

Extended day implementation in special education: Leadership characteristics - a case study

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Abstract: *This piece of research focused on whether the principal's leadership styles influenced the implementation of change in a small special needs school in Greece. The research followed the case study approach and interviews were used in order to gather information. A questionnaire was also used in order to illustrate the findings and to strengthen the validity and the reliability of the research. Throughout the research it was apparent that there was not one single leadership style that could characterize a principal. Moreover, the principal's unwillingness to bring change, to take more responsibilities and to give extra help uninspired teachers who were looking for a more active and empowered leader in order to succeed change. The research also indicated the importance of the transformational leadership style as part of an effective change. Several recommendations are needed since this was a small piece of research, based on a case study with a small sample.*

Keywords: *leadership style, special needs school, special education teacher, change.*

I. Introduction

There is clear and growing evidence that the role of leaders in the change process does impact significantly on the success of change [1, 2, 3]. Usually the social systems respond contradictory to change and that makes the implementation of change even more difficult [4]. Similarly, people's resistance to change is underlined [5]. This is acceptable since people may tend to prefer safe and familiar conditions instead of the risky and the unfamiliar ones.

Therefore, a leader should develop important skills such as teambuilding, communication, opportunities for collaboration and trust between individuals, effective leadership and professional knowledge in order to establish change [6]. Some researchers believe that this can be succeeded through transformational leadership [7, 8, 9].

Under the acceptance that change is complex and consequently there is a need to bring leadership to a transformational style [10]. There are researchers that include charismatic, visionary, cultural and empowering concepts of leadership as a part of the transformational leadership style [11, 12, 13]. Similarly, the charismatic/transformational leader uses different types of behavioral strategies when implementing change which they aim to empower the followers [14]. Moreover, the significance for the necessity of a more supportive model of leadership within a transformational framework is argued [10]. However, there are questions on how this qualitative approach fails to provide insights into the actual behaviors of leaders [15].

In addition, other researches demonstrate clear linkage between leader behavior and follower behavior and performance where it seems that it links change and behavior insufficiently [16, 17, 18]. Probably, this may be inevitable since the research is concerned with the behavior of human beings and the factor of subjectivity is high, thus one situation can be perceived differently by various researchers or leaders.

Furthermore, the research, demonstrated links between leaders' behavior and change implementation [10]. They identified five leadership capabilities which are related with the successful implementation of change and come to agreement with what other researchers stated [19, 14]. These five leadership capabilities are: creating the case for change, creating the structure for change, engaging others and building commitment, implementing and sustaining change and facilitating and developing capability. Other researchers questioned the efficiency of linking leadership and change and argue that a different perspective on leadership arises in the context of the complex and distributed view of change [20, 21].

Managing change is not easy and it seems that "effective change leadership involves instrumental and charismatic roles integrating operational know-how with strong interpersonal skills" [19, 3]. Charismatic roles refer to the leader who visualizes, empowers and refreshes the followers and the instrumental roles characterize the one who organizes, controls and rewards [22]. Most of the aspects are difficult to evaluate, assess and research since subjective factors may interfere [23]. Nevertheless, both the roles include: creating an environment which is ready to change, inspiring a share vision, involving many people so as to build commitment and enabling others to act.

Apparently, change is an important aspect that deserves investigation. Although leadership in educational change is crucial, it seems that the methods of managing change aiming for effectiveness are not

well established. The role and behaviors of the leaders in change context per se has been declared as an area that is lacking in empirical research [24, 23, 25].

In Greece –where the current research took place- there is a research gap concerning leadership characteristics in educational settings. The current research aimed to contribute to knowledge of the behavior and leading style in a condition of possible change of a special needs school’s principal. More precisely, in Greece there was an educational reform that was under investigation and some changes were being enhanced at an experimental base in order to examine their effectiveness. A special needs school was proposed to be included in the experimental base that concerned the operation of the extended afternoon school. Therefore, the investigation took place in a small suburb primary special needs school in Greece on September 2016.

Five special education teachers (SETs) and a principal were working at the school and had 24 pupils with special needs from six to eleven years old. It was the first year of the principal at the specific school and the first year as a head teacher. The school was controlled centrally from the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. The SETs and the principal had to follow the regulations since they were responsible for the school. The goals and the values of the school were mainly educational and were set by the ministry.

