

Leadership Skills and Teaching: An Invitation to Go Further

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This article explores the very close relationship between leadership and teaching, a topic which is new in Colombia, but which has been researched extensively in other countries. It starts with important theoretical considerations in relation to leadership applied to education. It follows with a reflection on the association between leadership and teaching. The essay goes deeper with the explanation of the five leadership practices espoused by Kouzes and Posner. As a conclusion, several implications and recommendations for teachers and other educational community members are presented.

Key words: Education, leadership, teaching, school principals, educative community

El presente artículo explora la estrecha relación entre liderazgo y enseñanza, un tópico que es nuevo en Colombia, pero que ha sido ampliamente investigado en otros países. Éste comienza con importantes consideraciones teóricas acerca del liderazgo aplicado a la educación. Éste continúa con una reflexión sobre la asociación entre liderazgo y docencia. El ensayo profundiza el tema con la explicación de las cinco prácticas de liderazgo expuestas por Kouzes y Posner. Como conclusión, diversas implicaciones y recomendaciones para los profesores y otros miembros de las comunidades educativas son presentadas.

Palabras clave: Educación, liderazgo, enseñanza, rectores, comunidad educativa

Introduction

Nowadays, all countries and their citizens acknowledge that education is a key investment. Colombia is trying to develop and successfully insert itself in the globalization process. In order to achieve this goal, it has to strengthen its education system. At the institutional level, the educational process must be sustained by the members of the educative community, especially teachers. Teachers are pivotal in the process of change and any innovation in education is not possible without their effort and commitment. Leadership in relation to teaching is an unexplored issue in Colombian education. As we face huge challenges in order to develop as a prosperous nation, it becomes an important tool for improving the quality of Colombian education and, as a consequence, for building a better society.

Leadership deals with attitudes needed to change people and organizations in order to find new ways to do the same things or to find new ways of doing something different. The idea doesn't necessarily imply seeking new realities but being able to see the current ones with new eyes. Leaders aren't born. Leaders are made. Anyone can be a leader: a student, a school principal, an academic coordinator, a businessman, a teacher, a priest, or a parent. Everyone can develop the attributes of a leader. The new world claims new skills. Colombian youngsters will enter into the workforce and they will need these new skills.

Leadership studies began in the arena of the business world. Yukl (1998) notes that “over one hundred studies on leader traits were conducted during the first half of this century (20th century), and most of them compared leaders to nonleaders” (p. 235–236). Leadership studies evolved and shifted to all kinds of organizations, education included. With respect to leadership in education, McEwan (1998) affirms that enterprises are different from schools in many ways, to wit:

Leadership models have traditionally been developed and tested in the business world. Educators feel they are being encouraged to emulate Sam Walton of Wal – Mart or Bill Hewlett of Hewlett Packard. These corporate executives, however, can measure their successes in terms of bottom lines, increased sales and productivity, and rises in stock prices. Educators ... face a different set of challenges. Although many of the lessons of leadership in the corporate world are applicable within the walls of our schools, we need our own model of leadership, one that incorporates the unique characteristics of teaching and learning (p. 4).

In relation to the Colombian educational system, the country needs to amend its present state of affairs, namely, its lack of theories and research about educational leadership. Schools and universities need to adopt new curricula taking into consideration the knowledge and skills required for international businesses and globalization.

Traditionally, most studies in educational leadership have emphasized the importance of principal leadership in changing and improving schools (Arends, 1982; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; McEwan, 1998; Rosenblum & Jastrzab, 1980; Wallace, Engel & Mooney, 1997). The collaboration of principals is critical in developing teacher leadership in the classroom. As Katzenmeyer & Moller (1996) state, “principals can encourage or discourage teacher initiative; they can propose or restrict opportunities for leadership in the building. These leaders are critical to empowering teachers as leaders” (p. 34).

However, recent studies have placed more attention on teacher leadership and its impact on school reform and student outcomes. We cannot neglect the fact that, within the school setting, teachers are the largest group of employees and that they are the closest to students. This consciousness can affect teacher behavior and their impact on students’ outcomes. In Colombia, neither principal leadership nor teacher leadership has been investigated.

Leadership and teaching

Leadership is at the heart of teaching. Those two variables, leadership and teaching, have been merging up to be very closely associated. Hinchey (1997) affirms the following:

“Two key ideas with the potential to redefine teaching have been around for some time. The first is that teachers need to assume leadership if efforts to improve education are to succeed; the second is that teachers must assume leadership if teaching is ever to become accepted as a profession” (p. 233).

Teaching as a profession has been seen lately as more than just teaching subjects in a classroom to a group of students. It involves committing oneself to a true education of students as persons in all dimensions: physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical, among others. Thus, educational leadership applied to teachers has to do with the relationship that teachers establish with students in order to inspire them to construct knowledge as well as a life project. Teacher

leadership has some specific characteristics, different from those taken from the business world.

