

## The Leadership of Primary School Principals and the Academic Success of Students

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### Abstract

*This article aims to analyse the impact of the leadership of primary school principals in Dâmbovița County on the educational act. Students' academic success and current management approach can improve their leadership skills. It also takes into account the effect of the school, social and administrative environment on the exercise of leadership by school principals. The conclusions of this analysis of the management of primary school principals propose the inclusion of a leadership course and a practical internship in the initial training of principals and the support of new principals in the stage of professional insertion. Thus, a tool is needed to contribute to the development of the leadership of school principals, supporting their professional development. It is important to take into account the professional development project desired by each director, given the evolution of the profession imposed by the new social expectations and the constraints of the context-actors-institution interrelationships.*

**Key words:** leadership, principals, student success, planning, change

**J.E.L. classification:** M12, I21, I25

### 1. Introduction

Education is a major challenge for EU countries. Everything there is a priority to the point where in education, the objectives of access take precedence over those of quality, especially since the objectives of quality in education require that each actor, regardless of the organizational level at which it intervenes, to contribute, by adopting essential changes in practices.

The design of the school structure has become that of a community school, democratic and responsible, which involves parents for a better success of students. Thus, there is a need for a leadership of school principals that must be translated into a school management that creates synergy between the different actors and the stakeholders of the school, so through openness. Leadership thus becomes a means of building the school team, taking into account the diversity of its players. As a process of influence, practicing it requires certain skills on the part of school principals, such as problem solving, understanding social situations, cognitive skills, vision, and the ability to inspire and influence others. The school principals represent the locomotive of the school that leads its administrative and pedagogical functioning, hence the importance of their efficiency.

In many ways, it can be said that school principals play an important role in the school success of students. The literature on this topic presents them as a key factor in school performance: as local supervisors, their daily support for teachers in solving their teaching difficulties through pedagogical monitoring is invaluable. It makes it possible to establish in school a relationship that is a source of assurance and trust among teachers, which influences the achievement of educational goals and, therefore, the school success of students. Teacher support encourages school principals to cultivate and train to cope with the constant changes in the educational environment. In this reflection, we postulate that this leadership of school principals is fundamental, insofar as they are the guarantors of the school climate and the commitment of teachers to their tasks.

The impact of school principals' leadership on student learning or methods of assessing their leadership is overwhelming. This reflection on the impact of school leadership on student learning aims to show that the leadership of primary school principals contributes to the improvement of

teaching practices, and therefore to the success of students, to propose an approach to evaluating their leadership in order to support better performance.

## 2. Literature review

Organizations have been looking for managers since the 1960s. Since the 1980s, the economic crisis has led recruiters to look for managers who are able to communicate, to act in such a way as to guide workers to a dynamic vision of the organization. They should be able to behave ethically, motivate members of the organization, and be persuasive. These top managers owe their credibility to their authority and moral integrity. Nowadays, the good leader is the one who is able to manage with a vision of the future of the organization (M. Krünger and J. Scheerens 2012). This means that in an increasingly complex administrative context it is no longer enough to be a good manager. A good leader must also be able to discern certain elements of reality that others are escaping, create a mental picture of the situation he wants for his organization, and translate it into actionable guidelines by mobilizing all organizational actors.

Leadership is therefore an administrative phenomenon that has emerged to respond to the blockages caused by the dogma of bureaucracy that requires centralization, standardization and regulatory standardization of management. The work of social psychologists, labour sociologists, administrative researchers, political scientists, anthropologists and other specialists continues to enrich the concept and clarify the perception of the phenomenon in education (M. Fullan, 2015; K. Leithwood, 2012; J. Roque, 2017; M. St Germain, 2002).

