Editor's Choice: Selected Keynote Speech

Transformational Leadership in Educational Context: A Fantasy of Education Scholars*

Hasan ŞİMŞEK*

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Education is a global concern. The post-industrial society demand different skills and mind-set from their citizens. Transforming technologies bring new possibilities whereas education is still a highly low-tech sector. Current global economic crisis and political instabilities bring new problems to educational systems. These challenges also call for new solutions from educational systems.

These deep transformations reassure the importance of leadership in educational organizations. Simply stated, those organizations that would renew themselves will survive and prosper whereas the ones which hold tightly on the traditional ways of thinking and of doing things will be the casualties of this deep transformation. As a number of emerging conditions force organizations to renew themselves, we also need to change our traditional ways of thinking about organizations. No doubt, leadership has an important role in creating and maintaining this transformation.

Traditionally, we have tended to view leadership as if it is an entirely unique substance within itself. When the leadership concept is isolated from the context in which it functions, this legitimizes the types of approaches that deal with individual traits or behaviors that make an individual a leader. The implicit assumption behind this perspective is the one that sees leadership as a capacity. Some saw the origin of this built-in capacity as a set of inherited characteristics from the birth. Some others, on the other hand, approached the origin of this capacity from a behaviorist theme, and argued that through a careful study of individual and behavioral qualities of effective leaders, we could raise effective leaders through the processes of training and behavioral modification strategies.

This line of inquiry in leadership studies has long been practiced under different labels such as leadership in relation to interaction patterns or role relationships with the followers, leadership in relation to the follower or the follower perceptions. With the advancement of more recent approaches to leadership such as transformation, culture and symbolic perspectives, we now tend to view leadership as a culture creation process or a process of symbolic interaction to create better functioning organizations.

For example, such questions have never been carefully dealt within the leadership studies: How are change and leadership interconnected in organizations? Is transformational leadership an always effective style of leadership? When do the organizations most demand transformational leadership? What are the organizational conditions that may call for a transactional style? What are the fundamental differences between transformational and transactional leaders in terms of their cognitive style?

Even more, how do we relate these questions to creating new educational systems and processes responding to the needs and demands of stakeholders of educational systems?

Proposition 1: There is a strong association between the mode of institutional change and the style of leadership: Incremental and adaptive mode of change requires maintenance or transactional leadership skills, whereas dramatic and discontinuous organizational change demand transformational leadership skills.

As widely proposed, organizational change involves two entirely different phases: evolutionary and revolutionary. The evolutionary phase is characterized by relative stability and adaptation. Usually there is a well established pattern of thought, perception and picture of reality as well as a set of tried and proved organizational strategies. All these reduce ambiguity and uncertainty. Under these circumstances, transactional or managerial skills of leaders fit well to the leadership demands of the organization, that is, the qualities of maintenance.

However, excesses in a number of strategic behaviors, changes in the environment, and misfit between the organization and the environment create anomalies that force the dominant mind-set into crisis. The crisis period breaks down the established order in organizations. The boundaries between the organization and the environment become permissive and a great deal of information flows in and out. The organization as system stabilizes in a non-equilibrium state.

The question at this point is whether or not educational systems in Turkey and elsewhere show the qualities of equilibrium or non-equilibrium state?

School organization itself and educational systems in general show "system" characteristics; that is, school and educational systems take "inputs" from the "external environment," they "process" these inputs through certain pre-established mechanisms and procedures, then they export the final product as "output" to the external environment. All this process is also used as "feedback" to the others. This is a symbiotic relationship. Both environment and system itself have capacity to change the "other." However, the rate and the timing of this change capacity are highly contextual. In the shorter time line, the external environment (economic structure, culture, values, religion, ideology, etc.) shows high probability of change over school

and educational systems. The schools' capacity of modifying social, cultural and ideological aspects of a society is rather a long term process. In this sense, school and educational systems play a "conservative" role in this relationship. So to say, "school mirrors the society."

