The Quality of the Educational Process via Classroom Leadership

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Abstract

The present study starts with defining the classroom as an educational micro-community that represents an ideal context for the development of leadership by educational actors through practicing simple rules and behaviors. These strategies develop as leadership skills training: organizing the learning environment, setting goals, time management, effective communication and the development of networks of communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, increasing self-confidence, etc. The paper attempts to measure how these skills work together, through a self-evaluation tool for teachers, and a questionnaire for students, assessing whether teachers and students are ready to act in line with the concept of leadership.

Keywords: cooperation, educational strategies, interaction, leadership, motivation, team work, quality.

1. Introduction

One of the prerequisites for success in the educational process and for the long-lasting quality of education is that teachers as agents of change to come from within the education system, to strengthen initiatives of change and to turn them into acts of training and developing human personalities. Professions within the field of education and training have evolved rapidly after the year 2000 and new developments are currently taking place, closely related to changes in contemporary society, to the dynamics of progress. Thus, traditional models of education as well as the activity of educators are constantly changing and adapting to the latest tendencies and societal developments. Commitment to education development is more likely to foster when those responsible for implementing changes are also involved in the decision-making process. Teachers, pupils, students and parents are themselves part of the social actors of change.

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The development of the educational process is the target of any school organization that wants to survive in modern times. Any attempt at education development does not apply in a vacuum, but in a school, in a classroom, as the school institution has centuries of experience, culture and civilization behind it. We can firmly assert that human development in society is closely connected to the optimization of school management strategies, particularly classroom management. We advocate for an education system and a school that encourages the active participation of the trainees, who get involved in their own expectations, create their own value systems based on knowledge and synthesis of the values of humanity, and constantly interact with their peers (Niculescu, M., 2012).

The teacher is often compared to a gardener who planted a "seed of knowledge" in the minds of his students, hoping to see this seed taking roots, growing, blooming and finally giving fruit. By joining forces, teachers and pupils/students create in schools and in classrooms the teaching process, which encourages the development of human personality. Teachers must preserve the strength to struggle every day in order to work effectively with pupils/students, to impart knowledge, to improve and deepen the learning process. If knowledge, information and data are clearly understood and well used, they start to build skills over time. The combination of informational resources with operational ones, turned into skills and abilities, as well as adopting an attitude appropriate to the context creates competences. The teacher himself goes to class every day to explain, advise, reformulate, facilitate and encourage the use of knowledge, makes every necessary effort to achieve his goal and sometimes deplores the indifference of some students or the errors they make. However, he also often wonders at the relevance of an idea or a perfect syntactic structure, maybe unexpected, devised by an extraordinary pupil/student. There are many ways of learning. Each method has advantages and disadvantages and it is likely that the most appropriate method represents a combination. The main advantage of a good class is to have a teacher who can present the content in a manner that is suitable to the learning needs of pupils/students. A good teacher learns from a great teacher, and the great teacher learns from his students. The past, the present and the future can be learned through their interaction, and the only chance at a bright future a human being can have is to anticipate it through learning. In other words, the chance of accepting change and of seizing it in favor of a person’s development means „learning the change”. Great scientists have studied the phenomenon of change in the world, they got themselves involved in changing the reality around them and used change as a path to progress.

How are we supposed to act in relation to change? If we expect for it to come, each pupil/student brings his own idea and hence starts the chaos. That is why we need to know and master change, not to remain indifferent to it. Man needs order, he needs a plan in order to act, to develop himself. (Niculescu, M., 2012).

2. From classroom management to classroom leadership

Investing in education represents a strategic objective for development. In this respect, Professor Ştefan Buzărnescu states that “The lesson of education management is compulsory: it teaches us that the future is far too important to let it succumb to an uncertain present” (Buzarnescu, St., 2001). It is estimated that being a manager has two meanings, a general one (an activity by which one makes a living, an occupation) and a more restricted one (to define training for specialized staff training) (Joiţa, E., 2000). Definitions in scholarly works in the field associate management with:

- tact, skills, manner, leading technique;
- coordination of resources;
- work with individuals or groups, a leader’s ability to mobilize all the members’ efforts to meet organizational objectives;
- the art and science of management;
- administrative doctrine.

