of the challenges in the area of education, teachers-leaders who are driven by responsibility, courage, integrity, reliability, agency and creativity are in high demand. Without teachers who are ready to face up challenges and take risks, who are capable of identifying and overcoming the barriers for the development of education in school and outside it, it will be difficult to introduce a considerable change at the school” (see: Madalińska-Michalak 2018: 32).

Whilst the literature on teacher leadership is, as Flores argues, “vast and lacks consensus” (2018: 262) studies have shown that teacher leadership is a central element to school development and improvement and that teacher leadership is able to transform educational practices in diverse contexts and to address specific needs (see: Frost 2017; Flores et al. 2016).

The perspective we adopt in this paper to teacher leadership is that proposed by York-Barr and Duke (2004: 288), who acknowledge that teacher leadership literature has both a formal and informal dimension, noting that

teacher leadership is “an umbrella term that includes a wide array of work at multiple levels in educational systems, including work with students, colleagues and administrators and work that is focused on instructional, professional, and organisational development”.

We believe that both the formal and informal dimensions of leadership aimed at involving school members to engage in improvement efforts. The impact of formal and informal discussions of leadership is well evidenced in the drive to nurture professional learning communities (PLCs) in various contexts/countries. Various studies over the years highlight the positive impact that a commitment to implement the characteristics of a PLC has not only on teachers (DuFour et al. 2008; Harris & Jones 2010; Cormier & Olivier 2009) but also on student achievement (Jacobson & Bezzina 2008; Tutwiler 2016). Initiatives to implement the PLC cut across boundaries as people come together to extend the leadership capacity of those involved (Bezzina 2006; Bezzina & Farrugia 2018) and thus highlights the importance of a leadership that is built “on influence and interaction, rather than power and authority” (Poekert 2012: 171).

The drive to bring people together shows a genuine commitment to develop a positive culture which, as Coyle (2018: xx) so succinctly describes as “a set of living relationships working toward a shared goal. It’s not something you are. It’s something you do”. This implies engaging, communicating, trusting, sharing, learning from oneself and others.

As people grow together they develop a shared social identity, a leadership which is distributed, shared, relational and collective (D’Innocenzo et al. 2014) where the values of respect, trust, collaboration, critical engagement and reflective practice predominate. The key emphasis, as argued elsewhere, is “on learning together so as to develop collaborative and shared mental models and meanings that bind them together as teams in a learning community” (Bezzina 2018: 307). This implies the creation of a context where teachers engage in decisions about teaching and learning. As Muscat (2017) argues, “creating such an environment demands passion, patience and endurance” (p. 27).

Cultivating a moral purpose

This links us to the next point that we would like to raise. Everything rests on values. As Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, points out – there is no such

thing as a value-free or unbiased position on anything. The question we need to ask ourselves is: What are the values that we espouse, that our organisation promotes? How are these being manifested?

Our contention is that leaders and organisations need to establish an appropriate set of values which are then externalised in our attitudes and which attitudes then determine the actions we take. Our contention is that this is the only way that our school communities can play a central role in society. This is where our leadership – at whatever level we are working in – has to be nurtured, for everyone has a leadership role to play.

This belief very much determines the way we view and manifest leadership, that of positive leadership. Positive leadership (PL) is based on positive psychology. PL is seen as a choice, an act of the mind and the will. It is a continual commitment that individuals make to themselves, over and over again, one that necessitates that organisations and those within the organisation have values, ideals, standards and integrity. The research evidence shows that positivity makes a difference. If you are a leader you have a direct effect on the lives of others at a surprisingly powerful level. We all have a direct effect on others – in both positive and/or negative ways. We can all relate to the positive side of transformational or distributed forms of leadership. PL “builds on what is already working well. It appreciates people for their unique contributions. It is trusting people so that they will engage in different ways. It means acknowledging good things and actions” (Bremer 2015: 11). It includes leadership that enables, that connects with people, that expresses kindness, being authentic and honest, offering a positive outlook/perspective to life.