Results from Crowther's study (1997) of 15 highly effective teachers that created improvement in schools in socio-economic disadvantaged communities, show the following:

Leadership in the work of successful practitioners appears to incorporate a quality which is not found in leadership theories that have their origins in business management or, for the most part, in educational management. That is, processes of teaching, consciousness raising, community building and personal learning were inseparable in descriptions of their work that were offered by participants in the research. When holistic profiles were analyzed to identify general characteristics of leadership, it proved to be very difficult to differentiate the instructional roles of participants from their roles as influential figures in their schools and communities. An important irony is evident here in that the historical failure of educational theorists to recognize leadership dimensions in teachers' work may be partly attributable to the insistence of highly successful teachers, such as the participants in this research, that their primary concern is 'to teach' (Conceptualizations of leadership section, para. 9).

Likewise, Peter Senge (1990) links leadership with learning: "Leaders in learning organizations are responsible for *building organizations* (the emphasis is the author's) where people are continually expanding their capabilities to shape their future – that is, leaders are responsible for learning" (p. 9). Also, Senge links leadership with teaching. Senge (1990) affirms that leadership in all organizations is related with three main roles: leaders are designers, stewards, and teachers.

The designer role has to do with creating the vision, mission, and values of the organization, as well as with designing learning processes. It is also related to the policies and strategies that put into action core values. The steward role is related to an attitude of serving the people and the organization the leader works for. This attitude implies a reflection on the kind of legacy and contribution the leader is willing to generate for the organization and its people.

The teacher role is related to helping people in the organization, including the leader himself/herself, to analyze and change the way he/she sees reality. These mental models or assumptions are emphasized by Senge (1990): "These mental pictures of how the world works have a significant influence on how we perceive problems and opportunities, identify courses of action, and make choices"(p. 12).

All teachers have the potential and the opportunity to lead. Barth (2001) put it this way: “If schools are going to become places where all children and adults are learning in worthy ways, all teachers must lead” (p.85). If teachers want to form leaders, they have to be leaders. Barth (2001) asks and responds: “What is the difference between being just a teacher and being a teacher leader? I think of a teacher leader as one who has a positive influence on the school as well as in the classroom” (p. 88).

As a natural consequence of his/her leadership, the teacher can and must participate in lots of activities for the well-being of the school, activities such as participating in the creation of a vision for the school, organizing the curriculum, participating in coaching peers, implementing extra-curricular activities for students, and so on.

Teachers have a great number of responsibilities which may pose an obstacle in their role as leaders, and the list of them increases daily. Time is a scarce and expensive resource at schools. Sometimes teachers simply don't have it; sometimes they want to be paid for extra activities. Teachers in Colombia have demanding responsibilities outside the school such as home roles or other jobs. Hence, most teachers who want to volunteer for leadership activities are, by nature, busy people.

Teacher leadership is fostered in schools where there is a community of learners. The concept of a community of learners is defined by Barth (2001) as “a school that has succeeded in creating a culture hospitable to human learning. In addition, the school culture fosters in students and adults a disposition toward independent, insatiable, lifelong learning” (p. 75).

A sound theoretical perspective leads to the same conclusion: teacher and leadership are closely related. Professionals who choose teaching as a vocation include leadership within and beyond the classroom as one of their essential skills in order to exert a positive influence on students' personal and academic issues.

Leadership practices and commitments

My perspective on teacher leadership is primarily based on Kouzes and Posner (1995). They explain leadership in terms of a set of learnable skills. According to them, leadership is “the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations” (p. 30). They link leadership with five exemplary practices, each of which encompasses two commitments (as shown below). Leadership Practices can be measured and assessed using the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI). The LPI is a

standardized instrument developed by Kouzes and Posner (2003) that measures how a person exhibits leadership through the five fundamental practices of exemplary leadership. It has been used around the world. The five exemplary leadership practices are the following:

Challenge the process

The first practice is to challenge the process: Leaders seek and accept the challenge. Challenge can be a new and innovative product, a new service, an attractive piece of legislation, or any campaign to increase academic performance. In the case of teacher leaders, they are early adopters of innovation. Leadership is essentially related to change, to a new approach to working together or a new way of life. The change can come from inside or outside the school. The two commitments connected with this practice are the following: (a) Search out challenging opportunities to change, grow, innovate, and improve; and (b) Experiment, take risks, and learn from the accompanying mistakes.

Inspire a shared vision

The second practice is to inspire a shared vision. Teacher leaders have visions about the future, the values and ideals they pursue, and the type of people and society they contribute to form. They have deep faith in those dreams. But it isn't enough to have a dream. Teacher leaders need to convince and inspire their students. To do this, teachers must know their students and speak their language. Leaders inspire others through enthusiasm and faith in their best projects. The two commitments associated with this practice include: (a) envisioning an uplifting and ennobling future; and (b) enlisting others in a common vision by appealing to their values, interests, hopes and dreams.

