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Transformational Leadership at Times of Crisis: The Case of School Leaders in Greece

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Abstract: The paper aims to investigate the extent to which school leaders adopt transformational leadership behaviors at times of crisis. The emphasis on restructuring in the educational policy environment in recent decades has led to an increased interest in transformational leadership in education, resulting in a large number of studies. In order to investigate the adoption of transformational leadership behaviors/practices at times of crisis, qualitative research was conducted with 30 primary school teachers in Greece. The schools were selected based on the extent to which they had been affected by the financial crisis. Greece has faced major challenges in the last ten years, including the financial crisis and the influx of immigrants. These changes have had a profound effect on the Greek educational system. In this context, the paper examines the extent to which school leaders in Greece adopt transformational leadership practices in order to deal with the impact of the crisis on their school unit. The findings of the research are used to draw conclusions and implications regarding educational policy as well as future research on the topic.

Keywords: *Transformational leadership, schools, crisis, Greece.*

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Introduction

Transformational leadership is considered to be a prominent and influential model in the field of educational administration (Berkovich, 2016). The origin of the theory is commonly linked to Burns' (1978) work on political leaders. Burns (1978) drew a distinction between two forms of leadership: On the one hand, transactional leadership is based on an exchange relationship between leader and follower. The follower offers compliance to the leader and receives specific rewards in return. On the other hand, transformational leaders interact with followers in ways that enhance creativity and motivation in the organization (Burns, 1978). Unlike transactional leadership, transformational leadership does not seek to maintain the status quo but provides a stimulus for change and innovation instead (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Burns' work provided the fundamental conceptual framework for the work of Bass (1985). Burns' model was further developed by Bass and Avolio (1994), who put forward a model of transformational leadership through the investigation of the behavior of leaders in both public and private organizations.

Research on transformational leadership has attempted to examine the effect of transformational leadership behaviors and practices on educational outcomes. In general, research findings point to a positive association between transformational leadership behaviors and practices, on the one hand, and educational outcomes, on the other (Eyal & Roth, 2010; Griffith, 2004; Koh et al., 1995; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). These outcomes include both student and teacher related variables (e.g. student achievement, teacher job satisfaction, teacher commitment to the profession etc.). However, in many cases the effect of transformational leadership on educational outcomes is indirect. This is especially the case with student achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Menon, 2014).

The financial crisis has had a long and lasting effect on many countries and educational systems (Jones, 2014). Moreover, the educational systems of several countries have been affected by political and economic developments, which have resulted in unprecedented changes in the organization and functioning of the school units. The influx of large numbers of immigrants in European countries is an example of a change that has had an impact on the school unit

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and the educational system as a whole. The COVID-19 crisis is the most recent example of a crisis that has had a tremendous effect on the operation of school units, with influence on a wide spectrum of variables ranging from teaching and learning methods to leadership practices and actions.

Greece is a southern European country, which has been affected to a great extent by the financial crisis and the European migrant crisis (Zambeta, 2014). In this context, the paper investigates the extent to which school leaders adopt transformational leadership behaviors at times of crisis. Given the emphasis of transformational leadership on change and restructuring, it is reasonable to expect that school leaders will use transformational leadership practices and behaviors at times of crisis. However, the extent to which school leaders exhibit transformational leadership behaviors at times of crisis has not been adequately addressed in the literature. This represents a shortcoming of existing research in that transformational leadership is likely to be more important at times when school teachers face major challenges and struggle to cope with new realities at the school unit. Bass (1985) has suggested that transformational leadership is more dominant at times of organizational change.

In order to investigate the adoption of transformational leadership behaviors at times of crisis, a research study was conducted at primary schools in Greece, which had been affected by the financial crisis. Specifically, the study sought to examine the extent to which school leaders exhibited behaviors that could be linked to the components of transformational leadership as described in the model proposed by Bass and Avolio (1994). The schools were selected based on the extent to which they had been affected by the financial crisis. The qualitative nature of the study enabled participants to describe and discuss the behaviors of the school leaders and to give examples of specific actions. Thus, the study provides evidence on the degree to which school leaders act in ways that are consistent with transformational leadership theory at times of crisis.