Professor Romită Iucu argues, „classroom management is an area of research in education sciences studying the perspectives of approaching a classroom of pupils and its dimensional structures in order to ensure appropriate behaviors for the process of teaching-learning-assessment“ (Iucu, R., 2006) The literature in the field uses the term
leader for the head of an organization who knows „what to do” and „how to do it” to get results, but who is also able to show others „how to do it” in order to succeed in their actions, as a true leader is followed by other people. Therefore, the leader must be a model, an example, to inspire the group, in our case the classroom of pupils, in a creative manner, to determine them to work together to achieve goals, through competence and skill.

Leadership is a behaviour that involves working with others and on tasks. This is based on the perspective that a leader is a person who is able to communicate well, engage in critical thinking, lead groups in problem solving and planning, and able to structure goals and objectives for the group (Feldhausen & Pleiss, 1994). To some extent, many students will have the experience of having a leadership role in their daily lives through interactions with families, peers, and community organizations.

I will focus on the assessments made by Stephen Covey on principled leadership, a concept that seems related to education: „If we focus on the principles, this makes us feel safe enough not to be threatened by change, comparisons or criticism; we get sufficient guidance to enable us to discover the mission, define the roles, sketch scenarios and goals; sufficient wisdom to learn from our mistakes, and to always seek to improve ourselves; sufficient power to communicate and cooperate, even under stress and fatigue” (Covey, St., 2006).

If the concept of authority refers to the formal dimension of power, leadership represents its informal side, given by the ability to exert influence. Stephen Covey goes on to argue that „People who guide themselves by principles always follow the school of their experiences. They read, get trained, listen to others, learn both with their eyes and ears. They are curious and always ask questions. They always expand their competence [...]” (Covey, St., 2002).

In the same line of thought, Professor Mielu Zlate believes that principled leadership is „a prerequisite for transformational leadership” and „transformational leadership is opposed to transactional leadership [...]”, going beyond the cost-benefit relation, focusing on the leader inspiring the subordinates to achieve performance above the set standards. Transformational leadership implies increasing subordinates’ emotional attachment to the organization, increasing their motivational resources, the personal identification of subordinates with their leaders, sharing their vision and acting accordingly” (Zlate, M., 2004).

Leadership represents a very important role of the manager, because it involves interaction with others, prompting the manager to ingrain energy and enthusiasm to the vision that he wants to impart to people. H. Mintzberg, a well-renowned professor of management studies at McGill University, Montreal, Canada, states that: “Management education must go beyond me and I to at least encourage managers to think beyond their own person - in other words to begin to be leaders” (Mintzberg, H., 2004)

3. Leadership role through interaction and motivation

Interactions between students do not happen only during classes, but also when they play sports, during breaks and extracurricular activities, at the cafeteria and during "after school" activities. Games, jokes, fights, asking for help, disputing territory, all these interactions allow children to build for themselves social identities appropriate to different social spaces: gym, library, classroom, cafeteria, hallway, teachers’ office, toilets, school yard, nurse’s office. Socializing is not just an action from adult to child: peers can socialize very well with each other, whether they are students or teachers, and adults get resocialized in contact with children.

The present study starts from the definition of the classroom as a micro-community which can provide an ideal context for leadership by respecting some rules that educational actors - teachers and pupils - will practice. These include: cooperation, collaboration, teamwork, responsibilities for each person, decisions taken together, compliance with codes of conduct, celebrating successes, admitting to making mistakes and correcting them, assuming and overcoming failures, expressing opinions, accepting alternative solutions, a work atmosphere based on involvement, but also on enjoyment, humor, equal opportunities for all pupils etc. Educational strategies that involve teamwork, cooperation, collaboration and involvement lead to the establishment of leadership in the classroom which will generate interactional contexts in which experience can be gained through motivation and interaction. If the youngsters find answers at school together with their teachers, they will give up the “cardboard models” offered
nowadays more and more often and in an increasingly aggressive manner by television and Internet, otherwise necessary modern media, but not sufficient. A role model shapes your personality and fills you with admiration, which can engender the inner strength to have legitimate aspirations.

