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Essay

Educational Leadership in Times of Crisis

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Abstract: The chain of crises experienced during the first two decades of the 21st century has changed life on Earth and concluded in a list of incredibly difficult challenges. It has become obvious that our traditional ways of acting do not work anymore. We need to search for new ideas and approaches. We want to believe in the potential of education. It manifests itself in different ways in beliefs, declarations, and actions. The work of education systems and institutions is a huge investment of commitment, time, and money. Governments, experts, workers, and service users have high hopes and enormous resources to keep education functioning. Everyone involved in designing solutions and carrying out tasks must understand how to respond to the global context and the challenges that humanity must deal with in order to survive. The environment and problems of public health, diversity and inequalities, technologies and social media, and the crisis of democracy affect the social reality and the world of education today. To be able to respond, both to challenges and to expectations, the human approach to leadership has to be transformed. The main problem for reformers is to define leadership again, using new assumptions and new intellectual tools. The research question worth asking is: what kind of educational leadership is needed? In this article, I propose a paradigm shift in thinking about educational leadership and a departure from the dominant classical paradigm. I propose a new model of educational leadership and adequate activities.

Keywords: educational leadership; change; framework

1. Introduction

We live a dangerous life. As human beings, we have survived thousands of years of hazardous experiences, but we have probably never faced challenges so serious as those today. Are we aware of the situation? Do we have appropriate methods, procedures, tools, and competences needed for survival?

More than a decade ago, Aven and Renn (2010) underlined that risk-related events impact various parts of the world on a regular basis. "The omnipresence of the risks has left its mark in public perception and public debate" (Aven and Renn 2010, p. 1). They announced that risks "should be understood as permanent companions of everyday life". The situation today is accelerated—there are more risks and they are more dangerous.

There is no agreed definition of risk, but this concept is usually used in the meaning of "an expected value, a probability distribution, as uncertainty and as event" (Aven and Renn 2010). In this paper, risks will be understood as indicated by the World Economic Forum in The Global Risk Report (2021)—from a global perspective. A "global risk" is defined "as an uncertain event or condition that, if it occurs, can cause significant negative impact for several countries or industries within the next 10 years" (The Global Risk Report 2021).

The most visible risks of the third decade of the 21st century are the human and economic costs of COVID-19. The pandemic threatens to scale back years of progress on reducing poverty and inequality and to further weaken social cohesion and global cooperation. "Various process could lead to dire consequences and lost opportunities for large parts of the global population. The ramifications—in the form of social unrest, political fragmentation and geopolitical tensions—will shape the effectiveness of our responses to the other key threats of the next decade" (The Global Risk Report 2021). Among the most

probable risks of the next 10 years, in the predictions of The Global Risk Report (2021), are infectious diseases, extreme weather, climate action failure and human-led environmental damage, and livelihood crises, as well as digital power concentration, digital inequality, IT infrastructure breakdown, and cybersecurity failure (The Global Risk Report 2021).

The most imminent threats—those that may appear in the next two years and become serious threats—include "employment and livelihood crises, widespread youth disillusionment, digital inequality, economic stagnation, human-made environmental damage, erosion of societal cohesion, and terrorist attacks" (The Global Risk Report 2021). From a longer-term perspective (in the 5–10-year horizon), there is a prediction that the most dangerous risks will be: "environmental risks such as biodiversity loss, natural resource crises and climate action failure dominate; alongside weapons of mass destruction, adverse effects of technology and collapse of states or multilateral institutions" (The Global Risk Report 2021).

Economic fragility and societal divisions are expected to increase. The risk of "youth disillusionment" will become a critical threat in the short term. "Hard-fought societal wins could be obliterated if the current generation lacks adequate pathways to future opportunities—and loses faith in today's economic and political institutions" (The Global Risk Report 2021).

"Climate change—to which no one is immune—continues to be a catastrophic risk. Although lockdowns worldwide caused global emissions to fall in the first half of 2020, evidence from the 2008–2009 financial crisis warns that emissions could bounce back. A shift towards greener economies cannot be delayed until the shocks of the pandemic subside" (The Global Risk Report 2021).