Literature Review

Transformational Leadership: The Theory

Bass and his colleagues consider transactional and transformational forms of leadership to be separate but interdependent (Avolio et al., 1999; Bass, 1985). This conceptualization differs from that of Burns (1978), who considered transactional and transformational leadership to be opposite extremes on a continuum and in effect, mutually exclusive. Thus, in the model proposed by Bass, transformational forms of leadership can be combined with transactional forms, resulting in better outcomes for followers in terms of motivation and performance.

In the model proposed by Bass and his colleagues, the following five factors constitute the main components or dimensions of transformational leadership behavior:

1. Attributed idealized influence is the degree to which followers perceive leaders as trustworthy and charismatic. Followers consider leaders to be individuals with a clear and attainable mission and a vision.
2. Idealized influence as behavior is actual leader behavior, which is associated with the possession of values and a sense of purpose. Idealized influence enables followers to identify with leaders and to follow their example.
3. Inspirational motivation is also linked to the behavior of the leader. In this case, leaders inspire followers by providing them with meaning and challenge. In order to enhance the motivation of followers, leaders project hope and optimism for the future. This, in turn allows for commitment to a shared vision.
4. Intellectual stimulation takes place when leaders encourage followers to be creative and innovative in the organization. Followers are expected to be critical in relation to existing assumptions and traditions. This also applies to leaders so that both leaders and followers are open to a re-examination of their own beliefs and perspectives.
5. Individualized consideration refers to a case where leaders focus on individual needs and relate to followers on a one-to-one basis. Through one-to-one interaction, followers are encouraged to achieve personal goals and pursue their own development.

Research on transformational leadership in business and educational settings has enriched and/or expanded the original conceptualization of Burns (1978) and Bass (1985). It is important to note that Leithwood and his colleagues have proposed alternative conceptions of transformational leadership based on their research in Canada since the late 1980s and early 1990s. This model of transformational leadership includes the following three main categories of leadership practices: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization (see, for example, Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). These, in turn, include nine dimensions of practice, which can be further subdivided into more specific practices linked to the context of the leader's work.

Several attempts have been made to investigate the nature and effects of transformational leadership in many countries. The instrument used in most studies is the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which was developed by Avolio and Bass (2004) to measure leadership style. The MLQ is based on three leadership constructs (transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership). Thus, the MLQ measures three constructs, which constitute the full range model of leadership as proposed by Avolio and Bass (2004). These

constructs are further subdivided into additional dimensions of leadership, resulting in a nine-factor model (Antonakis et al., 2003). Since its introduction, the questionnaire has been considerably revised, partly to address criticisms of early versions.

Transformational Leadership and Educational Outcomes

Research on transformational leadership has attempted to examine the effect of transformational leadership behaviors and practices on educational outcomes. These outcomes include student achievement as well as teacher-related variables such as job satisfaction and professional commitment. In the literature on transformational leadership, we generally find the assumption that transformational behaviors and practices are sufficient for positive educational outcomes (Kwan, 2020).

Koh et al. (1995) investigated the effects of transformational leadership on teacher attitudes and student performance in Singapore. Data were collected from school teachers and principals using instruments such as the MLQ. In comparison to transactional leadership, transformational leadership was found to be associated with additional positive effects in predicting organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior and teacher satisfaction. Indirect effects of transformational leadership on student academic achievement were reported in this study.

In Canada, Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) found transformational leadership to have strong positive effects on organizational conditions (school and classroom conditions). School conditions included variables such as school planning and organizational culture, while classroom conditions referred to instructional services, and policies and procedures. The effects of transformational leadership on student engagement in school were significant but weak on the affective and behavioral dimensions of student engagement. The early work of Leithwood and Jantzi (1997, 1999) pointed to the significance of teacher perceptions and to the fact that the important dimension of leadership for teachers did not relate to the characteristics of the school leader (such as age and gender) but to the leaders' actions and the perceived effects of these actions.