Leaders often talk about future issues in terms of foresight, focus, forecasts, future scenarios, points of view, and perspectives. These are all visual references. Human memory is stored in images and senses, not in numbers or abstractions. It means that to envision the future, teacher leaders must be able to draw upon that very natural mental process of creating images. Just as architects make drawings and engineers build models, teachers find ways of giving expression to their hopes for the future. Teacher leaders appeal to students' imagination and creativity to help them to construct their future.

Leaders communicate their purpose and build support for a direction. A teacher leader has to teach students and parents his/her vision. Leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue. It isn't necessary to be a famous, charismatic person in order to inspire a shared vision. However, it's necessary to have a vision and to develop the skills needed to transmit our own beliefs. Students need hope and guidance to construct their own way of life. Leaders need to identify their constituents and find out what their common aspirations are. Teachers must show students how they, too, will be served by a long-term vision of the future so they can know how to satisfy their specific needs.

There's a rich opportunity for teachers to appeal to more than just grades or material rewards. Great teachers create meaning. Values and interests of freedom, self-actualization, learning, community, and excellence truly attract students to a common cause.

Visions aren't strategic plans. Planning represents a calculating style. Leaders, on the contrary, employ a "committing" style that engages everybody in the journey. By using a powerful, non-verbal language and a positive communicative style, teachers breathe life into a vision. Successful teachers use metaphors and figures of speech, give examples, tell stories, relate anecdotes, draw word pictures, offer quotations, and recite slogans. In fact, doing so is a natural way of communicating. Furthermore, teacher leaders smile more, speak faster, say words more clearly, move their heads and bodies more often, and touch students during classes.

The greatest inhibitor to motivating others in the construction of a common vision is the lack of personal conviction. There's a very fundamental question that a teacher must ask himself/herself before attempting to motivate students: What do I believe in? Inspirational presentations are heart to heart, spirit to spirit, life to life. It is when you share what's in your soul that you can truly move students.

Montemurro, J. (1997) cites Barker's words: Vision is "dreams in action". A leader promotes a comprehensive and detailed vision, which include the how, when, why, where and so on. The vision must be positive and inspiring. When a teacher has a common vision, he or she is empowered. Vision and action can change students' lives.

Enable others to act

The third practice is to enable others to act. Leadership is a team effort. Exemplary teachers enlist the support and assistance of all those who help them to

fulfill their work; they share their power with their teams and trust them. Kouzes and Posner (1995) say that “leadership is a relationship, founded on trust and confidence. Without trust and confidence, people don’t take risks. Without risks, there’s no change. Without change, organizations and movements die” (p. 12). The two commitments linked with this skill are the following: (a) Foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust; and (b) Strengthen people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks and offering visible support.

Successful changes involve all the people in the organization. There is a strong relationship between being a leader and enabling others to act. In order to get the best performance, people need cooperation, not competition. It is wrong to believe that competition enhances performance. This is especially true of teacher leaders. As Barth (2001) states, “again, the emphasis for leaders must be on engaging everyone in learning, on involving everyone in the process. This involvement encourages creativity, an essential ingredient of good engaged learning and problem solving” (p. 225).

Exemplary teachers make students feel strong and capable. This means that students have the certainty of being in control of their own lives. Leaders give power to their constituents; help them to grow and receive the same from them. A teacher who shares his or her power is more effective than a selfish teacher. Empowerment is especially beneficial for educational leaders. According to Katzenmeyer & Moller (1996), teachers must include students as the center of the learning process: “rather than being passive consumers, students will be included in curriculum planning efforts and will work side by side with their teachers in designing their own learning experiences” (p. 97).

Model the way

The fourth practice is to model the way. Good teacher leaders model the way through personal example and dedicated execution; they are clear about the guiding principles. After dreams, leaders need to have hard work, persistence and operational plans. The two commitments associated with this exemplary practice include: (a) Set the example by behaving in ways that are consistent with shared values; and (b) Achieve small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment.

Teachers must be credible. How do students know if leaders are credible? Kouzes & Posner (1995) state that the most frequent response is “they do what they

say they will do” (p. 210). In the same direction, Katzenmeyer & Moller (1996) affirm that teacher leaders need to set the example and to involve their students: “teacher leaders will serve as models for students who will govern themselves in highly diverse learning environments” (p. 97).

Values and vision help us to determine what to do and what not to do every day. Leaders must be able to gain consensus on a common cause and a common set of principles. Educational leaders must unify their academic communities around shared values. It is a long term process. According to Kouzes & Posner (1995), values cannot be imposed: “Unity is forged, not forced” (p. 217). Shared values encourage ethical behavior and promote high levels of performance and personal growth.