Further, responses to the pandemic have caused new domestic and geopolitical tensions that threaten stability (The Global Risk Report 2021).

Is it possible to reverse the negative consequences of expected processes? We need to react in a way that is different from what we were doing during "normality" before COVID-19. There is no way back to business as usual for many reasons—we will be different, conditions will be changed, the post-pandemic world will focus on other aims—but one of the most important reasons is that "usual" and "normal" were not good enough. We suffered because of the lack of freedom and equality, and we were systematically destroying the natural environment. We need to think about new designs and new solutions.

We are in a possession of a powerful tool—learning. Education and school are not sufficient for solving all problems but they have transformational potential. Because we learn, we are able to change ourselves and to change the environment (even a hostile one) (Bregman 2018). Learning makes us human. Thanks to learning, we develop an understanding of social roles and tasks, we shape skills and awareness, we see ourselves in the local and global context, and we strengthen ourselves in the belief that we can cope with challenges. Unfortunately, school has, to some extent, monopolized the learning process, both in the spatial understanding (where learning is supposed to take place) and in the temporal understanding (as though learning should be limited to childhood and youth). This is a mistake—institutionalized education fulfills various goals, but, at the same time, it loses autonomous consciousness and is ineffective for today's needs.

The purpose of education is not a given but is a constant topic for discussion (Biesta 2015). One of the perspectives in thinking about education (not a popular one) is that it serves social reconstruction, counteracting the marginalization and exclusion of individuals and social groups by providing them with the knowledge and skills needed to improve their own status (Łuczyński 2011). In order to make this true, education cannot be a preservation tool of social status quo—we need to redefine education and school. One of the possible places to start the process of change is the transformation of educational leadership. Leadership needs imagination that would allow them to avoid typical errors. The main aims of this paper are focused on explaining the reasoning behind the necessary changes in thinking about educational leadership and on presenting the theoretical framework for the new educational leadership model.

These recommendations stem from meta-analyses of the processes and outcomes of previous research and projects. The three main sources of inspirations were: research on school principals' understanding of their professional roles through interviews with 100 principals, research on school principals' perception of their competencies through a survey with 3600 respondents, and reflection on professional development conducted by 96 participants of the pilot course for future school principals.

2. Transformation of Educational Leadership

Leadership may support people in their development and fulfilling tasks with satisfaction and in their respect for others and the work itself. Unfortunately, we too often witness quite the reverse phenomenon. Unfortunately, leadership, instead of inspiration and support, too often offers discouragement, boredom, and cynicism.

2.1. Crisis of Management and Leadership

Judging by the reactions to specific events, we might worry about the competence and trustworthiness of those who manage the different types of risks. Risk management should start "with a review of all relevant information, particularly from combined risk appraisal, consisting of both risk assessment and concern assessment where the latter is based on risk perception studies, economic impact assessments and the scientific characterization of social responses to the risk source. This information, together with the judgements made in the phase of risk characterization and evaluation, form the input material upon which risk management options are being assessed, evaluated and selected" (Aven and Renn 2010). However, the custom of relying only on well-prepared experts seems to lack the desired efficiency. In order to predict, diagnose, and plan actions to overcome the negative outcomes of the most burning challenges, we need to create much bigger coalitions of citizens, societies, associations, companies, and governments. Better solutions and practices are available to face challenges and to manage risks. Despite some great cases of cooperation and innovation in the past, we have witnessed mainly deficits in dealing with burning issues. The current times have exposed how most countries have struggled with aspects of policy making and crisis management during the global pandemic. We need to change this to benefit the future. We need an enormous educational effort in order to prepare intellectual and material infrastructure. Among the first steps of this transformation, we need changes in education and educational leadership.

The old world of simplistic formulas for strategy, finance, and leadership no longer works. The series of events of the 21st century has exposed fatal weaknesses. It has revealed a deeper crisis which has been brewing for longer: a crisis of management. The old order is giving way to new disorder. For some, it represents great risk; for others, it represents great opportunity. Modern management promised progress through science, efficiency, and insight, but modern management is now reaching its end game. There is no further advantage to be gained from doing the same as always (Owen 2009).