In a US study of the relation of transformational leadership to school staff job satisfaction, turnover and school performance, Griffith (2004) reported no direct association between principal transformational leadership and school staff turnover or student achievement progress. Two indirect effects (through job satisfaction) were identified, one being negative in relation to staff turnover and the other positive in relation to student achievement progress. In schools with higher levels of transformational leadership practices, the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students was found to be smaller. In the same country, a study of the leadership behaviors of school leaders in inclusive educational settings, found that teachers were more motivated under leaders they perceived as more transformational rather than transactional (Ingram, 1997).

In a study of Dutch schools, Femke et al. (1999) reported that high innovation schools were more likely to be led by transformational leaders when compared to low innovation schools. Another study in the Netherlands found a positive association between transformational leadership and the schools' innovative climate (Moolenaar et al., 2010). In England, Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) examined the effects of a transformational leadership model on teacher variables, classroom practices and student achievement. Leadership, along with the three teacher variables, explained about 25% to 35% in teachers' classroom practices.

In a study conducted in Cyprus, perceived leader effectiveness and teachers' job satisfaction were found to be significantly linked to transformational leadership (Menon, 2014). In this study, the context appeared to play a role in the link between transformational leadership and teacher-related variables. The importance of the context was also highlighted in a study of transformational leadership in Chinese urban upper secondary schools (Liu, 2015). The study found a significant contribution of transformational leadership to teachers' commitment to change.

The link between an integrated form of transformational leadership (in combination with instructional leadership) was explored in a study by Boberg and Bourgeois (2016). Even though the authors found no evidence of a direct link between leadership and student outcomes, they reported that school leaders can have an impact on student emotional engagement and achievement. The combination of transformational and instructional leadership was found to be necessary for effective educational outcomes in a large-scale national study by Day et al. (2016).

In Israel, Berkovich and Eyal (2017) found that transformational leadership behaviors at the school unit had an effect on two teacher work-related outcomes, namely, autonomous motivation and affective organizational commitment. Emotional reframing was found to either fully or partly mediate this relationship.

The available research on the effects of transformational leadership suggests that it is more likely to have a direct impact on organizational processes associated with employee practices, motivation and satisfaction, which in turn are linked to the quality of the service offered and the performance of the organization. In several studies, indirect effects on student outcomes have been identified (see, for example, Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

The findings on the effects of transformational leadership appear to support earlier research on the effects of leadership on outcomes, which finds such effects to be indirect through actions that school leaders take to influence the school and the classrooms (see, for example, Hallinger, 2003). Thus, the nature of the relationship between leadership

and educational outcomes makes it necessary to identify those intervening variables that are likely to have a direct impact on students (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999).

It is important to note that despite its dominance in the field of education, transformational leadership theory has been criticized on several grounds. Liu (2015) points to two main areas of criticism: The first relates to the belief that transformational leadership theory does not take into account organizational diversity and the second concerns the focus on one source of leadership. Berkovich (2016) provides an in-depth discussion of criticisms of transformational leadership theory, focusing on the following: a lack of a clear conceptual definition of transformational leadership; a conceptualization of transformational leadership which confounds leadership behavior with its effects; and the absence of causal models which describe the way in which transformational leadership affects outcomes. Additional criticisms relate to the measurement of transformational leadership and to specific instruments such as the MLQ (Menon, 2014). Moreover, the fact that transformational leadership may be necessary but not sufficient for school and/or instructional effectiveness has been highlighted in the literature (Kwan, 2020), resulting in a call for integrative approaches to leadership (Day et al., 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Methodology

Research Questions

The questions used in the interviews were formulated to meet the research objectives of the project. Thus, the main research questions of the study were as follows:

- Research Question 1: What are the main leadership behaviors and practices of the school leader in relation to the financial crisis and its consequences for the school unit?
- Research Question 2: What are the practices and initiatives of school leaders in relation to the dimensions of transformational leadership as described by Bass his colleagues, namely, attributed idealized influence, idealized influence as behavior, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration?
- Research Question 3: What are the main problems/factors that prevent the school leader from implementing practices and/or undertaking initiatives associated with transformational leadership at the school unit?