For example, structural-functionalists who have a long legacy in the field of sociology define school and educational systems as a functional part of larger socio-economic apparatus. Society as a larger system desires to protect itself through a slow change process by keeping the parts and internal processes intact. Radical change is not a desired mode of change since it involves surprises and ambiguity, no matter how small the change is. School and educational organizations in this system are expected to behave as an integral part of this slowly evolving system. Primary function of the school system is to protect the society! For the structural functionalists, schools do serve two primary functions in relation to the larger external environment: First, school is an agent of social and political "socialization." Second, the primary function of school is to train manpower required to improve and sustain economic growth (Scimecca, 1980, s. 7-9).

One of the greatest names in the field of sociology, Henry Levin, used the "principle of correspondence" in explaining this relationship:

> "...schools, rather than changing the society, are always used to reproduce the existing society. This means, educational reforms cannot be used to change social, economic and political relationships. These reform initiatives have always lost as soon as they have started threatening the "dominant ideology" (Levin, 1974, s. 304).

On the other hand, the second theoretical line of inquiry in the field of economy, education and sociology; the radical theory, also admits the "protector" role of school and education systems, of course, with quite different reasons. Being an extent of Marxist methodology, the Radical theorists accept school and educational systems as part of a "superstructure," that corresponds to the dominating socio-economic class, which is the bourgeoisie class. The proponents of the Radical theory assert that, interestingly very similarly to Henry Levin's assertion, modern school and educational systems "reproduce" existing society with its unequal economic and social structure. A great Radical economist Samuel Bowles argues that schools and educational systems in general in the modern capitalist societies are the tools of teaching young generations the required economic and social skills to function in a capitalist economy as well as being the operative agents of "political indoctrination."

If these two opposing traditions in social sciences provide as a glimpse of truth, schools and education systems in modern societies play a secondary role with respect to change or a role of "dependent variable" in the complex relation of school and society. If important reforms to initiate from the school system in order to change the larger socio-economic structure, then what type of leadership potential we are supposed to expect from the educators. We must have all the reasons to look very suspiciously at any arguments of exercise or evidence of "transformational leadership" in the field of education! With this evidence at hand, we should always be careful to detect the signs of reform or radical transformations coming to the school or educational system from "outside," not the vice versa!

Proposition 2: Transformational leaders are both norm-breakers and norm-setters, whereas the transactional leaders are good practitioners and developers within the already set norms.

Transformational leaders focus on building and strengthening new organizational norms and attitudes. They mainly engage in the creation and the establishment of new common "meaning systems." This type of leadership makes major changes in the mission, structure and human resources management of the organization. They suggest fundamental changes in the organization's political and cultural systems.

It is mostly proposed that a transformational leader is highly normative in cognitive style. By this, they become the most important catalyst in the construction of a new man-made or "enacted reality" for the members of their organization. In this sense, transformational leaders are *norm-setters*. On the other hand, transformational leaders are *norm-breakers*, as well. Drastic institutional change or transformation becomes an opportunity for organizations to learn new things. By being a catalyst in the creation of a new enacted reality during this transformation, transformational leaders also teach their organizations to unlearn habitual, traditional and customary ways of doing and seeing things.

By contrast, transactional leadership maintains the organization but is incapable of generating significant change. Under existing organizational culture, the concerns of transactional leaders are the things to be carried out and the goals to be attained.

The question here is whether or not educational leaders are supposed to be norm-breakers and norm-setters, and what are the embedded norms in our educational systems that need to be transformed?

As cultural artifacts, norms represent observable aspects of, first, beliefs; than values in organizations. Beliefs and values define how an organization as an entity sees the world. That is, what is the nature of men, good or evil? Where the truth comes from, an outside source; God, elderly, boss; or from inside by the contribution of humans involved? Why we act the way we act; is it because of our innate and unchangeable nature or because of the way we constructed it as involved humans with free will?

Norms represent behavioral regularities that make organizations as well as life orderly. They are the unwritten rules, a code of conduct among us, no matter how much we know or how close to each other. They are distilled from embedded beliefs and values in a system.

Modern school and educational systems are locked by two realities: On the one hand and as I explained under the previous heading, educational systems and schools are expected to be the agents of "socialization" that involves economic, social and political attitudes and skills. It is clear that even the modern school and educational systems are universally given the task of "guardianing" the society! On the other hand, school and educational systems are expected to educate "creative, innovative" individuals who can change their closer environment and society. When we consider the deep and historical imprints of social, economic and political "socialization" role of schools, we have good reasons to believe that "innovative and creative" individuals are expected to be important only in the economic domain.