Understood differently in the literature, leadership is considered either a professional behaviour or an administrative role or function. In any case, it goes beyond management, as it allows the manager to develop adaptive skills in his management practices to adapt the service offer to the specific needs of the demand. Through this openness, leadership allows for a decentralization movement that creates synergy between different actors and stakeholders in education. As a result, it becomes a means of equity and social justice by taking into account the diversity of actors and situations. Thus, there are inevitable links between management and leadership, because, as a process of influence, the practice of leadership requires from the manager certain skills such as intelligence somewhat above the norm, extraversion to communicate more easily with others and the spirit of openness. He must also demonstrate problem-solving skills and vision in relation to its context and compelling realities (Spillane et al., 2008). This vision will enable him to gain the support of all for his ambitions for change by pushing their limits, to establish a culture of success for all and to give meaning to everyone's daily life.

Leadership is considered in the literature either as a professional behaviour, or as an administrative role or function, or as a process (P. G. Northouse, 2016). As a behaviour, it is related to the vision that the manager projects on the organization, to his ability to sell his ideas and to obtain the voluntary membership of the members of the organization. He appreciates the way he gets results.

Management as a role or administrative function is supported by the notion of internal and external responsibility. In the role assigned to him, the leader establishes congruence between his action and the expectations of the beneficiaries, in order to ensure the success and effectiveness of the organization.

Regarding the management process, it is perceived as a dynamic of developing the professional capacities of all the actors of an organization in order to initiate change. Therefore, it prevents decision makers and employees from being stuck in their traditional roles. The change brings everyone back to common goals, to negotiation to try to solve the priority issues of the moment and to promote achievement.

This is why leadership is also defined as a process of innovation and learning, the purpose of which is to establish a culture of sharing ideas, persuasion, action, to ensure the development of all players.

Some authors in the education system distinguish leadership management. For them, management deals with business planning, financial management and human resources according to the established rules. In terms of leadership, it influences the common conception of the structure, its missions to increase the capacity of actors to improve the missions assigned to them. Thus, K. Leithwood (2013) identifies five principles that contribute to the efficiency of a school structure. It

is about giving up control, taking into account the specifics of the environment, delegating decision-making power, establishing a culture of collaboration and directing all activities towards student success.

As for M. St Germain (2002), he deals with constructivist leadership and proposes about forty criteria on which to base management's distinction.

Other authors consider the two phenomena in a complementary way, because most often, in order to exercise leadership, they must be in a decision-making position, a source of opportunities for action (P. G. Northouse, 2016).

However, the educational leadership, depending on the complexity of the field related to its human nature, requires an elucidation of the phenomenon.

We note that leadership is a dynamic phenomenon and not a static one. Regardless of form, it relies on an individual or a group to involve all actors in an organization in improving human relationships and outcomes. This phenomenon parallel to the administrative phenomenon is a powerful means to create a culture of change through a set of activities and communications through which the manager-leader influences the behaviour of the actors without imposing himself.

Numerous studies in education have confirmed the bureaucratic nature of the administration of social structures, mainly of primary and secondary institutions.

The important role of the principal in establishing a calm school climate is demonstrated (J. Hattie, 2009; V. M. Robinson, 2010). The ever-changing socio-cultural context inevitably generates new phenomena in front of which players, mainly school principals, need to be equipped to better manage these emerging issues. As stated by S. Raynal (2009, p.3) "In a rapidly changing environment, with increasing market pressure, states need to constantly adapt to better respond to the citizens of each countries." This perception of reality is much more important in the social sectors of human activity such as health, education and social assistance.

### **3. Research methodology**

For this case study, a mixed method approach was adopted. This methodology has proven to be particularly useful in examining contextual differences in curricula, as well as the perceptions of education professionals and students from four schools located in Targoviste. The schools that participated in the study were public and had the status of a high-performing school.

The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to allow a better understanding of individual experiences. During the two-week intensive visits, the researcher conducted individual interviews and focus groups with members of management, teachers and primary school students. Team members also participated in lessons as observers and visited school facilities.

### **4. Results**

As the school is a social reality, it is subject to human and moral constraints involving school principals, despite the imposition of predominant bureaucratic management. In these types of organizations, it is useful to take into account values and ethics, which complicates the practice of school management. In addition, the exercise of school management takes place in a context of complete decentralization of education in which teaching and human resources are transferred by the state to schools through town halls.

