

Annual Conference of the Swiss Society for Educational Research 2005

Educational Leadership and the Changing School

Annual congress 2005

Introduction

The growing complexity of the reality we live in, evolving as it is in sometimes unpredictable directions, requires our education systems to continuously adapt to emerging social needs. This awareness underpins most of the renewal and reform movements presently aiming to reshape schools.

Flexibility is necessary in order to face current educational challenges. School systems are thus urged to place greater authority in the hands of the individual school, with a consequent redistribution of power at all levels. Every component of the school as a system is involved in this reshaping-- from the overall organisational structure through to the decision-making processes and mechanisms; from the pedagogical framework down to the teaching programmes and learning processes and up to the management of human and financial resources. This, however, should not be seen as a mere re-sketching of the decision-takers' map. A new definition is needed of roles and professional profiles engaged in the planning, leading and management of unfamiliar tasks. What schools need are new local leaders.

The term "leader" carries with it a wide range of pedagogical, administrative, relational and creative traits. A leader cannot be confined to a mere managerial and/or economic role, as research unrelated to education may rather tend to suggest. Proactively empowering others in an educational environment must be taken into account as a leadership responsibility. From this stance, thought is being increasingly given to the idea of leadership as a consequence of social and institutional change.

Leadership may also trigger and sustain school development. Not only must school heads, local administrators or regional/national government worry about the daily practice of running a school; at the same time, they must perceive themselves to be and must act as change agents, fostering innovation and supporting improvement. Improvement is a key issue for leadership – this is where its challenges lie. A leader's characteristics have a significant influence on the outcome of innovation, thus impacting on the benefit to students.

The conference aims to explore these issues, as well as the connections between them, backgrounding them also in evolutionary terms; it will also examine various definitions of leadership (which may be concerned with school development to a lesser or wider

degree), existing practices and unsolved problems. The interacting axes of reflection, which run through the three distinct work sessions proposed, attempt to outline the state of the art of research in Switzerland and in other countries related to such topics.

Axes of reflection

1. Concepts of leadership

On account of its numerous facets and the diverse connotations the concept entails in differing cultural settings, "leadership" is not easily defined. Many attempts at defining it may be found in research literature, each focusing on distinct issues or features. The most recent tend to expand the domains of the concept, so as to include school heads, teachers, students and local authorities on the one hand, and regional/national policy-makers and administration on the other. This session will focus on the following questions:

- What definitions of leadership may be suggested for the field of education? What should the main tasks of school leaders be?
- Can we classify leadership types or speak of a leadership typology?
- What domains may the concept of leadership be extended to? School heads? Teachers? Students? Local authorities? Regional administration? National policy-makers?
- What should the role(s) of the school head be within a context of increasing school autonomy or devolved self-management?
- Can leadership be attributed by policy-makers and, if so, how? What leadership can they themselves exercise?
- What empirical evidence is there to prove whether there is a link between leadership and the quality of schooling, and if so, what may this link be?

2. The role of leadership in school improvement

Whether or not the increasing significance of leadership is perceived as a consequence of social and institutional change, a greater part of research experience has been focused on how leadership may actively contribute to school improvement. Indeed, leadership has been repeatedly highlighted as a key factor in school development, whether at the school or the system level. Session 2 investigates this broadly-scoped issue, presenting studies dealing with:

- How and to what extent may leadership contribute to school improvement? What evidence is there of a relationship between leadership and change?
- During the last decade it has become clear that, in order to be effective, substantial reforms need to combine both top-down and bottom-up strategies. Every level of the school system must contribute to the process -- starting from the individual

teacher, through to school management and straight up to the higher policy-makers. How does leadership fit into this context of wide-scale reforms?

- What are the new tasks of a school leader in an autonomous or self-managing school?
- Much research has pointed to the importance of a cooperative culture within schools as the basis for creating and maintaining quality. What role can leadership play in this?
- The concept of organizational learning, i.e. of organizations being able to build and capitalize on the experience and knowledge of the people within them, has been very influential in educational research. In what ways can leadership contribute to the development of "learning schools" and learning systems?
- Hidden dangers may lurk in the decentralisation of responsibility and the ensuing increased autonomy of schools. What may these risks be? Might the emphasis placed on leadership amplify or aggravate any eventually negative developments?

3. Leadership and its players

If we want things to work in schools, it is useless to consider leadership without dedicating sufficient attention to its practical implications. The various concepts of leadership and of its role in innovating school life need to be applied, with strategies being developed so that school leaders may be spotted, recruited, trained, supervised and appraised. The papers presented in this session should try to answer the following questions:

- Who are the principal players affected by the shift in the power paradigm (policy-makers, administrators, trainers, teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, citizens, students, etc)?
- What relationship do teachers have with respect to leadership? Do they simply have to bear someone else's leadership or can they engage in it themselves, for example by taking on new roles within their schools?
- What are the most effective strategies in selecting good leaders? Are some profiles more suitable than others? Are there different profiles for different leaders?
- What are the most effective strategies in supervising school leaders?
- How should leaders of organisations oriented towards teaching/learning such as schools be trained?
- How may the work of leaders be appraised?