Understanding effectiveness in school administration: A discourse analysis

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Abstract: The current paper primarily aims to investigate and interpret the observations, perceptions, and experiences of an effective school's principal through a qualitative approach. The study was designed as a case study. The participant of the study was a primary science education teacher with 17 years of experience in the profession who has been a school principal for two years. As the data collection tool, semi structured interview format -the most preferred way of obtaining data in qualitative research- was chosen. Descriptive analysis of data interpretation was adopted throughout the data analysis process. As it is stated in related literature, in descriptive analysis, the obtained data is identified in a systematic and clear way. Afterwards, these descriptions and identifications are explained and interpreted, and the cause and effect relations are examined, eventually some certain conclusions are made based on the data. The results of the present study showed that participative leadership, seeking subordinates' motivation and satisfaction, and concerning students' needs are essentials in school administration. The results were examined and interpreted within the scope of the educational administration literature and administrative and functional features of Turkish education system.

Key words: leadership, primary school, efficiency in management, decision-making, democratic leader

1. Introduction and Theoretical Background

Humankind has always been in educational activities even in primitive ages till today (Tatar, 2006). For this reason, education is considered as a vehicle to grow up creative, productive and responsible citizens for societies (Baştepe, 2009; Kurul Tural, 2002). The need for education has created associations between the society and its people inherently which then led them get together and form organizations cooperatively (Çalışkan & Güçlü, 2014). Regarding this, every organization can only survive by acquiring their objectives. It is obvious that organizations can be established and maintained so long as they are efficient and self-sufficient within themselves and their environment (Arslantaş & Özkan, 2014).

Efficiency is commonly associated with the ability of being efficient of a vehicle, a tool or an activity (Abdurrezzak, 2015). In organizational terms, efficient organizations process the inputs, transform them into high quality outputs and reintroduce them into the society (Katz & Kahn, 1978). In other terms, efficieny can be defined as going into action by utilizing all kinds of organizational resources to achieve the organizational goals in the planned way (Alamdar, 2015).

In this respect, schools are among the most important organizations for people and societies. Schools are deemed to be societal and unique systems in educational context. Accordingly, schools have general and specific educational objectives to enable students gain planned knowledge, skills and behaviors by scientific methods (Çubukçu & Girmen, 2006; Günal, 2014). As a societal system, schools' efficiency is also associated with their performance (Helvacı & Aydoğan, 2011; Koçak & Helvacı, 2011), and each school has its unique characteristics (Bursalıoğlu, 2010). Keeping in mind that schools provide its input from society, educate them and regain them in society. In this respect, schools' efficiency can be considered and related to the quality of its output (Gökçe & Bağçeli Kahraman, 2010; Kurul Tural, 2002; Yıldırım Duranay, 2005).

Lezotte (2009, p. 3, cited as Zufiaurre & Wilkinson, 2014) suggests that effective schools have some peculiar entities, and lists as follows:

- instructional leadership,

- clear and focused mission,

- safe and orderly environment,

- climate of high expectations,

- frequent monitoring of students progress,

- positive home-school relations,

- opportunity to learn

- students' time on task.

Grauwe and Varghese (2000, p. 6) state that school efficiency has four dimensions. These are, namely:

- focus on outcomes,

- favourable internal management,

- cost-effectiveness,

- equity.

Objectives of the study

It is clear that effective schools are associated with a wide range of inputs and outputs in educational context. Though there is not enough scientific evidence in terms of qualitative approach. Correspondingly, the current study examines and aimes to interpret the observations, perceptions and experiences of an effective school's principal through adopting a qualitative approach. Accordingly, the present study primarily and basically aims to elaborate on the following research questions:

- What are the challenges of being a school administrator?

- What kind of skills and knowledge required to be a school administrator?

- What motivates the teachers at school?

2. Method

Participant

The semi structured interview was made with a primary school principal who was 41 years old, and married with two children at the time of the study. He had been the principal of that school for two years. The interviewee has 17 years of science teaching experience in the profession. He is presently a school principal in another primary school which is located in Samsun city of Turkey.

Procedure

There are several ways of gathering information for a qualitative research. Yet, qualitative interviews are the most preferred way of obtaining data. Accordingly, in the current study, semi-structured interview format was chosen. The interview was held in the principal's office during the lunch break of the school. It took approximately an hour to go over all of the questions in the form. The participation was voluntary. The interview was recorded by a voice recorder with the permission of the participant as stated by Angelides and Ainscow (2000).