The current research was theoretically based on the dimension of capacity building which displays leadership in a progression of change. An effort was made to see if a specific behavior and way of leading of the school’s principal influenced the implementation of the change.

Nevertheless, although the views were ambiguous throughout the current research, an effort was made to investigate whether the leader’s style and behavior influence the implementation of the change that was being proposed for the specific school. More precisely the research questions were:

1. What leadership styles are being developed from the principal to the specific organization?
2. Does the leadership style influence the implementation of the change?

II. Methodology

A qualitative approach which explores attitudes and behavior in depth taking views from the participants was used. Qualitative analysis is mostly concerned with the understanding of relationships and attempts to examine one’s words and how others react to them [26]. It also aims to explore the nature of a particular educational phenomenon [27]. Therefore, it seems that this was the most appropriate approach since the research was related with peoples’ actions, attitudes, and behaviors.

This research was focused on one organization and one leader in the real world; it was studied at a specific time and it followed the case study approach. An instrumental case study was considered the most appropriate approach since the investigation’s query provided further insight into the process. Additionally, there was a lack of any evidence on the specific subject and the existing knowledge was limited. Thus the researcher has used the case study approach in order to provide unique example of real people in real situations and eventually enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly [26]). Furthermore, it can provide detailed data on each case studied, as well as allowing further scope for checking the validity of the data [28].

Based on the literature review, the researcher developed questions that were used for interviewing all the staff (5 SETs) and the principal in order to answer the research questions. In addition, the school’s documents were checked in order to investigate the governor’s regulations that concerned the educational reform. Through the interviews the researcher was taking detailed notes of the respondents’ answers. The use of interview was aiming to gather greater information and probe particular issues in depth [29].

Additionally, for adopting more than one method and strengthen the findings, a rating scales questionnaire emerged that was completed by the SETs and the principal. The rating scale questionnaire included close-ended questions, thus it was less flexible than the interviews. It seems that the combination of the opened and closed questions that were used during the interviews could be beneficial for gathering more information and could triangulate the answers. The researcher linked the questionnaire statements with the interview questions and tried to compare the answers so as to keep consistency at a certain level since the situation was unique and the sample small. Therefore, the answers from the questionnaire were checked and were analyzed qualitatively in relation with the answers of the interview.

Special attention was given to the preparation of the interview and the questionnaire, in an attempt not to present the questions in a way that would influence the respondents and create bias. It has to be noted, that a pilot of the interview and the questionnaire were conducted with a special teacher working in another special needs school in order to verify the understanding of the questions and avoid leading questions.

Consequently, the questionnaire was reformed because some questions on the questionnaire proved poorly worded and had to be improved. The piloting revealed also that indeed it was necessary to include closed questions in the questionnaire, as these improved time management issues and eliminated the need to analyze irrelevant data.

Although it may be difficult to demonstrate reliability since by definition the case under study is inconsistent [26], an effort had been made to protect the reliability of the study by using a highly structured

interview with the same format and sequence of words and questions for each respondent [29]. Even though the sample was quite small, the use of the questionnaire triangulated the findings from the interviews. In qualitative research, the triangulation is considered a powerful way of demonstrating concurrent validity [27].

In a face-to-face conversation with the principal the researcher explained the purposes of the research and clarified that the focus was on her leadership method and not on her per se. The researcher informed the SETs about the research and its purposes and later on she asked permission from the SETs in order to accomplish the research.

The principal and the SETs agreed to participate and understood the research purpose prior to its commencement. Particularly, they agreed to participate voluntarily in the interviews and the completion of the questionnaire. The confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of the school and the participants were highly protected since the researcher tried to cover any possible track that could lead to the identification of the school and the participants. Through the process the researcher tried not to be biased and not influence people by making a general statement of the focus or giving many details about the research per se ([26]).

The analysis of the interviews followed the qualitative approach and an effort was made to search for meaningful patterns by line-by-line transcription. Initially, the questions of the interview and the questionnaire were grouped according to the two research questions. Then an effort had been made to answer them rationally by making explanations. There were questions which were used just to gather general information that helped the researcher to clarify the respondents' perceptions.

III. Results

The presented data are based mainly on the respondents' answers during the interviews. The data taken from the questionnaire were illustrated in correlation to the answers so as to strengthen the validity and reliability of the data. The findings are reported under the key headings of research questions using data from the interviews and are exemplified by the answers of the questionnaires.

