School principals as leaders: Pre-service and in-service teachers' perspective

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Abstract

Problem Statement: Despite the intertemporal, voluminous, and transcultural study of leadership; this phenomenon continues to be contested and elusive. Scholars also highlighted that the existing school leadership models are incomplete and the relevant research is dominated by the principals' perspective. Therefore, it is suggested that the followers' views should be included in the discussion of leadership, as the latter is commonly considered as an influential relationship or process, where followers choose willingly to follow their leader because he/she fulfills their expectations and wills. Consequently, the exploring of how teachers want their school leader can offer new prospects in the understanding of leader-followers relationship in school leadership.Purpose of Study: This study explores the pre-service and in-service teachers' views about what they want and expect from School Principals as leaders to willingly follow them. Methods: The sample consisted of 36 teachers purposefully recruited. Written texts were used as a research tool, where participants were asked to write down spontaneously their thoughts, and content analysis was used as a research method. Findings: The findings showed that the teachers referred to particular leadership characteristics, skills, values, and practices as desirable for school leaders. These findings are discussed in the context of the broad literature of leadership and in relation to the proposed leadership models. Conclusions and Recommendations: A conclusion to be drawn is that teachers' perspective contributes to a more balanced view on managerial leadership, while authors further suggest that this topic should be explored cross-culturally.

Keywords: School ,Pre-service, teachers' perspective;

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1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that school leadership is a vital factor for school function. However, and despite the intertemporal, voluminous and across cultures study conducted by diverse theoretical stances for leadership (Horner, 2004, p. 27); the latter is a highly debatable issue among the scholars, without a mutual understanding of its conceptualisation (Hoy & Miskel, 2001, p. 392).

Bush and Glover (2003, p. 5) defined the leadership as 'a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes…'. Still, the required elements for the existence of leadership are a leader, followers, the situational conditions determining the existence, the exercise and the effects of leadership; and also the value orientations serving as a bond between leader and followers steering them to a common direction to achieve these values (Fyrippis, 2007, p. 4). In fact, the diverse leadership theories proposed interdisciplinary over the years have focused, more or less, either on specific elements of those mentioned above in isolation, or on their combination. Amanchukwu, Stanley and Ololube (2015, p. 7) stressed that the leadership is considered in modern relevant theories as a mixture of personality characteristics or traits, as specific behaviours or leadership skills, or as a relationship or process. However, the conceptualisation of leadership as a social process where a leader deliberately influences followers seems to be the convergence point among the majority of leadership definitions (Hoy & Miskel, 2001, p. 392). Therefore, given the above, the incorporation of both leaders and followers in the discussion about leadership is necessary.

Nevertheless, Bush and Glover (2014) focusing, especially on school leadership and by reviewing the relevant models have been proposed, stressed that the focal point of many of those, such as instructional, transformational, managerial, moral and authentic leadership and managerialism, is the leadership of the individual—commonly principal—, although these scholars also referred to a few shared leadership approaches having gained lately prominence in the field. Apart from the central interest of the diverse leadership models in school principals as leaders, the same locus of attention has been found for the research conducted (Blase, 1987, p. 589). For instance, Harris, Day and Hadfield (2003, pp. 67 & 68) highlighted that researchers commonly investigate and capture the principals' perspective on effective leadership, while they often exclude the perspectives of other people within school units.

But, as previously mentioned, leadership will finally emerge only if there are followers being influenced to consciously and willingly choose to follow their leader. Hence, we have to answer why followers choose to do so. Although this argument may be simplistic given the fact that school leadership is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, at least the followers' perspective can offer a more balanced view about school leadership. Kouzes and Posner (1987, p. 501) emphasised that it is in a greater extent how the followers perceive their leader that defines the success of the exercised leadership than how capable is the leader. In addition, according to the previously mentioned scholars, 'followers, not the leader, determine when someone possesses the qualities of leadership' (p. 501). Particularly, people assume the role of the follower due to their expectations from the leader, grounded on how the latter can satisfy their desires and needs and on what he/she is proposing to give them (Zarate Torres, 2009, p. 13).

In spite of all that have been mentioned so far, it has also been noted that school leaders have to know what other people relating to schools (teachers, students and their parents) expect from them to be enabled to visualise their vision for their school and to choose its direction (Moos, Mahony & Reeves, 1998, p. 60).