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was adopted throughout the study. In descriptive analysis, data can be summarized and interpreted in relation to the themes determined before data collection process (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Data can be organized both concerning the interview questions and concerning the questions used in the interview and observation processes. In descriptive analysis,

direct quotations are generally included in the study in order to get attention of the reader to the striking and spectacular opinions of the participants. In addition, in such studies it is also important to identify the data in a systematic and clear way. Afterwards, these descriptions and identifications are explained and interpreted, and the cause and effect relations are examined, eventually some certain conclusions are made based on the data (Elliott & Timulak, 2005; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013, p. 256).

3. Results and Discussion

The interview and the related discussion concerning the participant's replies are presented below sequentially.

Q1: What are the challenges of being a school administrator as?

> "Educational leadership today is a challenging profession. It requires high level of communication in all processes at your school. You have to be a good communicator. And, you should not seek to be assigned as a school principal if you are not prepared to take on a stressful and demanding position. You are also required to work long hours and in the summertime, and deal with teachers, the staff, students and parents. Managing the teachers at your school is most probably the most difficult task for a school principal, because if there is no teamwork, then things cannot be accomplished."

One of the best known realities of school administration is its challenging and demanding characteristic. Here, he mentions about his position and the way he perceives his profession. Based on his statements, we can say that a powerful and long-term commitment is required to bring about substantial and enduring gains in the performance of both the teachers and the students (Benwari & Dambo, 2014; Cheng, Li, Love, & Irani, 2004; Harter, 2015; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2009). And he highlights the importance of teamwork in determining common organizational goals, and achieving them as stated by Baker, Day and Salas (2006). Accordingly, a study in UK context revealed that the key challenges were 'lack of time', 'supporting failing member of staff', 'personnel management', 'staff morale' and 'homework policy' mostly (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000).

The following second and third replies were evaluated together by the researcher.

Q2: What type of administrator do you see yourself as?

> "I can define myself as a democratic principal. I hope that I am not perceived as a classical administrator; I mean to be perceived as an authoritarian administrator by the teaching staff. I do not thrive on the power I have over the staff as the school principal. I encourage my teachers to voice their reasonable opinions all the time in meetings, and seek recommendations from them. Also, I am quite understanding towards my staff, but always hold everyone to the same standards. I often interact with the parents of our students and inform them about all of the school activities and wish them to have their input on their child's school. Actually, I wish to create a family like atmosphere in the school."

Q3: Could you briefly summarize your approach to administration?

> "I have always exhibited an attitude of understanding towards my teaching staff and the students. I have been careful to treat and respect everyone equally. In this regard, I guess I have been a democratic principal. In addition, I show great interest in efforts of my staff and students, and try to motivate them as far as I can. As the school principal, I do not try to establish superiority on the teachers working in our school, and approach them more as a friend."

As he stated, he is a democratic leader who listens to and uses his subordinates' ideas. He claims that he has some of the traits and skills associated with successful leaders such as being alert to social environment and neighborhood, assertiveness, cooperative, willing to assume responsibility, diplomatic and tactful, organized and having high activity level (Yukl, 1989; Zaccaro, Kemp & Bader, 2004). Yet, a study which was conducted with thirty-two heads of department in Birmingham and

Manchester indicated that they mostly adopted distributed leadership style in school improvement, nonetheless they appeared to use shared power leadership rherorically rather than practically that points to the failure in delegation of tasks. If applied thoroughly, distributed leadership has appeared to meet the contemporary needs arouse in school administration like sustaining accountability, work intensification and role differentiation (Hallinger & Heck, 2011, p. 12).

In addition, it is obvious that he takes advantage of his personality traits and leadership skills in getting close with people -the teachers, the staff, students, and the parents- and gaining sympathy of the community. Besides, these personality traits like being knowledgeable about group dynamics appear to fit best the demands of a rural principal to deal with essentials and to interact with the parents and the neighborhood in a collaborative, decisive, and ambitious way (Zaccaro, Mumford, Connelly, Marks, Gilbert & Threlfall, 2000).

Q4: What kind of skills and knowledge required to be a school administrator do you think?

> "Obtaining a bachelor's degree is the first requirement to become a school principal. There is also a particular teaching experience required to be assigned as a principal. Of course, you should be successful in the school administration entrance examination. Moving from being a teacher to the administration is a highly demanding situation. Principals should also need to keep up to date with the practices of education system and develop goals accordingly so that they know where they reach goals and where they fall short."