Principal's leadership styles

The principal characterized herself as "collaborative, humane, approachable and very emotional...", points that were also mentioned from the SETs in both instruments. All of the SETs described the principal as democratic, fair and very accountable towards the ministry; arguments that concur with principal's opinion. It has to be mentioned that four out of five SETs during the interview used the word "diplomatic" to portray her.

All of the participants marked that there was a level of lack of organization in the school, a point that the principal seemed that did not recognize. Moreover, a participant pointed out that "the right function of the school is based on the good will and the diligence of the staff". Three respondents mentioned that "the principal could and should have undertaken more responsibilities", one of the SETs revealed that "I believe that she tries to lead without taking any responsibilities". All the SETs agreed that she had good communication skills and that she does not take any risks.

However, there was a disagreement among the participants as far as the motivation issue was concerned since some SETs felt that the principal motivated and inspired them while they were working (two out of five) whereas others did not feel the same. From the responses, it seemed that the leader made an effort to motivate the staff but she did not completely succeed since some were inspired and moved towards her but others did not.

Additionally, a point that the principal kept repeating in the interview was the fact that she felt that the teachers were like daughters to her and that is how she treated them in return. All the SETs admitted that her aim to create harmony and adopt an affiliate style by being very friendly and emotional, led to a level of inadequate performance in crises and made it more difficult to manage and cope with change.

From the above mentioned points, one could acknowledge that the principal's way of leading included different and various leadership styles. On the other hand, it seems that she was cooperative and capable of building a relationship with her followers', aspects that characterize transformational leaders but it seems that there is a lack of her active involvement and her organizational skills.

In summary, the data analysis revealed that the principal had many capacities that could include her in the transformational leadership style but her lack of active involvement may interfere negatively. The lack of further effort on behalf of the leader could be seen as a barrier towards managing change.

Does the leadership style influence the implementation of the change?

All the participants mentioned that the leader organized some meetings in order to inform all the people that were influential (parents, community, staff) about the potential change in order to decide the way to proceed. This was a supportive mechanism of change, since the principal gave opportunities for communication and collaboration. At this time, she informed them about the proposed plan and answered their questions about the subject. These meetings were organized by her, aiming to persuade parents to accept the change that the

Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs proposed. During the first two meetings, it was reported that parents and community strongly refused to implement the change in the school.

A third meeting had been organized and she asked from the inspector of the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, to speak to the parents but again with no change. The principal tried to negotiate and renegotiate in order to bring transformation. Finally, a fourth gathering had been organized with ministry representatives and the parents of the children finally accepted the implementation. The parents were assured that the ministry would proceed to appropriate building structure until September (the beginning of the school year) and that the process of change would be very flexible in order to have changes required on time. It has to be highlighted that all the meetings were organized by the principal in the afternoon, outside her working schedule.

Although SETs mentioned the above meetings, they included also some other significant points. Except from one teacher that she reported that the principal's attitude was neutral, four out of five SETs revealed that after the meetings she was later on trying to persuade parents not to accept the implementation of the extended day school. "...She [the principal] was negative towards the implementation and she was telling the parents union that she would ask to be transferred to a different school..." (teacher 1), "...She [the principal] threatened parents that she would leave school if they accepted the change..." (teacher 2). The principal stated that her opinion was contradictory to the implementation due to lack of school building, time and in-service training but she supported that "My job was very difficult and tensed but I tried to act according to the instructions of the ministry".

Furthermore, the SETs indicated the need of building equipment. All of the SETs participants mentioned that perhaps the principal was against the extended day school due to the advanced workload, the extra responsibilities, the need for extra effort and time to implement the change. They also stated that a more experienced, dynamic, organizational and active leader was needed in order to establish the change. Although the principal was democratic and increased participation of SETs in the school's decisions, the data analysis revealed that more features were needed to see the change as a challenge and try to manage it.

IV. Discussion

The analysis of the collected data indicated that there were signs of principal's use of motivation management in order to approach people; this can be seen as a key factor to successful leadership [17]. Contradictory to the findings of the present research, it is supported that successful leader takes new and different responsibilities such as facilitation and coaching; this issue was not verified for the principal [23].