The review of the relevant pedagogical literature revealed that there have been some studies exploring the teacher perspective on leadership. Such studies have focused on specific leadership types and their effects, for instance on instructional leadership (Blase & Blase, 2000), or on the effectiveness of school leadership in general (Blase, 1987; Harris et al., 2003); while there have also been those investigating the teachers' expectations for leadership among other stakeholders' perceptions (Moos et al., 1998).

In this study, while we focus on principal leadership, and especially on managerial leadership, we seek to explore it from the followers' perspective, namely, from teachers'. We based on Blom and Alvesson's (2014, p. 344) definition of managerial leadership, which denotes here to the leadership that school principals should exercise due to their formal positions in the educational administrative pyramid, and specifically in the school administration, in such a way so as to influence their formal subordinates/teachers, so that the latter to become voluntary their followers. This particular type of leadership was selected for two main reasons: First, because it has been suggested to be the most suitable conceptualisation of leadership for centralised educational systems, such as Greek (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 565) about which our data were collected; and second, because we assume here that the leadership type/style which will emerge in a school, and whether it will be distributed or of another type, is largely dependent on the principal of a school due to the power emanated from his/her formal position (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 560).

The specific objective of this research is to explore what teachers want and expect from their school principal as a leader to willingly follow him/her by taking on the role and identity of followers.

2. Methodology

The survey was conducted in the spring academic semester of the academic year 2017–2018, and the data were collected specifically in April 2018. The sample consisted of 36 out of 40 postgraduate students attending the lesson entitled 'Teacher Training' taught by the first author. These students were both pre-services and in-service teachers, taking postgraduate courses on educational administration and leadership, provided by the Department of Primary Education of Democritus University of Thrace.

To achieve the goal of the research, it was decided that the best research tool was written texts, where participants could freely and spontaneously write down their thoughts, without any external influences on their responses (Taratori, Stravakou & Kougiourouki, 2009, p. 398). Therefore, the participated students were asked during a teaching lesson to write a free text answering the question 'What do you want and expect from a School Principal as the leader of the school'?, without mentioning their names or any other identifying element for their anonymity to be ensured and their responses not to be influenced, given the fact that one of the researchers was also their Professor.

As a research method, the content analysis was used, which allows the description of the collected material in a systematic manner (Schreier, 2012, p. 3).

2.1. Data analysis

Specifically, the process of content analysis (Taratori, 2004, p. 758) was carried out as follows:

a) As the unit of analysis, a word, a phrase and a sentence were defined. Then, after the gathered material was read multiple times and numbered to be quantifiable, its coding was made on the basis of the above units of analysis.
b) The data were categorised and thematic categories were emerged, where for the construction of the latter a key factor was the repetition of the same phrases, words or sentences about the desirable school leader from different respondents. The construction of the coding frame was based from our data, but we also took into account the relevant literature and the existing categorisations, such as Argyropoulou and Symeonidis's (2017), whenever they fit in our case (Schreier, 2012, pp. 84–94).
c) Finally, a quantitative and qualitative description of the research findings were made, as well as the findings were discussed in the context of the broader literature.

The data categorisation was conducted separately by the two researchers and authors of this article, but they compared their findings at regular intervals and resolved any disagreements (Schreier, 2012, pp. 166–174).

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. The quantitative analysis of the research findings

From the systematic study and coding of the participants' written texts, 278 accounts were found about the school principal as a leader, which were further categorised in four different main categories shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Aggregate table for the quantitative distribution of the research findings

No.	Main categories	Reports	Percent
1.	Leader's necessary qualifications (A1)	24	8.63
2.	Leader's personality traits (A2)	62	22.3
3.	Desirable values for leader (A3)	54	19.43
4.	Leadership skills (A4)	138	49.64
	Total	278	

It has to be noted here that our categorisation may not coincide with other categorisations found in the literature about leadership skills etc. and that seem to be different from each other. However, in our study and for the reliability of the analysis, we used specific definitions for each category that fit for our data. Specifically, the participants' accounts describing the 'dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings and actions… [which] are enduring dispositions', or simply their descriptions of what the leader 'are like' (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz & Knafo, 2002, p. 790) were coded as personality traits. As skills were coded the segments about a 'competence, or having a mastery of task-relevant knowledge and skills to accomplish a goal in an effective fashion' (Hoy & Miskel, 2001, p. 398), while desirable values were defined as the 'enduring [leaders'] goals…the intentions behind their behaviours' and also the goals that the participated teachers wish for leaders to try to attain (Roccas et al., 2002, p. 790). Therefore, the sub-categories of each main category were emerged directly from the data, while later, these sub-categories were put in one of the main categories responding to the used above-mentioned definitions.