Exemplary teachers always pay attention to how they themselves and their students are living shared values. The more teachers take care of students, the more students take care of them. Tools that could be used in order to maintain the passion and commitment include calendars, critical incidents, stories, questions, words, symbols, artifacts, rituals, seminars, and focus groups.

Referring to the same topic, Barth (2001) put it this way: “Why is it so crucial that teachers and administrators become the leading learners in their schools? The first reason is the extraordinary power of modeling” (p. 28).

Encourage the heart

The fifth practice is to encourage the heart. Leaders encourage their constituents to carry on. It’s part of the teacher’s job to show students that they can win. Encouragement refers to the way teacher leaders visibly and behaviorally link reward with performance. The commitments related to this practice include: (a) Recognize individual contributions to the success of every project; and (b) Celebrate team accomplishments regularly.

In the case of teacher leaders, it is important for them to be recognized. As Barth (2001) emphasizes, “positive recognition comes in many forms: a title like Master Teacher; additional compensation; reduced teaching load; responsibility for a budget; allocation of prime space; an appreciative note from a parent; or acknowledgment by the principal in the school newsletter”(p. 114).

It is also important for teacher leaders to recognize students. Shapiro (1993) affirms that “the teacher who can help students develop positive self-concepts has a better chance of increasing academic achievement and motivation. Positive teacher practices produce improvement in student performance...” (p. 93).

Conclusions

In this article, I have deliberated on leadership, teaching and the very close relationship between them. I emphasized this relationship based on different authors and perspectives. Now, I want to finish this reflection by considering some applications of educational leadership in our context.

Colombia is a developing country with many economic, social, and cultural challenges. An important key to overcoming these societal obstacles is to improve our education quality. In order to accomplish this objective it is necessary to train educators so they can innovate and forge outstanding generations of Colombians. Due to scarce resources for educational research, many decisions are taken without enough scientific support, which poses a great drawback to educate young Colombians better. One of the areas lacking scientific research is educational leadership, an issue that has been deeply investigated in the United States and other regions of the world, but that has been neglected in our country.

Furthering research about teacher leadership skills will have positive consequences for teachers, students, and administrators of Colombian educational institutions. Leadership research will enhance daily activities and will trigger sustainable improvement processes in many schools. The first step in doing so is to diagnose the kind of leadership that the educational community members, especially teachers exercise within and outside the classroom.

According to different results that come from pedagogical and sociological studies conducted in our country, there is a gap between adults and youngsters. Teenagers, boys and girls, from different socioeconomic strata don't communicate with their parents, teachers, and other adults. As a hypothesis, it is quite possible that many Colombian students don't see their teachers as leaders. It is not out of all reason to think that Colombian students don't recognize their teachers' ability to challenge the process, to inspire a shared vision, to enable others to act, to model the way, or to encourage the heart.

Another possible important hypothesis here is that teachers may not see themselves as leaders. If they don't see themselves as leaders, then they won't develop and exhibit leadership skills within and beyond the classroom. All teachers should cultivate their leadership skills in order to form a new generation of Colombians who exercise leadership in the right direction. Teachers influence not only students, peers, and supervisors, but also other members of the educational community and beyond which include parents, other schools, entrepreneurs, external supervisors, people

from the community, politicians, and so on. Teacher leaders have the power to generate a new educational culture in Colombia.

Let's look at other educational community members. Again, the leadership practices of principals, supervisors and administrators need to be diagnosed. This is the first step needed to enhance administrators' expertise so they can perform better both as leaders and professionals. Additionally, they must be sensitive to teacher leadership if they want to develop the quality of education in the school and to contribute in a true manner to the construction of a new Colombian society. Principals and administrators need to take into consideration teacher leadership in designing school policies such as the selection process, training, and even economic compensations.

It is important to note that students need to be led to construct their life projects. If they accomplish this fundamental goal, they can become leaders and improve their lives not only in economic matters, but also in other areas. Teachers, in conjunction with parents, are the only ones who can educate students in a good direction.

It is necessary and desirable to carry out extensive studies concerning educational leadership in different educational settings in order to explore our own reality and to enhance the quality of Colombian education. Also, it is very important to create our own theoretical and methodological approaches as well as new instruments for data collection in order to incorporate Colombian context and culture in this new arena of educational leadership studies.

Leadership is a fundamental characteristic for forming successful people and organizations in this complex and global world. It demands people who can guide themselves and others to make the planet a better place to live. This article is a first attempt to uncover the issue of teacher leadership, a theme that can contribute to the quality enhancement of Colombian education. I invite my colleagues to go further as teacher leaders. It may demand an extraordinary effort, but I am sure the results will be remarkable.

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