The principal of the school gave opportunities to SETs to exercise informal leadership that could result in a more democratic school [13]. Yet communication skills, opportunities for collaboration and building strong positive relations between all school members and the community were issues that the principal managed to achieve. Her persuasive ability was quite high since she seemed to have influenced people towards the implementation of her own wish. On the contrary, it is supported that informal leadership can imply lack of department heads to facilitate change which is a crucial point for the specific research although in this case the leader was the one who held the important role [6].

A great part of the specific leader was the influence of her emotions a point that is raised from other research's findings that reports the change which usually arouses emotions and in this case the principal's leadership is a key [23]. The principal seemed to be much influenced by her emotions since all the teachers emphasized the point. The situation calls for a principal to coach so as to tackle with change. As people have to confront change they deal with two problems: the social-psychological fear of change and the lack of technical knowledge of making the change work [3].

Transformational leaders are characterized as the "tools of post-modern organizations since they want to create change and they can cope with change [7]. Similarly, it is argued that transformational leadership is more likely to generate significant and sustained change contrary to 'strong' leadership and tightly directive systems [12].

The findings of the research suggest that the specific leader has some characteristics of the transformational leader such as the strong relationships, communication, collaboration and motivation. However, she lacks in other characteristics such as the empowerment, reaction as consulter or facilitator [11, 5]. In addition, the two out of three task related dimensions of the capacity building, which concerned persuasion and information were demonstrated through the leadership but the results of the research indicated weakness concerning the supportive mechanism that the leader should have promoted in order to promote and sustain change [22].

The leader should not only be able to adapt to change but to respond quickly since we live in a world of change and surprises [4, 15]. This is difficult due to the lack of managing development programs that concern the leaders' preparation about changes as research evidence [5, 2]. Combining this point of view, with the fact that in the current study this was the first year of the principal at the position, one could assume that the leader

reacted in such a way because she did not know how to react differently. She chose to follow the known route instead of the unknown which has risks and creates fear. Therefore, she didn't manage to create the culture of change as it is stated from other researchers [1].

Nevertheless, although the leader established some democratic principles and increased the participation and collaboration of the teachers, a more experienced, dynamic, organized, empowering and active leader was needed so as to implement the change effectively. The principal found it difficult to manage the change including the staffs' perception on her weakness with the leadership style she was using. The present findings are in agreement with those of [11] who suggests the need of building construction and more time to implement the change. Furthermore, the findings of the current study mirror the findings of some earlier studies where the leader's emotions proved to be an influential factor towards or against change since emotions can impact leaders' behavior [20, 18].

As far as the second research question is concerned it seems that the research confirms that the principal's leadership style did not inspire SETs towards change and their suggestion for a more dynamic and active leader implies that indeed leadership style influenced the implementation of change. This is a point that was found to be in agreement with other researchers' findings, who clearly state that leadership is crucial to change in schools [13, 8].

Overall, the outcomes of the current study revealed that the specific leader could be characterized by different styles. Concluding, it seems that there is not one specific leadership style that could characterize the principal but if she had adopted a more transformational leadership style she would have possibly found it more helpful to implement the change more successfully.

V. Conclusion

Several issues that concerned leadership and management were reported in the specific study which mainly demonstrated the diversity of perspectives that are included and the extent that each of them may influence leadership. The values in educational leadership and management are other issues that arose in the research. It became obvious that values are not inherently rational and a challenge to our personal values can often provoke a strong and non-rational response just like the two different approaches that the principal assimilated with parents. Another relevant key issue was the response to policy which seems that it is difficult to resist to the pressures that the government sets.

Although the real context of the research was immediately intelligible because the participants spoke for themselves the results cannot be generalized in all the cases of schools' principals proposed for the implementation of the extended school. The main limitation of the conducted research was its small length and the small sample. In further research, bigger sample should be used whereas the evidence will be more reliable, valid and generalized. Additionally, further research is needed to include other factors such as the vision of the principal concerning the extended school and the way it had influenced her actions towards change. An alternative method -like the survey approach-may also be employed so as to include all the schools that had been proposed for the implementation and combine the data from different schools, parents from different areas and socioeconomic status, and students' views.

In concluding, leadership is seen as a "fluid concept" in which there is a difficulty in conceptualizing as a defined stage. Therefore, there is not one unique style that can characterize one leader to all the situations. The leadership could be different in every situation and there are various styles that can be seen as appropriate. The change is inevitable in workplace, therefore the role of the leaders in the change process is crucial and deserves in depth investigation.

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