The three research questions provided the framework for the formulation of the interview protocol. An attempt was made to formulate the protocol in a way that would address all three questions to the greatest possible extent.

Participants

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 primary school teachers in Greece. The sample was selected through criterion sampling since the individuals included in the sample were chosen on the basis of whether their school had been affected by the financial crisis. Prior communication with school leaders provided evidence as to whether this was the case and the extent of the effect.

Of 30 respondents, 25 were female and five were male. This is consistent with the much higher representation of women in teaching posts in the country. Respondents' years of service at the specific school ranged from 1 to 22, in agreement with an attempt to include teachers with both limited and extensive experience at the participating school unit.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the school units and were audio recorded. The time of the interviews was agreed after prior contact with respondents. Ethical principles were adopted in the collection of data from respondents, both in relation to the protection of individual autonomy and the respect of privacy (Howe & Moses, 1999). Teachers were provided with information on the purpose of the research and were informed that they could choose not to participate in the interviews. Moreover, prior to the interview, the researcher provided an introduction, in which she highlighted the anonymity aspect of data collection.

The interview protocols provided the raw material for the analysis. The protocols were divided into text fragments. In relation to the first two research questions, keywords and themes were assigned to each text based on the conceptual framework (see, for example, Femke et al., 1999). Thus, in this case, we mainly followed a deductive approach to data analysis in that the raw data were generated deductively from transformational leadership theory and prior research (Boyatzis, 1998). In contrast to inductive analysis, deductive analysis is driven to a great extent by the theoretical interest of the researcher. As regards the third research question, an inductive approach was more appropriate in that the themes emerged from the raw data without a strong connection to a pre-existing theoretical point of reference.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the analytical approach, we adopted a six-phase process, similar to that proposed by Nowell et al. (2017). The main phases included in the analysis were the following: familiarization of the researcher with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, definition and naming of

themes, and report production. The effectiveness of the process was facilitated by two factors: the number of interviews conducted; and the pre-existing conceptual framework.

The quality of research findings is commonly judged on the basis of specific criteria. In the case of quantitative research, these criteria include validity (the degree to which the research truly measures what it is supposed to measure) and reliability (the consistency of results over time as shown through repeated measurements). In qualitative research, the concepts of reliability and validity have been redefined and approached in different ways as researchers have not come to an agreement regarding the relevance of these concepts in this type of research (Armstrong et al., 1997). In this context, the concept of trustworthiness has been proposed and refined as a parallel to the conventional criteria of validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the case of the present study, we attempted to achieve trustworthiness by taking into account the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba. Specifically, a second researcher with a similar theoretical background was asked to review the data and identify codes and themes. This proved to be very useful in the case of Research Question 3, which was not framed by the theoretical background. In adopting this methodological approach, we recognize that the collected data do not allow for the testing and generalization of the theory, which can be achieved through quantitative analysis of larger data sets.

Findings

In relation to Research Question 1, Respondents were asked to discuss the degree to which their school leaders adopted a positive stance towards change, which constitutes the very essence of transformational leadership. Overall, respondents highlighted a positive attitude on the part of the leader towards change.

Yes, he/she adopts a positive attitude towards change, encouraging teachers to develop a relationship of trust and support with the students whose families face financial difficulties. Moreover, he/she promotes the interaction of school and home so that the students develop a positive attitude towards the school and improve their performance.