There is clearly a need to break the domination of the classical paradigm where leadership is associated with strong individuals, elites, so-called charisma, and power. We need to understand the necessity of mass collaboration and a change in leadership style that may indeed manifest itself in a rejection of the mythologizing of specialization and expert knowledge, of experience and control, in favor of cooperation, participation, and creativity (Gobillot 2009).

Unfortunately, the dominating classical paradigm of leadership (Avery 2004) pushes us to expect strength, and competition, which is useless and toxic. "Charisma has a dark side that can sap the strength and potency from an organization. If it grows too powerful, the leader becomes ineffective at motivating others and at driving the business. As the leader begins to hear only praise and admiration, they enter a negative cycle in which compliments and agreement cause them to become overconfident" (Ciampa 2016).

As Ciampa describes the chain of reactions, "leaders create their own sense of reality and become resistant to evidence that they may be incorrect. Since the leader's views and

actions are the only ones that matter, followers reduce their willingness to be proactive. They wait for directions and become passive. Eventually, they stop listening and become cynical. Creativity and productivity decline" (Ciampa 2016). Today, leadership generates a burden similar to that of fossil fuels: We burn them because a minority benefits from it. We burn them because we have technology and procedures. We burn them because we are manipulated. We burn them although it kills us. Traditional leadership benefits only a few and poisons everyone, but it is supported by stereotypes and mainstream narratives (Mazurkiewicz and Fischer 2021).

The role of leadership is a perplexing one. Democratic societies are built upon a popular assumption: that the power belongs to the people, although it is obvious that the people do not always govern themselves (even in democracies). Reality dictates that there must be leaders—the few must govern the many. "A belief in wise and virtuous leaders acting for common good has a long and honorable tradition. But in modern times individualism and diversity have undermined the very notion of common good. Many recent scholars and practitioners have sought to avoid the perceived evil of leaders by championing a participationist approach the working of democracy and many remained unconvinced that merely gathering stakeholders together yields wise policy" (Wren 2007).

A new fiction of leadership is urgently needed (Mazurkiewicz and Kołodziejczyk 2017). Wren (2007) defines fiction as idealized notions of what should be; they are societal beliefs in ideal values and organizing structures. Such idealized beliefs are necessary for any polity to function. It is also important for leadership to be based on such fiction. They are imperfectly related to how things really operate in the real world, but they are necessary as first principles and inspiration for change. We need to work the tension between dreams and practice (Fielding and Moss 2011). We need a new leadership mindset, which is not picking up a few pointers here and there. It is about seeing things in new way (Dweck 2006).

2.2. New Educational Leadership

I propose here the framework for such fiction in educational leadership that might serve educational leaders as they work to fulfill the aims of education and the promise of school. The framework of responsive education leadership is composed of the following elements: authenticity, complexity, and interdisciplinarity; a focus on learning and development, equality, and social justice; context and reflection; distributed, participatory, and shared leadership; and democratic practices.

Leadership is built from many elements, starting with personal matters like self-understanding, identity, self-esteem, and relationships with the self, and later relations with loved ones and with people at work and on the streets. Leadership is about choices in life, decisions made from micro- and macroperspectives, immediate reactions in time and in place, and the interpretation of social affairs and political, economic, and cultural choices.

In order to find and maintain a course of action that allows schools to support individual and social developments, leaders of every kind have to deal with different tensions. Some of them are rational, some are irrational, some arise from inside the school, and others from outside. Leaders need to deal with issues of democracy and autocracy, order and chaos, organizational and individual problems. Leadership uses imagination and tradition, implements change and maintains the status quo, and analyses quality of performance and feelings. All of this occurs almost at the same moment, with broad aims and specific tasks in mind, and always, in the end, leadership should be focused on people, good work, and a good life (Mazurkiewicz and Fischer 2021).

We need to stop thinking about leadership as a set of skills and characteristics of the individual, and start thinking about leadership as a set of conditions and as about the process of empowering people to achieve what they believe is worth achieving and what they want to achieve. Traditionally, leadership has been understood as "a process of influencing others, as a method of forcing submission, a mode of persuasion, an effect of interaction, a mechanism or attaining goals, a measure for building structures, a negotiation

of power, a personality profile, and even as a manner of behavior" (Smith and Piele 2006). In a time of failing traditional narratives, of rising waves of doubt toward democracy and decreasing trust, we need a new myth of leadership that will help to prove wrong the dilemma of the assumption that power belongs to people who are, in mass, unable to govern well.