The relationship between role model and disciple is based on multiple questions and answers, found together. We can find the answers in the family, books, nature, or anywhere, but many students expect to find them at school with the help of their teachers. School offers children the opportunity to learn, practice, and acquire all the rules of the “science to act”, absolutely necessary for establishing connections with others. Both pupils and students can reach their full potential in the interactional context of the classroom.

The Self-Determination Theory describes students’ motivation as a continuum from demotivation or lack of motivation, passing through different stages from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation. On this continuum, the concept of internalization describes how motivation for a particular school behaviour an range from lack of motivation or resentment, to passive acceptance, then active acceptance and eventually personal involvement. With the increase of the degree of internalization, it also grows the persistence in solving a task, positive self perception and the quality of individual commitment. (Ryan & Deci, 2004)

4. Theoretical framework and research methodology

My research investigates whether teachers and students are ready to cope with this emerging new concept of leadership derived from a legitimacy negotiated in a rational manner and manifested in the skills of teachers and students together. Therefore, leadership seems very suitable to be applied in education, and this micro-research had as a starting point these considerations. This manifestation of leadership skills will be emphasized through a self-assessment grid and a questionnaire for students.

The research methods employed are: the survey, the questionnaire and the focus group. Leadership can provide pupils and students with opportunities for learning and for practicing leadership skills in a supportive environment together with teachers and peers. This support leads to the development of the necessary competencies to practice the teaching profession. Among them, I selected some which are representative for the self-assessment grid applied to teachers and pupils from three schools in Timisoara, where students from West University of Timisoara did their teaching practice in 2011-2012:

- team-building;
- communication and networking;
- project planning;
- reflection;
- self-confidence;
- problem solving;
- goal setting;
- decision making;
- time management;
- conflict solving;
- project management;
- resource distribution;
- understanding otherness.

These are related to the manifestation of leadership and they lead to the development of student skills closely connected to the improvement of: interpersonal relations, motivation, study skills and commitment.
Hypothesis: If teacher mentors and teaching experts will apply work strategies based on leadership characteristics and qualities, negotiated between the parties and adapted to the current educational context, we will have positive results in terms of quality of the educational process and shaping of personality of youth and adults altogether.

The sample was made of thirty students and six teacher mentors who worked with six teaching experts as part of a team of teaching practice. The pupils participating in this micro-research were comprised of a sample of one hundred fifty, affiliated to selected schools, and they responded to a questionnaire on the qualities of a teacher-leader. The following schools were selected: "Jean Louis Calderon" High School, "Carmen Sylva" High School and "I.C. Bratianu" Technical College, and the pupils were chosen according to the groups the mentors taught and where the students conducted the observation. Their age ranged from 11 to 16 years, corresponding to grades V to X. In the foreground, teacher mentors and teaching experts were required to face the target audience - students and pupils - to imprint on them the skills that lead to the development of competencies related to the practice of the teaching profession. Therefore, the key question was: are teachers appropriately equipped to deal with this newly emerging concept of leadership?

According to expert studies and historically speaking, the legitimacy and authority of the teacher is related to the institutional and scientific legitimacy. Adding to these the newly emerging concept of leadership, we reach the rational legitimacy negotiated between teachers and students/pupils. Thus, we can state that the authority of the teacher is eventually also based on the negotiation of competencies of individuals working together. The self-assessment grid was applied to teachers and students training to become teachers, according to the lessons observed by the latter during their teaching practice. I was interested in the perception on the quality of the educational process, as seen by every student and practiced by every teacher mentor. This grid comprised five topics which form the teaching-learning process: teaching, leadership, networking, class organization, participation by motivation. Each respondent filled in the answers according to some elements of observation.