(Female teacher, 4 years at the school)

Other respondents also referred to the attempt to collaborate with other stakeholders (parents, external bodies) in order to identify important problems and find solutions. As regards the arrival of immigrants, one respondent referred to the fact that the school leader organized meetings and discussions with the school staff to encourage them "to accept the new order of things and maintain a positive stance to the new visitors of our school." Another respondent referred to the school leader's fight against xenophobia based on the following three pillars: respect of differences, desire for social justice, and a democratic approach towards the solution of social issues and racist incidents.

In relation to specific behaviors/practices associated with leadership (Research Question 2), respondents were asked to discuss five behaviors/practices linked to transformational leadership in the literature (Bass & Avolio, 1994). In each case, they were asked to discuss the extent to which their school leader exhibited this behavior and to provide examples.

Most respondents expressed very positive views of their leaders, using adjectives such as "supportive", "creative", "fair", and "empowering". The adjectives used could be linked to the first dimension of the Bass and Avolio (1994) model of transformational leadership, namely, that of attributed idealized influence. Reference to the effectiveness of the leader was made in several cases, while many respondents highlighted the fact that the leader adopted a democratic style of leadership. When asked to provide examples of specific behaviors and practices, several respondents pointed to the fact that the school leader took specific initiatives in order to manage school resources more effectively and efficiently. In this context, reference was made to specific measures that were often decided at staff meetings, pointing to the adoption of more collaborative methods of decision making.

Through staff meetings, the school leader and the teaching staff decided the following: to donate certain school provisions to children in need; to limit educational visits and excursions to distant places because of the financial cost; to adopt a more sensitive stance towards students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

(Female teacher, 17 years at the school)

Other measures included the provision of free meals to students of low-socioeconomic background. In some cases, free meals were offered to the family of the students in need. One teacher mentioned that the school leader was particularly sensitive to the needs of immigrant students. Another teacher referred to the fact that the school leader had sought donations in order to cover the expenses of the school unit and finance certain activities. In addition to collaborative practices within the school unit, school leaders were often described as having effective collaborations with external agents and/or institutions including the municipality, the church and society as a whole.

An additional set of practices that emerged as important from the responses of participants were linked to the managerial and organizational skills of school leaders. Reference was made to the ability of the school leader to prioritize needs and set realistic short-term and long-term goals. Some respondents referred to the fact that the school leader took a pro-active stance in dealing with problems at the school unit.

Management is effective because in almost all cases, the right decisions are made at the right time and solutions are provided. She is pro-active because in many cases, she identifies issues that may result in confrontation and conflict, and deals with them in advance with a number of measures.

(Female teacher, 3 years at the school)

Sometimes we discuss issues and make decisions in advance, taking into account the possibility that we come across them in the future.

(Female teacher, 1 year at the school)

It is important to note that a small number of respondents made reference to the fact that their school leaders exhibited certain weaknesses in dealing with the financial crisis, the most important of which was the fact that they were overcome by stress.

The second behavior/practice concerned the degree to which the school leader referred to the importance of values, taking into account the moral implications of decisions made at the school unit. The importance of values is highlighted in the second I of the Bass and Avolio (1994) model, that of idealized influence as behavior. In general, respondents gave positive evaluations of school leaders even though they tended to provide fewer examples of this type of behavior/practice. Specific values mentioned by respondents included respect for differences, solidarity, and collegiality. In one case, the respondent noted that the school leader gave more emphasis to moral values, even when this meant that he/she had to put aside legal considerations.

She is a defendant of moral values and makes frequent reference to them during staff meetings and during her visits to classrooms.

(Male teacher, 15 years at the school)

All the decisions of the staff meetings and other discussions are based on the principle of equality among staff members as well as (among) children; consequently, these values are considered important in the functioning of the school.