This may not be easy. It takes a lot of courage, a belief in self in spite of a context that does not express positivity. Whilst the expression of such values depend on the culture and the leadership team positive leadership starts with one person, the person who is willing to express human kindness and display positivity in relation to others. The fundamental question is: Are you going to be that person?

So, an important reflection to make is what do we convey with colleagues, co-workers, clients Confidence? Arrogance? Humility? Enthusiasm? Authenticity? Does everyone like what they get from you? For being fully human includes doubts and indecision, learning, making mistakes which lead to insecurities; it includes shame, fear, anger, grief, guilt, discouragement... But, being authentic inspires, encourages, expresses kindness, support, optimism. How do we approach people, our work? What are the challenges that effect our lives?

Concluding remarks

At the end of the day what is it that really matters? Developing authenticity is work we must first do to ourselves. It is an “inside job” as Graham Williams (2015) points out. It is a long road. Positive leadership looks simple but to practice it requires inner work. Like anything, it’s easier said than done. It requires managing your self-talk; embracing positive possibilities; it requires engagement, commitment and perseverance. It needs to be turned into a habit. It may seem idealistic for some. Maybe this helps to describe why it is hard for some to nurture a professional learning community, to lose hope and hence to disengage.

In our opinion, to quote a line from the stage show *War Horse*, ultimately we are “only remembered for what we have done.” Hence, our acts, our deeds will live beyond our stay in any group/organisation/community. Developing authenticity is work we must do ourselves in communion with others. We can choose our legacy. We need to ensure that we reframe our current views about the things that matter – the way we look at our colleagues, at decision making, at what determines our actions, at the things that happen but we are ignoring. The move from in inward to an outward perspective can be very significant to make personal decisions that can have an impact at the personal and collective level. We need to create more opportunities for people to share their views and opinions about things. This leads on to the second issue that is fundamental to reframing views and that is character formation.

We are of the opinion that we need to emphasise character building, and this should start in our schools, through the varied activities within the community. We need to nurture communities where learning takes place as a natural way of life, where we challenge issues that are relevant to our vision, questions that engage us passionately, that challenge us. This will help us to develop communities of practice in the true sense of the term where thoughts, emotions and behaviour are interlinked. This is the leadership that must take us forward. In this respect leadership leaves an impact on all those involved – both the person reaching out to others and those who receive. In this context leaders work alongside, with and for their community.

The discussion presented in this paper brings us to another conclusion that the changes we observe call for the schools to look into the future and not look back into the past. However, this promising perspective gives rise

to a series of questions that were formulated by one of the authors (see: Madalińska-Michalak 2018: 10–11):

- Are the teachers capable of introducing innovations and changes in schools?
- What determinants affect the work of teachers, their needs and opportunities to lead other people?
- What are the actual limits of teachers' autonomy in school education and higher education?
- How to depart from accountability and focus on educational outcomes in education? How to concentrate on the teachers' responsibility both for teaching outcomes and the process and for creating the conditions for the introduction of innovation and change at the school?
- How to increase the need to build ethos-based culture at schools?
- How can teachers – who are themselves the products of a system, which emphasized hierarchy, formal leadership, and did not leave room for leadership based on cooperation and mutual learning – shape other people to become committed, open, and capable of expanding on alternative visions?
- How to move from the position of power at school to serving others and society as a whole?
- How to reconcile the top-down transformation and reform of education with a bottom-up movement consisting in its socialising and diversifying it?

These questions result from the hope that in time of uncertainty the internal capacity of all teachers in our schools matters and should be nurtured through learning and growth. Without the awareness of the direction, in which we are heading – without a vision of education and the school – it is difficult to think of the concepts for school development. After all, what is happening here and now, what is temporary and often necessary, although fragmentary, cannot and should not in any way disturb the future, which holds a new quality of reality, and a new quality – let's say it a bit solemnly – of the world, in which the next generations will live" (Madalińska-Michalak 2018: 11).

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