Teaching included the following elements of observation: using warm-up elements at the beginning of the class (ice-breakers), presenting the objectives and the lesson plan, checking previous knowledge about the topic introduced, presenting new knowledge and structuring understanding. Leadership included the following elements of observation: self-confidence, control, ongoing assessment, prompting students to actively participate, creating a pleasant atmosphere, motivating pupils, using excessively the expository method, respect and consideration for pupils, feedback, cooperation, maintaining class discipline, interrupting the discussion. Networking included the following elements of observation: clarity of expression, checking understanding, moving around the classroom, ignoring certain remarks, keeping eye contact with pupils. Class organization included the following elements of observation: presenting in an organized manner the teaching-learning elements, providing useful summaries, reinforcing concepts, fostering teamwork. Participation by motivation included the following elements of observation: encouraging questions and comments, prompting interaction among pupils, asking for individual answers.

There were YES/NO type of answers, and the analysis was carried out in a focus group, precisely in order to have a debate and make leadership work in this group. As a moderator, I drew the following conclusions from the analysis of the grid and the focus group discussions:

The teacher mentors focused mainly on relational and teaching skills, according to the following variables:
- facilitating the teaching-learning process;
- clarifying and understanding concepts;
- feedback and control.

5. Analysis of results
By analyzing the results, I was able to reach the following conclusions: the teachers in the sample believed that they largely adopted the function of facilitating and clarifying, in proportion of 90%, and the function of feedback and control in 86%. The most widely used techniques to facilitate the education process are encouraging, motivating, creating a friendly atmosphere and helping the pupils. The clarification techniques I came across were: defining the concepts and providing examples, using the problem-solving method and the exercise method. Student trainees, future teachers, believed that all three functions were equally important and they should be combined in the process.

In order to facilitate the process, what they considered most important were motivation and helping pupils, but also fostering communication based on physical closeness and consideration, to encourage pupils to respond, to get actively involved in the classes. Regarding the function of control and feedback, they felt that maintaining discipline and generating interaction were the most difficult to achieve. As far as the function of clarification is concerned, what they found the most difficult to apply was synthesizing concepts and reinforcing them, because they believed there was not enough time for that during a class. By analysing the answers in the grid, but also the focus group discussions with teachers and student trainees, I reached the following conclusions: the students find it the most difficult to combine methods and secure an atmosphere of study, communication and interest based on the interaction. Even teacher mentors and teaching experts admitted that these aspects very much depended on experience and educational context, which encouraged the students not to give up until they accomplished their goals and achieved visible results.

The conclusion was that leadership skills could be gained through work, practice and training. We all have skills, but they need to be constantly improved. The questionnaire for pupils comprised items that focused on the teachers’ profiles (strengths and limitations). These referred to: their ability to explain well, charisma, excitement, sense of humor, whether they answered all questions, favored certain students, provided help, made some errors, summarized the newly presented concepts, raised their voice, gave opportunities to all students to participate in class, gave too much homework, punished pupils who had not performed their tasks. By analysing the answers provided, I concluded the following: teacher mentors were able to explain well in a proportion of 80%, they had a sense of humor in 32%, they were charismatic in 28%, they respected their pupils in 70%, but sometimes they raised their voice in 30%, which was an element of stress for pupils, they gave them much and difficult homework, which showed that learning in class was not so well accomplished, and teamwork was only sometimes achieved in a proportion of 27%.

6. Conclusions

Pupils are very much interested in teachers’ attitude, their behavior, as I stated before - sense of humor, charisma, respect - and less interested in their teaching skills. They reproach teachers underusing teamwork, which could lead to a better understanding of the concepts, thus to doing homework easily. This grid represented an excellent model for student trainees in terms of raising their awareness on mistakes they should avoid in the future, when they begin their own careers as teachers.

Returning to the topic of this study, the concept of leadership, I conclude that it requires cooperation and responsibility negotiated among social actors forming the educational community, analysis and authority in terms of reciprocity. In our contemporary society, leadership applied to the educational process becomes not only a challenge, but a necessity in training the young generation. Therefore, I firmly believe that it is necessary to incorporate leadership into the training curriculum for future teachers.

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