The behavioral approach to leadership is relevant to his approach. In Iowa studies leadership was classified into three types according to leader's style of handling decision-making situations. Democratic leaders encourage group discussion and decision making and subordinates to express their ideas and make suggestions (Choi, 2007; Foels, Driskell, Mullen, & Salas, 2000; Gastil, 1994). In Ohio studies his style accounts for moderate level of initiating structure as it refers to the extent to which a leader focuses on goals, tasks and works. For Michigan state leadership studies, his leader behavior can be identified as production-centered owing to his emphasis on achieving the goals or increasing the test scores of students. Correspondingly, Hess and Kelly (2007) reported seven themes being deemed as school principals' responsibilities, namely, managing for results, managing personnel, technical knowledge, external leadership, norms and values, managing classroom instruction, and leadership and school culture, which seemed to be in line with the expressions of the current study's participant.

Q5: Could you briefly describe the organizational culture at your school?

> "We wish to create a family like atmosphere in our school. I always trigger the interaction among students, teachers, parents, and the neighborhood. But, state schools have a common structure that is born from common state schools across the country. For example, there are rules set in place for the clothing in the school setting, the pageantry regulations, even for the use of electronic devices. Anyhow, we try to create a collaborative and free environment for our students."

This school has a family culture according to Steinhoff and Owens' (1989) culture phenotypes likely to be found in public schools. The school as family is nurturing and friendly, often cooperative and protective (Lunenburg, 2011a; Maslowski, 2001). However, Angelides and Ainscow's (2000) study results indicated that older teachers tended to use power of influence to become dominant and to maintain their dominance toward school administration which points to a non-cooperative school culture.

Q6: What do you do to motivate the teachers at your school?

> "Well, it is important to show your appreciation as the school principal to the teaching staff. I occasionally go in to the teacher's room and am a part of their conversation by spending time among them. I discuss situations and events at our school, or in our neighborhood. By doing this, I make myself available to the teachers especially the ones graduated and started teaching newly. I also pay attention to publicly announce and offer the names of the teachers who try hard to prepare

or help organize the presentations we make on October 29 The Republic Day, April 23 The National Sovereignty and Children's Day, and May 19 The Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day and who increase test scores of students in central performance exams to our local directorate of national education for monetary and salary awards."

Expectancy theory of motivation is relevant to explain Mr. Yılmaz's style in motivating the teaching staff (Lawler & Suttle, 1973; Lunenburg, 2011b). He simply creates expectations for his staff, and the staff knows that if they behave in a particular way or contribute to the school's success or reputation, then they expect to be offered to the local directorate for some kind of legal awards of the state. In this regard, teachers' every attempt to success is appreciated by the school administration. In addition, as decentralization has been a trend in educational systems in line with the recent changes in institutional environment, internal and external performance evaluation and feedback sytems may also support highly-effective teaching staff in terms of motivation and teaching quality (Verhaeghe, Vanhoof, Valcke, & Van Petegem, 2010).

Q7: How do you make decisions at your school?

"We make decisions formally in our school board meetings with our teaching staff. We must act within the legal boundaries of the state, particularly the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). Anyhow, I usually consider the well-being of all those who would be affected by the decision. For example, you may have an idea to expand the schoolyard or change the school corridors in a radical way. We think long and hard the impact of such change on the students, the staff and the neighborhood. It is easy to be manipulated by political pressure; I mean the pressure of local directorate for national education. But, of course I and our teachers mostly keep the interests of our students as the criterion in our decision-making process."

Although the formal structure of the MoNE causes to lean the classical decision-making model in public schools, Mr. Yılmaz claims that he allows the teachers involve in the decision-making process and appreciates their contributions in the process. In this respect, it is evident that he prompts shared decision-making to solve school problems, reflect on planning and curricular activities. MacGilchrist and Mortimore (1997) also draw attention to the importance of school development plans and their constructive potential to elicit the influence on meeting educational, financial and human resource needs of the schools. By doing this, administrators may contribute to morale and job satisfaction of the teaching staff monitoring their needs closely (Bamidele & Ella, 2013; Muindi, 2011; Nielsen & Randall, 2012; Şahin, 2013; Zubair, Bashir, Abrar, Baig, & Hassan, 2015). Additionally, Robertson and Briggs (1998) reported that better decision-making help schools carry out required strategic changes and promote effective school culture, as well. However, Angelides and Ainscow (2000) reported that older teachers seemed to dominate decision-making in school and overall school environment, and appeared to disagree with the change proposals of younger teachers. On the contrary, identifying in-service priorities was stated to be taken as development plans' focus in decision making and planning processes (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000).

The following eighth, ninth, and tenth replies were evaluated together by the interviewer.

Q8: How would you describe the communication process at your school?

"I generally allow for open communication between parents, teachers and students. We also have an anonymous suggestion box in the school where teachers and parents can express questions, comments or concerns. As the school principal, I pay attention to make sure that everyone's voices are heard, including my own."

Q9: How would you summarize your school communication with parents?