(Female teacher, 5 years at the school)

The third behavior/practice was associated with inspirational motivation in that it concerned the degree to which the leader placed emphasis on the development of a shared vision regarding the future of the organization. As was previously the case, respondents highlighted the fact that their school leader involved them in decision making and promoted a culture of collaboration. According to one respondent, "the vision of the school was the product of a collective insight." The possibility of disagreement between the school leader's views and those of the teaching staff was noted by a respondent, who continued to say that in this case, the leader accepted the views of the majority. The behavior/practice adopted by the school leader was described as follows by one respondent.

He/she functions as a genuine individual and not as a controller, cultivating such relationships so that the staff can reach out to him/her when this is necessary. He/she promotes several shared and collegial activities and collaborations so that decisions are made unanimously by staff members.

(Female teacher, 6 years at the school)

The fourth behavior/practice was also linked to inspirational motivation, focusing on the extent to which the leader was enthusiastic about the future of the organization, exhibiting optimism and the certainty that goals would be achieved. Overall, respondents were positive, pointing to a systematic effort by the school leader to inspire and support teaching staff. One respondent referred to specific actions undertaken by the leader, which included teacher training, the improvement of teaching material, the use of technology and the organization of the school library. Moreover, reference was made to optimism and support in relation to both organizational goals and personal (teaching staff) objectives as well as to the creation of conditions that could allow the achievement of objectives. However, it is important to note that in relation to this dimension, several respondents referred to limitations or weaknesses, as seen below.

As regards the pedagogical objectives of the school unit, he is very optimistic that with the help of all colleagues, they will be achieved. As regards the goals of improving the infrastructure of the school, he does not exhibit any enthusiasm because there is uncertainty in relation to the financial future of the school.

(Female teacher, 5 years at the school)

Yes, he is optimistic in general. However, there are times when he changes his stance when major problems emerge.

(Male teacher, 18 years at the school)

In order to investigate the extent to which the school leader exhibited intellectual stimulation, respondents were asked whether their leader sought different perspectives in the solution of problems and encouraged them to do the same. As in previous cases, respondents gave positive evaluations even though in some cases they pointed to certain limitations in this area. The main limitation appears to be that some school leaders tended to focus on their own perspective, especially at the beginning of a meeting or discussion.

When we adopt a negative view, he/she helps us through a discussion to see the problem through a different perspective and uses arguments to persuade us to become positive.

(Female teacher, 17 years at the school)

In most cases, he/she seeks different perspectives in the solution of problems, paying great attention to the views of teachers who have something different to propose.

(Male teacher, 15 years at the school)

No, he presents his own point of view when a problem is discussed but he does allow the members of the staff to present their points of view so that different perspectives emerge.

(Female teacher, 6 years at the school)

The final dimension of transformational leadership, as proposed by Bass and Avolio (1994) is that of individualized consideration. Respondents were asked whether the school leader spent time with them on an individual basis and supported them effectively at this level. Moreover, they were asked to discuss the extent to which the leader helped them to develop their skills and competencies. Respondents were very positive, with one teacher stating that the main aim of school leadership was the emotional support of the teachers of the school. Another respondent said that she felt that the school was like a family and that the school leader was a valuable guide and collaborator who helped teachers develop their skills. The assignment of tasks and responsibilities suitable for each member was also mentioned as a good practice. Moreover, one respondent said that the school leader enabled her to develop her skills because he/she allowed her to "do things that are outside the curriculum." However, several respondents emphasized the fact that the school leader had time limitations, which prevented him/her from engaging in this practice effectively.

Yes, the school leader spends time on individual discussions with teachers so that he/she helps them solve the problems they may be facing in their work but he/she does this in order to find out more about their skills and assign to them the suitable role at the school (beyond their teaching duties).

(Female teacher, 6 years at the school)

Little time, as much as possible due to his/her management duties.

(Male teacher, 18 years at the school)

She tries and considers it her duty to do this, to the extent that the huge requirements of her job allow this.