All of this makes the role of school principal a very demanding task in terms of responsibilities in achieving educational goals, in terms of managerial and relational skills, and educational problem-solving skills. These requirements require proper school management in which the exercise of leadership by school principals seems essential. Leadership in education is a profession of human interactions that requires mastery of high relational skills essential for building credibility. This credibility is based on both management and pedagogical skills. However, this exercise needs to be regulated and we believe that a formative assessment of this leadership can contribute to this.

In order to ensure the quality of basic education, the ministry, in addition to adopting texts and policy measures for the development of the quality of education, carries out actions for the creation of diversified structures, planning, management. In this regard, many efforts have been made to streamline the system from a management point of view. This is highlighted by the political,

administrative and pedagogical strategies and programs aimed at teaching effectiveness and academic success that have been developed and implemented.

For example, the Education Development Plan has made it possible to increase the educational offer and train teachers. Improving access to education has been achieved through the construction of school infrastructure, the massive recruitment of teachers and the institutionalization of the professional training of school principals.

### **The conditions for the exercise of leadership by school principals**

At the end of their vocational training, primary school principals rarely have access to continuing education, in the sense of strengthening their ability to manage the school team, to encourage them to renew their skills. Under these conditions, how can they prioritize certain learnings related to school-specific issues? If we take into account, for example, students' reading difficulties, which are common to all schools, school principals should be trained in new approaches to teaching-learning to read, interacting directly with teachers to improve reading learning. The development of school principals is therefore essential to build their capacity to support teachers in implementing effective teaching / learning approaches.

Primary school principals should be able to:

- 1) to plan and carry out school activities properly according to the guidelines of the ministry;
- 2) to mobilize internal and external financial and human resources for the benefit of teachers 'and students' learning;
- 3) to establish harmonious relations with school actors and stakeholders;
- 4) to improve the teaching-learning conditions for the academic and social success of the students;
- 5) to communicate for a serene learning climate, imbued with respect and trust.

It seems essential to specify the dimensions of these five capacities in terms of the resources to be mobilized by school principals in order to make them operational. The first two skills are management. This involves "proper planning and conduct of school activities in accordance with the guidelines of the ministry", a managerial skill which consists in coordinating educational activities in accordance with official curricula and provides guidance, guidelines and information on rules, official texts and school life. their observance by all actors. In a word, it is about directing the administrative life of the school in the sense of achieving the objectives of the mission statement.

The second ability, "to mobilize internal and external human and financial resources for the benefit of teacher and student learning" requires political skills that consist of establishing useful alliances to obtain the material, human and financial resources necessary for the operation of the school. It also involves the development of positive collaborative relationships with equal directors, but also at decentralized and central levels. These relationships are essential for access to information and training networks, which are a means of visibility, broadening the professional horizon and access to opportunities for professional development. It is also a matter of acting strategically towards the educational community of parents, town hall and social partners, associations and NGOs working in education.

The other three skills refer to leadership: the third skill, "Establishing harmonious relationships with school actors and stakeholders" is a social skill. Running a school means collaborating, because in human occupations, the need to work together is essential for actors. As a leader, the school principal should explain his or her positions and decisions to teachers and students, discuss them with them to take their views into account. Therefore, it plays a mediating role between actors in case of conflict. Another dimension that requires collaboration skills is the change of status management: in fact, graduates of training schools and young principals in vocational integration experience a hybrid status: reaching training with the status of teachers, they find themselves in the field after only one year with director status. This creates a social distance between them and the other members of the school organization.

The fourth skill is to "improve the teaching-learning conditions for the academic and social success of students." The school principal must maintain his / her teaching expertise in order to further invest his / her knowledge and experience in supporting teachers, in order to create the conditions for a professional culture. This collective culture makes student success an organizational priority around which all management, teaching and learning activities are designed, both teacher and student learning. The principal provides valuable support to teachers by fostering dialogue. It

involves the family and the community in finding solutions to learning problems, such as those of students with integration, learning or adjustment difficulties. In a word, it is about creating favourable learning conditions for all students without exception.