"I openly communicate with the parents, encouraging them to try to help their child at home. They should discover their roles in the school and in their children's education. We are also aware that the parents are the most effective representatives to the community, regarding the reputation of the school."

Q10: What is your communication like with the staff at your school?

> "I get the ideas, thoughts and suggestions of our teachers on everything about our school. I am open to communication all the time. I am especially helpful to the novice teachers in our school. They can call me any time of day they need. In my opinion, all the ideas and suggestions about the school are worth listening to."

As the principal expressed, communication occupies a central place in public schools as Katz and Kahn (1978) asserted communication is the essence of organizations. In hierarchical systems like our example, the direction of communication tends to be downward, in which people at higher levels of organization convey messages to people at lower levels (Dewan, Seidmann & Sundaresan, 1997). So, administrative personnel in state schools, especially the school principals transmit information or various directives from above to his subordinates in a downward communication flow. But, Mr. Yılmaz says, "I am open to communication all the time, and pay attention to everyone's ideas… We also have an anonymous suggestion box in the school where teachers and parents can express questions, comments or concerns." He tries to provide people opportunities for upward communication which is necessary to provide administrators with feedback on downward communication, and deal with problem areas quickly. He also aims to facilitate upward communication between himself and the teachers at his school with an open door policy. Correspondingly, Brown *et al.* (2000) focused on having close links with parents, and keeping parents well-informed for success in parental contribution. Sanders (2016) also measured the participation of parents and family membership in parent-teacher organizations in terms of schools' effectiveness, and presented evidence regarding highly-effective community schools.

The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) is a highly centralized organization, then the flow of communication is downward and it has a chain like communication network. Information is generally sent through in such a network in a relay fashion.

Q11: What are your goals and principles as a school principal?

> "I think that school principals should set both short-term and long-term goals for their schools, and then compare themselves with other schools in the district and national standards. Higher test scores of the students, increased participation in extracurricular activities and fewer instances of disruptive student behavior are our main goals. I believe it is my main imperative that all the staff and the students should be of the same value in the eyes of the school administration. In addition, to me, your community must feel that you are approachable. And, I always respect the dignity of my staff."

Here, he again stresses his participative leadership approach which is seen as an effective vehicle for achieving organizational goals, increased subordinate job satisfaction, and democratic community (Belias & Koustelios, 2014; Bell & Mjoli, 2014; Bogdanić, 2012; Kim, 2002; Malik, 2013). From this standpoint, we can infer that he is aware of the present national education process in state schools, and tries to change and transform the organization with the help of all of the people influenced or to be influenced by these changes.

Q12: What would you like to suggest to the entering school administrators?

> "I think the principal of a primary school must keep the atmosphere positive. Teachers who work in the same school come from varying levels of experience. So, the principals must find ways to get along and work together, even if they have conflicting teaching methods, educational backgrounds, political views, personal values or religious beliefs. Moreover, they – the principals- have to set goals on a yearly basis, and during the whole academic year students, the teachers, the staff, and parents should do their best to achieve these goals together."

As a principal, he gives importance to creating a collaborative, cooperative, facilitating, and positive atmosphere by raising a sense of togetherness in each member of that community. In his view, school

administrators' biggest duty is to help all personnel and students fulfill their potential by learning and developing effective interpersonal communication skills.

4. Conclusion

The results of the analyses conducted within the current study has revealed that the main characteristics of an effective school principal as an educational leader are listening to his subordinates' ideas, being alert to social environment, being willing to take responsibility, being diplomatic and tactful, and being organized and having high activity level (Gürbüz, Erdem & Yıldırım, 2013). Gaining sympathy of the community is also important as to get closer with people around and activate group dynamics. It is apparent that the case investigated in the present study has consistent entities and implementations in school administration with Lezotte's (2009) approach such as establishing clear and focused mission, maintaining positive home-school relations, and creating climate of high expectations in school. In addition, creating favourable internal management was valid for the case analzed (Grauwe & Varghese, 2000).

Being production-centered regarding increasing school and student performance in central performance tests and having substantial success in reaching schools' goals in every aspect are considered key skills to be a school administrator. Further, involving teachers in decision-making and appreciating their contributions in administrative processes seem to contribute to morale and job satisfaction of the teaching staff. Therefore, the participant appeared to monitor students' progress frequently (Lezotte, 2009, p. 3, cited as Zufiaurre & Wilkinson, 2014), and focus on outcomes and equity (Grauwe & Varghese, 2000, p. 6). In conclusion, participative leadership, seeking subordinates' multidimensional satisfaction, and focusing on students' needs are deemed necessary and compatible in approaching school administration in a collaborative, cooperative and decisive way.

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