Leadership does not depend on the personalities of individual persons. Leadership is a complex process constructed and experienced in groups. The shape of the process in a particular institution, community, place, or time cannot be visualized or presented in sharp relief, with clear lists of elements or simple figures; it is more like a cloud. People move in it, on its borders, and around it. They are often not sure where they are in it. The metaphor of a cloud, in which we may observe an unregulated stream of events, attitudes, behaviors, actions, and values stretched along a continuum from an undeveloped, irresponsible, selfish, competitive ethos to a developed, mature, responsible, cooperative, and responsive one, offers the most inclusive and open definition of leadership (Mazurkiewicz and Fischer 2021, pp. 74–75).

Education is a human right. Schools have a moral obligation to secure that right. Leadership should allow us to reimagine education and democracy again and again but should also enable us to avoid the reconstruction of failing mechanisms. Given the context in which we live, the fragile status quo, and the need for change, the key to success for people is learning. The future of education and the future of the world depend on leadership. However, again, a new paradigm is needed.

Educational leadership is a specific form of leadership built together by a group of people in every project or organization. I would suggest to understand educational leadership as a process taking place in groups and characterized by the following properties clearly showing its specificity. The expected model should be created upon these assumptions:

- Educational leadership is a long-term process of learning and development, the specific goals of which depend on the context, but learning always remains its main goal;
- Thanks to educational leadership, the abilities and potential of others are improved. Conscious leaders should work together with the group to create situations that enable all to learn and solve problems;
- The performance of tasks is determined by the adopted system of values, which are more important than externally imposed indicators;
- The potential of educational leadership is not related to charisma or the visionary nature of individuals, but with the organization's ability to increasing the participation of its members in the decision-making and learning processes;
- Thanks to educational leadership, a learning community is formed by involving the mind and emotions, previous experiences, and sensitivity towards the conditions of operation and towards other people, with simultaneous appeal to the values accepted by a given community.

It is impossible to offer one definition, one model that fits everywhere. However, we may propose a framework, a set of conditions, to build a strategy that emerges from a philosophical standpoint that is not value-blind and focuses on empathy, community building, and awareness. New educational leadership is characterized by a sensitivity toward the people engaged in the process. These conditions give us a lens through which we may look at our own work: authenticity, complexity and interdisciplinarity, a focus on learning, respect for diversity, the seeking of equity, time for reflection, the need for participation, and, ultimately, the development of this work in a democratic environment become the basis for responsive leadership and responsive schools.

Authenticity is the first critical aspect of the framework, which supports the work of educational leaders, according to the model presented above, to ensure that schooling and learning are connected and aware of the world. There are many aspects to this sense of authenticity. Key to it are confidence, trust, acting professionally, honesty, and openness. Leaders consciously design actions focused on the personal development of themselves and their team (Blanchard 2007). Educational leaders act with confidence stemming from

understanding and acceptance of one's own identity and the context of one's own life. Authentic leadership ensures credibility. Professional educators have a moral obligation to create learning environments in which students learn and act in ways that will help them to engage in important initiatives.

Complexity and interdisciplinarity heavily impact the leadership environment. There will simply not be a future where new challenges do not emerge. The answer to complexity and the interdisciplinary nature of the challenges in the world is preparing teachers and students for lives in an uncertain and undetermined future. Educational leaders are not only aware of the difficult complexity, they also know how to operate in such an environment taking under consideration the possible, and delayed, effects of their own decisions.

A focus on learning and development characterizes strong educational leaders and allows them to deal with the complexity of various tasks (MacBeath et al. 2018). That clear focus supports the effort of building learning communities and learning organizations. Learning organizations have clear goals that are broadly accepted. There is time to deliberate about the actions to be taken and then time to reflect on the learning process. A task of educational leadership is to assure that learners are learning under the right conditions. Educational leadership guarantees everyone's support for their own development. The community builds opportunities to develop each individual. No matter what stages of life any of these individuals find themselves in, there is an awareness of the need to continually learn, stretch their skills, and engage with new information.