Table 1 shows that the category of the leadership skills gathered overall the half of the total participants' accounts, followed with a great difference by the category of leader's personality traits, while third came the category of the desirable values for a school leader. It is also apparent from the Table 1 that the qualifications that considered as necessary for the school leader collected the smallest percentage of the participants' accounts.

Regarding the specific findings in each category (see Appendix), although various leadership skills mentioned by the participants, the two most referred skills were those of guiding and supporting and of communication, while the abilities to inspire and to be a role model were followed. As for the leadership traits, being considerate, fair/impartial and cooperative were the three most highly mentioned. The participants also stated that the formation of a school culture and the success of teaching and learning should be the most desirable goals for leaders to achieve, while from the teachers' perspective the ideal leader has to be both an expert in the science of education and a cognizant of the educational legislation.

From the quantitative analysis of the research findings, the following can be concluded:

- The teachers in our study expressed that they want from their leaders first of all to be distinguished by their leadership skills with which they will influence their followers, in a much lesser extent to both have specific personality traits and always strive for the formation of a positive school culture

and for the success of teaching and learning; while the ideal leader has in an only small extent to have specific typical qualifications.

- Taking into consideration (a) the definition of skills (A4) from which it can be assumed that skills are evolved through more exercise and knowledge; (b) the fact that the value (A3) awareness can- and should- be obtained by the leaders and that is a prerequisite for authentic leadership (Begley, 2001); and that school leaders can acquire during their lives the qualifications (A1) referred as necessary for leadership by the participants; and (c) that the totality of the reports of all the categories (A1), (A3) and (A4) exceeded the reports of traits, the inferred view of leadership from the participated teachers' perspective may be that leadership is acquirable rather than inherently attributed.

- Although the high number of the participants' accounts may indicate their personal concern about the issue and their previous thinking of the ideal leader, the distribution of the participants' reports, especially on the desired leadership skills (see Appendix), may be attributed either to the subjective nature of these notions or to the fact that the participants do not have a clear idea about the issue. This can be further enhanced by the fact that the sample consisted not only of in-service but also of pre-service teachers, who actually have not worked with a principal before. But, given the fact that it was not possible in this research to compare the opinions between these groups due to the participants' anonymity, this should be addressed by future studies.

- The fact that the sum of reports of No. 1 to No. 6 sub-categories of the A4 main category for leadership skills gave 102 reports exceeding all the others, and that these leadership skills would have a direct influence on teachers, it may also reveal that leadership emerges as a social process between a skilled school principal-leader who influences his/her teachers-subordinates, and therefore the latter willingly follow (Bush & Glover, 2003, p. 5; Kouzes & Posner, 1987, p. 501). This is particularly evident in the following qualitative analysis of the findings.

3.2. The qualitative analysis of the research findings

All the participated teachers stressed that school principals have a variety of roles to perform, one of which is to be school leaders having as such a pivotal role in the school function (Stravakou, 2003, pp. 26–30). According to teachers' perspective, principals as school leaders should have communication skills. Hence, they have to be active and careful listeners in their conversations with others, to facilitate and provoke the communication among the people being related to schools, to be able to communicate to educators what their school tries to accomplish and to be willing to communicate with others. As a teacher put it: 'the principal's door should be always open to whomever teacher wants advice'. Actually, in a previous study, it was found that Greek school principals communicated with teachers verbally rather than in written form, which indicates that the former have perceived the importance of verbal communication (Stravakou, 2003, p. 281). Except for the communication skills, the participated teachers found of paramount importance the school leaders' skills in guiding and supporting. School leaders have to guide all teachers in their duties, and especially the new ones, to support them to take initiatives and to their professional growth. This category was found to be related with the leader's proficiency in the pedagogical science referred as a prerequisite for school leadership. Some teachers emphasised that only if school principals are highly knowledgeable in the pedagogical science, they will have the skills to guide and support professionally the teachers.

Having the ability to inspire and being able to be a role model in the school were also mentioned by many teachers as important skills for leadership, and these categories seemed to be related. For some teachers, the ideal school leader inspires them to overcome themselves to do the best for students, to visualise the leader's vision, and to strive for the success. This inspiration is accomplished when the ideal school leader acts as a role model in the school with his/her behaviour, actions and words. The leader's inspiration was found as a consistent finding in a series of studies conducted by Kouzes and Posner (2011, pp. 4–13) about the leaders' most desirable characteristics from the followers' point of view. However, other characteristics found by the above-mentioned scholars, such as credibility or

honesty, were not emerged here. Interestingly, there were also some participants who want from their leader to have also skills as a manager and to be a 'good educator'. The latter is crucial in school leadership, especially when school principals contribute to the teachers' professional growth as a mentor (Argyropoulou & Symeonidis, 2017, p. 56), while the former indicated both the differentiation between management and leadership having been made by the teachers and the interlinkage between the two in case of the school principals' roles. This was also emerged in a study about teachers' views on effective leadership (Harris et al., 2003, pp. 70–71).