(Female teacher, 15 years at the school)

In a final question (Research Question 3), respondents were asked to identify and discuss problems that had a negative impact on the ability of the school leader to adopt transformational leadership practices/behaviors. Several problems were identified which included heavy workload, difficulty of working with parents and other stakeholders, the lack of resources, the ethnically diverse student body, the lack of adequate administrative assistance and the bureaucratic nature of the educational system. One respondent pointed to the difficulty of combining teaching duties with administrative work, which limited the effectiveness of the school leader. The need for more school counsellors was also noted by respondents.

The biggest problem is the mentality and behavior of parents as well as bureaucracy.

(Female teacher, 10 years at the school)

Surely the legal framework of education does not allow the school leader to adopt these practices to a great extent.

(Male teacher, 15 years at the school)

Very few respondents reported no problems or limitations. In the rare cases that this was the case, respondents pointed to the fact that the experience and strong personality of the leader helped him/her overcome any limitations.

Discussion

The findings of the present study point to a positive evaluation of school leaders in Greece as regards the adoption of transformational leadership behaviors and practices at a time of crisis. Even though several limitations were noted, it appears that school leaders tended to adjust to the challenges of the crisis and become more engaged in the functioning

of the school unit. School leaders appeared to adopt more collaborative methods of decision making and to implement new approaches to the management of problems. These approaches included cost cuts as well as the adoption of a more sensitive stance towards students and families of low socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, the managerial and organizational skills and practices of school leaders in response to the crisis were highlighted by respondents. Respondents mentioned the ability of the school leader to set realistic goals and adopt a pro-active stance. The finding points to the relevance and importance of transformational leadership at times of crisis. In recent years, transformational leadership theory has been strongly criticized, with several researchers suggesting that transformational leadership practices are less important than instructional and/or other approaches to leadership, which include integrated models (Day et al., 2016; Kwan, 2020; Shatzer et al., 2014). However, the degree to which transformational leadership is effective and/or sufficient in education may depend on the context. Bush (2017) drew attention to the importance of the context when pointing out that leadership theory is conceptualized in Western countries and applied in non-Western countries, without prior consideration of contextual differences. In this study, we considered the context as an important factor that could apply to the situation at hand as opposed to geographical location. We thus sought to investigate the degree to which transformational leadership practices and behaviors were observed at a time of crisis. Our findings suggest that the context (as defined by the degree to which the leader is faced with a crisis situation) may play a role in the emergence and adoption of transformational leadership practices. It is reasonable to expect that leaders will tend to be more transformational at times when the followers lack motivation, inspiration and drive. In stable situations where teachers are motivated and driven, instructional leadership practices (or a combination of leadership approaches) may be more appropriate.

As regards the five dimensions of transformational leadership included in the Bass and Avolio (1994) model, respondents discussed each dimension separately, giving examples of how their school leader exhibited relevant behaviors/practices. Overall, there was a positive assessment of school leaders, with respondents discussing specific practices, which included the following: promotion of greater interaction between school and home as well as greater collaboration with stakeholders; the use of moral values as a framework for decisions and actions; the promotion of shared and collegial activities; the emphasis on teacher training and other initiatives in an attempt to motivate teachers; the encouragement of teachers to view problems through different perspectives; and the effort to support and, interact with, teachers on an individual basis. Of the five dimensions of transformational leadership, respondents were more likely to identify limitations and/or weaknesses in relation to inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. The limitations mainly related to the difficulty of managing scarce resources and the heavy workload that came with the leadership post. The problems that prevented school leaders from being transformational included the latter as well as problems of collaboration with stakeholders, the lack of adequate administrative assistance, and the bureaucratic nature of the Greek educational system. Respondents also pointed to the difficulty of managing schools with ethnically diverse student bodies. Difficulties such as the ones identified in the present study have been identified in several leadership studies, which point to the challenges and limitations that face leaders with heavy workloads, budget cuts, schools with student diversity, and stakeholder tensions (Dinham et al., 2018; Liou & Daly, 2018; Szeto et al., 2019; Tintoré et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings of the study point to an attempt of most school leaders to adopt transformational behaviors and practices at a time of crisis. This could serve as an indication that crisis situations “bring out the best” in leaders, who, in this case, did not appear to be overwhelmed by the mounting problems they faced at the school unit. Teachers appeared to appreciate transformational leadership practices and behaviors in that many pointed to the fact that their opinion was taken into account in decision making and they benefited from the support of their school leaders. However, the weaknesses reported in the areas of inspirational motivation and individualized consideration show that the leaders facing crisis situations are likely to be less effective in motivating and supporting staff than desired. Their heavy workload and the demands of the situation may prevent them from identifying and addressing the needs and problems of individual staff members, as stipulated in the transformational leadership model of Bass and Avolio (1994).