They may simply become "political and social dissidents" if their "creative and innovative" character exceeds the boundaries of economic utilitarianism. Of course, no educational system *is designed* to produce economic and social dissidents!

Educational and school systems in the world are the most "regularized" ones. Since the time of Adam Smith, the best economic model is free market economy for economic liberals. The new liberalism which has revolutionized social, economic, political and cultural spheres of modern societies since the 1980s has had the weakest impact on education and school systems. In the eyes of many, education is a public good. Interestingly, public education is still the largest sector in many parts of the world. A public good must be "common," "accessible," "conservative," "normal," and "pedagogically acceptable." As the "institutional theory" teaches us, educational systems in the world are getting similar to each other because of instant diffusion of theories, norms, techniques, rules, and methods.

Is there a room for the possibility of a transformational or radical change in this picture? How relevant is it to expect the act of transformational leadership by public and private school principals and educational managers around the world? Could it be somewhat irrelevant to apply such management models, concepts, theories and applications to school and educational systems? Don't we need to revise or modify these management theories and models to make them meaningful in a specific context such as schools in specific and education system in general?

Proposition 3: Transformational leaders deal with an ambiguous and uncertain world, whereas the tasks of transactional leaders are eased by the boundary set by the transformational leaders.

As very well stated in the leadership literature, the fundamental task of the transformational leaders is future oriented. The desired future direction of history, what we call the "vision" thing, is essentially an ambiguous and uncertain initiative. It is taking risks, gambling with the extraordinary, the unusual, and the new. In this sense, transformational leaders function in an extremely chaotic environment.

Transactional leaders, on the other hand, best function during the period of equilibrium or evolution where there are clear-cut and commonly agreed norms and rules to run the organization. Change is incremental and adaptive, and the level of ambiguity and uncertainty is low. This may explain why transactional leaders engage more in pragmatic adjustments. While transformational leaders initiate new organizational culture, transactional leaders accept it as it is. They maintain the organization by getting the daily routines done. They explain the role and task requirements for their employees and provide contingent reinforcement to influence their performance, to attain desired outcomes. Clearly, this is a less ambiguous and uncertain task compared to the task of transformational leader.

The question here is whether or not transformational leadership is a viable alternative in initiating and securing change in education? To answer this, we need to clarify where the ambiguity is located in relation to education? Is it the ambiguity that resides in the educational system per se, or is it a reflection of an ambiguous situation or crisis of the larger system, that is, larger socio-economic and political order?

We may address this question at two levels: The schools as single organizations that could be seen as micro level of the educational system, and the educational

systems as macro level large structures. At the micro level, as I have discussed in the previous part, life in schools is highly regulated and structured. There are deeply embedded routines and traditions in every school's daily operations. Interestingly, these are carefully observed by all important stakeholders of schools such as parents and educational authorities who supervise the system. There are also normative pedagogic principles that run across all levels of educational fields as well as shaping the mindset of involved stakeholders. This is why, basic educational reforms come from outside. Moreover, radical transformations in the larger socio-political system have always been the primary source of radical paradigm shifts in schools and education systems. Social, economic and political revolutions throughout the history have always been the moments of reform and radical change in the structure and organization of education.

I need to conclude this talk by underlining four things:

First, pure managerial models may not serve our needs of understanding the deep structures and processes of change in education and schools.

Second, dependent and independent structures need to be treated differently in relation to change and transformation: Dependent structures such as education and school system cannot transform itself; rather they are open to externally imposed change and transformation.

Third, because of the nature of schools and education as I have tried to elaborate here as well as considering the organic culture of schools, "transactional leadership" may be the right terminology to be used in school settings. The reason is simple if we know what transactional leadership is about? As Bass and Burns explained; rules, procedures and standards are essential in transactional leadership. Followers are not encouraged to be creative or to find new solutions to problems. Research has found that transactional leadership tends to be most effective in situations where problems are simple and clearly-defined. Don't you think that all these very well describe our working conditions and culture in schools?

Finally, any national and international evidence of educational and school-related reform and change that are presumed to be the result of transformational or visionary leadership initiatives of educational leaders need to be treated suspiciously.

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