Furthermore, the majority of the participants stressed that the successful teaching and student learning and the formation of school culture by ensuring a positive school environment, as the enduring leaders' goals behind their actions. Interestingly, the school leader's aim to teaching and learning reflects the central premise of the instructional leadership and leadership for learning (Bush & Glover, 2014, pp. 555–556), while the findings regarding the cultivation of school culture stresses the link between leadership and organisational culture. Schein (2004, p. 11) emphasised that 'the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture'. According to the participants' accounts, the ideal school leader works towards 'the formation of school culture reflecting the image of the school to society (external dimension of culture)' (Taratori-Tsalkatidou, 2009, p. 29). In this culture, the collaboration is dominated among the school members, while at the same time the school leader gathers financial resources to upgrade the indoor and outdoor settings of the school ('external dimension of culture') (Taratori-Tsalkatidou, 2009, p. 30).

Lastly, the majority of the teachers advocated that the ideal school leader is considerate for all school members and fair/impartial.

4. Conclusions

This study explored the in-service and pre-service teachers' opinions about the ideal school leader making them willingly to follow him/her. The research findings, which cannot be generalisable, overall indicated that the teachers' views reflected, more or less, the diverse conceptualisations of leadership as traits, skills or social process, found in the modern relevant literature (Amanchukwu et al., 2015, p. 7), reflecting also a mixture of elements of the diverse proposed leadership theories, such as instructional, transformational and others.

Specifically, it was found that from the teachers' perspective, the ideal school leader has most of all leadership skills, such as communication skills or the ability to inspire; in much lesser extent has both specific personal traits, such as the consideration for others, and enduring goals to pursue. However, the formal qualifications, such as the high proficiency in the pedagogical science, are seen as prerequisites in the ideal school leader only in a small extent.

An implication of these findings are that the Greek State should base the school leaders' selection not so much on typical qualifications but on leadership skills, while the State should also ensure the development and improvement of leaders' skills. Although these findings are limited to the Greek educational system only, they answer to the call for the teachers' perspectives to be incorporated into the discussion and research about leadership. Our work has led us to conclude that teachers have vivid images about their ideal leaders and they are also willing to share them, so the research should let them be heard. Still, cross-cultural studies can shed new light on this issue.

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Appendix

Tables depicting the quantitative distribution of the research findings for each main category

Table 2. The quantitative distribution of the research findings about the desirable necessary qualifications for leader

Category no.	Leader's necessary qualifications (A1)	Reports	Percent
1.	Continuous training and being updated	6	25
2.	Highly proficient in the pedagogical science	9	37.5
3.	Knowing the educational legislation	9	37.5
	Total	24	

Table 3. The quantitative distribution of the research findings about the desirable personality traits for leader

Category no.	Leader's personality traits (A2)	Reports	Percent
1.	Considerate	18	29.03
2.	Fair/Impartial	18	29.03
3.	Accountable	8	12.90
4.	Cooperative	11	17.74
5.	Creative	7	11.30
	Total	62	

Table 4. The quantitative distribution of the research findings about the desirable values for leader

Category no.	Desirable values for leaders (A3)	Number of segments	Percent
1.	Cultivating school culture by ensuring positive school environment	19	35.18
2.	Successful teaching and student learning	20	37.04
3.	Well-functioning and development of school	10	18.52
4.	The best possible for everyone at school (teachers, parents, children)	5	9.26
	Total	54	

Table 5. The quantitative distribution of the research findings about the desirable leadership skills

Category no.	Leadership skills (A4)	Reports	Percent
1.	Guiding and supporting	26	18.84
2.	Communication	25	18.11
3.	Human resources management	12	8.70
4.	Motivating	11	7.97
5.	The ability to inspire	17	12.32
6.	To be a role model	11	7.97
7.	Exercising of administrative and bureaucratic duties	9	6.52
8.	Being a good teacher	7	5.07
9.	Problem solving	8	5.80
10.	Handling crises and difficult situations	6	4.35
11.	Implementation of educational legislation	6	4.35
	Total	138	