Equity, equality, and social justice create another condition of educational leadership. Individuals who seek to build a new school must work to ensure equity, equality, and social justice. Respect for individuality and equality in the form of support for the basic living conditions—resources, respect, recognition, love, and strength—becomes essential. School should be a place of resistance to injustice.

Educational leadership is contextualized and reflective. Critical thinking about the context of the school and the state of the environment is an important starting point for building reflection. Reflexivity is the ability to reflect on actions and strive to accurately assess reality, and to think about context in the cultural, material, and socio-political dimensions. Educational leadership is distributed and participatory. Leaders are open to cooperation, build a common vision, and seek the ultimate goal of high-quality education. Leadership is about creating a space for practicing participation and ownership. What matters in a school is the deepest sense of working together. Our definitions of collaboration and cooperation matter for those asked to trust in the processes and leaders of the school. Educational leadership is democratic. If our ultimate aim is to build a society focused on improving the human condition, then the school and its leadership are compelled to function in democratic ways. Built on respect, participation, and leadership focused on servitude, such schools work to build the community inside the school that they hope to see outside in the society at large. Democracy does not simply mean the political processes that are used in governance structures around the world. It is also seen in day-to-day means of functioning. Democracy is also not telling others what is true; democracy is deciding about it together (Mazurkiewicz and Fischer 2021).

3. Conclusions: Re-Forming by Distributing Leadership

The process of rebuilding the educational sector for the purpose of preparing people for the most difficult challenges that we, as humanity, have ever faced is complex and difficult. One of the rules proposed here is participation—it has to be a participatory process. Participation is a source of information about needs and attitudes, and it improves efficiency, mirrors basic values, and is a tool of protection for group interests (Noworól 2020). Re-forming schools today means distributing leadership. This does not mean simply off-loading accountability tasks to others in the building; it is a careful re-thinking of the approach in which formal and informal leaders are recognized for the leadership contributions they make. There is constant support and even a demand for the participation of everyone in the school environment in decision making and dialog. How

leaders work with others in their schools and in the systems and institutions around them must reflect the kinds of deliberation and decision making we hope to be the hallmark of society. A focus on what those we are working with know, their knowledge base, helps to identify the understanding these individuals bring with them into the school. Focusing on building a community strengthens the development of society. The educational leader knows the development opportunities that exist in others, including students and teachers, around them.

"There is no single scenario or prescription for educational leadership. There are metaphors, ideas, contexts, and mental models. Leadership concentrates on building relations through a common sense of meaning, exchange, learning, focus on purpose, and an awareness of the necessity of change" (iQuerel 2021). It emerges from cooperation, solidarity, and respect for others. Leadership needs to involve as many allies as possible. It is constructed in every institution, situation, or project one by one, contextually, while answering local and global needs.

The world today is dominated by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Noworól 2020). This situation forces us to act. Is it possible to design, plan, and implement reforms which bring us expected outcomes? Wise and intelligent policy is needed here. Policy making is often seen as a process trapped in a maze, but it should not be. "Four levels of analyses should serve as sources of inspiration:

1. The sociopolitical environment from which policy, based on the dominant discourse, is derived;
2. The strategic direction which emanates from the socio-political environment and which broadly defines policy;
3. Organizational principles which indicate the parameters within which policy is to be implemented; and
4. Operational practices, based on the organizational principles, that are necessary to implement the policy at the institutional level and to translate such policy implementation into institutional procedures and specific programs of action" (Bell and Stevenson 2006).

We have to adjust our priorities and practices to the risks we experience and expect. We need changes in the way we do things, so we need to change the process of preparation (education and schooling). The best way to start the process of change is to transform classical leadership into participatory educational leadership—a process that accelerates learning, development, and cooperation. More open and reliable policies will help in this endeavor. We know that the current sociopolitical environment is not supportive of democratic reforms, and strategic directions are not well prepared. This is why the process of policy formulation has to be under the scrutiny of public opinion and experts. It is time to start a wide and open debate: education and leadership for challenges—what do you mean?

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