The fifth ability “to communicate for a serene, respectful and trusting learning climate” is for the school leader to communicate in order to convey the values that represent his or her vision of the school to the other actors. This communication is necessary not only to establish dialogue with school actors and stakeholders, but also to manage the ethical issues related to the complexity of educational situations, marked by budget cuts, emerging issues such as technological deficit, inclusive education, overload, school violence, civic education. and so on. It is a means of involving and mobilizing internal and external actors, such as parents of students and other partners, around the crucial issues of the school. By explaining the stakes of responsibility of each internal actor towards the community and the education system, by sharing the promising pedagogical approaches used by certain members of the school team or proposed by certain partners of the education system, the principal appreciates the efforts and promotes everyone's commitment to a common vision. at school. By accompanying teachers during class visits, he commends the efficiency of some and encourages the efforts of others, presenting good performance as a product of collective work. Given the importance of these leadership skills, it is important to develop them among primary school principals. As the initial training program does not allow for their development, it is essential that continuing education address this key issue for teacher training for the academic and social success of students.

## 5. Conclusions

Through this theoretical reflection, we sought to analyse the situation of primary school principals in Dâmbovița, to show that their leadership can have a positive impact on student learning. Management is a more encouraged practice than leadership, because the education system is part of bureaucratic management. However, the human nature of education and the constant and multifaceted changes in the educational environment make it essential to adopt more flexible, leadership-friendly approaches. Although some authors attribute leadership status to directors who are effective in learning, it must be acknowledged that leadership is difficult in a bureaucratic environment and that the administrative environment as a whole must evolve.

However, as the theoretical content is not representative of the action of the principals-leaders in reality, we consider as a continuation of this reflection, an empirical study to target real practices and operationalize proposals and training tools.

The world of education is part of a constantly changing social context in which it is not easy to do quality management work on structures. The organizational environment is facing new phenomena that include tense relationships between individuals or socio-professional groups related to the diversity of conceptions about school, the new social needs of populations, but also the loss of civic and educational values, all things that make the educational environment it is changing and facing a tacit challenge to the goals of the school that no longer meet the social expectations in terms of performance, values and growing requirements in terms of teaching. In addition to the low school performance, these situations often affect the motivation of the actors. The lack of personal and professional challenges leads to mind-boggling situations, such as this new rule of public management that requires us to produce more with less resources. However, the analysis of the potential of the workers shows that everyone's production could be improved, or even doubled, if certain conditions are met, without prolonging their work schedule, without pushing them to go faster, but by making them imagine. challenges, to take responsibility by channelling all their energies towards the achievement of new organizational and professional objectives.

The role of school principals must therefore be understood in this regard: to cope with change by making decisions capable of mobilizing all actors around essential, academic success. In this sense, leadership opens up multiple perspectives for action.

The management of school principals must be taken into account on an ongoing basis, as human situations are constantly changing. During initial training, training devices such as hands-on training and analysis of observation-based practices could improve the perception of graduate management on the one hand and positively influence that of school principals, thanks to sustained interactions

and analytical approach through the student observation sheets, the content of which could lead to an explanatory interview between the students and the principal.

Another means of training the person and the professionalism of the future directors is to use the portfolio throughout the initial training as a tool for analyzing the professional project of each "trainee". A reflective analysis of this tool at the end of the training could participate in the construction of a professional development project to be supported by the educational supervisors.

Another way for the initial training structure would be to involve successful school principals in apprenticeship in theoretical preparation, in the form of conferences-debates, to share their experiences with future school principals.

The content of the training program could also be enriched with a leadership course that includes a study of the school environment. In this context, the school environment would serve as a framework for several initial training activities.

We believe that a further empirical study of the leadership skills implemented by high school principals performing in student learning would make it possible to update these skills to make them more relevant.

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