Conclusion

Very few studies have attempted to examine the influence of the context on transformational leadership behaviors and practices. Consequently, we know very little about whether transformational leadership behaviors and practices are more likely to manifest themselves in certain situations. Situations of crisis place heavy demands on school leaders, which may limit or enhance the degree to which they can adopt transformational leadership practices. In the present study, the evidence points to the latter in that Greek school teachers appeared to adopt transformational leadership behaviors and practices in order to deal with the effects of the financial crisis. This conclusion is based on the perceptions of teachers, which provides more reliable data as opposed to self-evaluations of the school leaders themselves. However, it must be noted that teachers pointed to weaknesses in relation to two dimensions of the transformational leadership model proposed by Bass and Avolio (1994). School leaders were less likely to exhibit behaviors and practices associated with individualized consideration and inspirational motivation.

In interpreting the findings of the present study, the limitations of the study must be borne in mind. First, the research conducted in the study was cross-sectional. It is thus impossible to know whether the same school leaders exhibited

transformational leadership behaviors to the same extent before the financial crisis. Second, the fact that the study is based on qualitative data means that the results cannot be generalized to the teacher population of Greece. It is possible that other school leaders faced with the same challenges in the same country respond in different ways and do not adopt transformational leadership behaviors and practices to the same extent. Nevertheless, our findings strongly suggest that crisis situations will not necessarily limit the ability of the (school) leader to undertake actions and initiatives, in accordance with the transformational leadership model. They also point to the importance of the (situational) context and suggest that teachers will feel more satisfied and empowered by leaders who act in accordance with the transformational leadership model at times of crisis.

Recommendations

The findings of the present study could serve as the basis for policy initiatives aiming at the adoption of transformational leadership practices and behaviors at the school unit. This is especially important at times of crisis when followers have greater needs and face greater problems. In situations of crisis, it is important for both leaders and followers to receive adequate support and training in an attempt to enhance the ability and skills of both to adopt transformational leadership behaviors and practices. For instance, important skills include the ability to engage others in decision making, to communicate effectively and efficiently, and to adopt a positive and optimistic stance in relation to the problems faced and their consequences. In the case of school leaders, it appears that, at times of crisis, they are likely to be less effective in the areas of inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. This was mainly due to heavy workloads, limited time and stress. Thus, our findings suggest that, at times of crisis, it is important for leaders to have less workload and more support from other stakeholders (e.g. administrators) so that they are in a position to address the needs and problems faced by their teachers on an individualized basis.

Transformational leaders can empower teachers to achieve more and embrace their work and the mission of the organization, even at times of crisis. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for leadership preparation programs to strengthen the transformational potential of individuals before they become school leaders. These programs should be informed by the findings of research on other leadership models and practices as there is evidence to suggest that transformational leadership may be more effective if combined with other forms of leadership (see, for example, Day et al., 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Moreover, additional research on the topic is necessary as most available studies on transformational leadership do not take into account the context and its effect on the effectiveness of the leader. More research is necessary in different countries, situations and educational systems. Quantitative and/or longitudinal studies could be extremely useful in investigating the impact of specific factors on the transformational behaviors and practices of school leaders. Recent developments such as the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic strongly point to the need for re-examining the role of the school leader in cases where he/she and the school unit in general face unprecedented challenges.

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