METAPHORS AS A RESOURCE FOR DISCOVERING THE LEADERSHIP MODELS THAT FUTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATE WITH THE JOB OF PRINCIPAL

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Abstract

The starting point for this study is the recognition that metaphors are not only a literary resource but can also be used as a cognitive instrument to evaluate behaviour. We employ this resource to discover, interpret and assess the leadership models that future teachers associate with the job of principal. This involved the participation of 113 students on the Pre-School Education and Primary Education degree courses taught in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alicante. A qualitative method of research was chosen for the purposes of understanding the great many shades of meaning found when interpreting what the participants had to say. Bearing in mind the classifications of content analysis approaches [33], we used directed content analysis (based on predefined theoretical ideas) to identify leadership models in the metaphors proposed by participants. A summative content analysis was also used, with which frequencies (the number of times participants referred to a given leadership model in their metaphors) were taken into account to complement information of a narrative nature. The analysis process was carried out with the help of Aquad 7 software. The questionnaire comprised ten open questions designed to identify leadership models, what participants had been taught about them, and the motivations that would lead teachers in training to occupy the post of principal in the course of their future careers. The investigation focuses on just one of these questions, in which participants were asked to think of a metaphor that for them represented the figure of the principal. It can be deduced from the results that most participants tended to suggest metaphors that associate the principal with a managerial leadership model of an individualist character. This means they considered the basis of leadership to be geared towards administrative functions, which should usually allow other areas in the school to develop, and stems from a viewpoint of the principal as a source of individual power and authority. Although to a lesser extent, they also associate the principal with both an instructional leadership style and a more relational and collaborative leadership model concerned with the well-being of the members of the community, again from an individualist point of view as in the case of managerial leadership. These opinions, which may have been conditioned by previous educational experience, lead us to believe that there is a need for teacher training centres to work towards making this view more complete and bring it into line with more social, distributed leadership models.

Keywords: Metaphors, educational leadership, teacher training, leadership models, principalship.

1 INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the positive impact that a principal’s leadership has on educational contexts can be justified from a triple perspective: improved academic results, encouragement of teachers' professional development and the creation of learning communities ([1][2][3]). Their obvious influence in these areas encourages us to discover the conceptions that teachers in training – the possible school principals of the future – have about how the job is actually carried out. Here this is done by analysing the metaphors they use to describe it. Indeed their conceptions are a useful source of knowledge insofar as they help to identify what they think about the job of principal and therefore what leadership model they might be inclined to adopt if they were in that position. They also serve to give us a richer insight into this complex field of study [4].

This investigation is in line with others that consider the metaphor to be not only a linguistic but also a cognitive resource in that it can have psychological consequences ([5][6]). This makes it a tool of interest for educational research ([7][8]) and in particular for research into the leadership of school principals ([9][10]). Hence the desire to discover more about the leadership models that teachers in training identify with the job of principal.
1.1 The metaphor as a research resource

There is no doubt that the metaphor has become a resource that aids understanding of social and educational contexts [11]. Far from providing information about the world alone, metaphors give us information about how it is presented, revealing different conceptions, emotions and perceptions. For that reason Argyropoulou and Hatira [9] refer to them as bridges able to bring together the explicit and the tacit. Similarly, other authors see them as lenses, filters or blueprints that can connect theory and practice or thought and action, favouring understanding of a particular reality [12]. In short, a metaphor links two different ideas, replacing one with another, suggesting an analogous relationship that enables an approximation or a better understanding of the original idea [13]. It means that something can be understood and experienced by considering it in terms of something else [14].

Various investigations in the field of education have used the metaphor as a source of knowledge. Kesen [7], for example, examines the metaphors used by a teacher to describe their professional experience. Pinnegar, Mangelson, Reed and Shaina [15] and Thomas and Beauchamp [16] used them to identify aspects relating to teacher identity in teachers in training. Zhao, Coombs and Zhou [17] claim that the conceptions encompassed by metaphors about teachers may determine their future professional practices, establishing a bidirectional relationship between cognition and action [18]. In fact the construction of metaphors can bring an awareness of how teachers define their role and purpose in the classroom, an analysis of which can be useful for their professional development. Consequently they are a valuable resource in training and self-instruction. Centres providing initial and continuing teacher training should therefore encourage the development of professionals given to reflection and able to identify the potential of metaphors when it comes to thinking before practice, in practice and about practice.

In the area of educational leadership, Beck and Murphy [19] were two of the first to study the job of principal through the metaphors used to describe it in the scientific literature. Since then various investigations have analysed metaphors to discover how principals see themselves [20], how they describe their beliefs and missions [21] and even what emotions – positive and negative – they associate with the leadership models that govern their own practices [10].

1.2 The kaleidoscope of educational leadership: an overview of the models

An etymological study of the term educational leadership enables us to design a kind of chromatic circle with a multitude of meanings, encouraging us to establish different classifications ranging from transactional leadership – related to strategic organization – to the distribution of responsibilities and even the inspiration characteristic of transformational leadership [22]. Exploring the differences between some of these classifications inclines us to follow the proposal made by Bush and Glover [23], which is to differentiate between leadership models on the basis of their individual or social character. In this respect, authors such as Crawford [24] note that things have evolved from a predominance of individual leadership models towards shared or social leadership models. While the former would be those in which the principal’s actions follow his or her individual vision, giving the job a more heroic, authoritarian character, the latter stress that institutional vision does not reside with the leader but with the community, and this gives rise to the development of a distributed leadership under which relations between members of the organization are strong and based on trust.

Some of the most frequently studied models are managerial, instructional and collaborative or participative leadership. In this paper we have decided to define only these three, since they are the ones identified by the participants in the study:

- **Managerial leadership.** The leader concentrates on conserving the system. Their work revolves around the functioning and daily organization of the institution, so they naturally concern themselves with the school budget and the design of strategic plans and their subsequent prioritization and implementation, which precludes the visionary perspective of leadership. It is a leadership that is clearly individual in character.

- **Instructional leadership.** This reached its peak in the early 1980s. Southworth [25] notes that it is very closely related to the teaching and learning processes, including teacher training and student development. Other authors such as Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood and Anderson [26] define it as working to improve the teaching and learning processes through effective management. One of the main criticisms made of this model is that it focuses too much on the principal as the centre of power and authority [27], and this enables us to identify its individual character.
c) **Collaborative or participative leadership.** According to Chrislip [28], this is the model exercised by leaders who aim to establish internal and external links with the community. On the one hand the principal has the job of building trust between teachers, parents, pupils and administration and services staff, while on the other the job calls for links with other organizations and institutions the school can work with in order to become more involved with its immediate surroundings. We consider this model to be of a more social character, as do Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach [29], for example, who say that leadership in this case is within reach of any member of the organization.

2 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study followed a phenomenological approach, focusing on analysing phenomena through the subjective experiences of each individual [30]. The decision to opt for this design was based on the fact that it is the most suitable for understanding the complexity of the meanings emerging from the interpretation the subjects make of the actual reality [31].

2.1 Objective

The purpose of the investigation was to discover, evaluate and interpret the leadership models that future teachers associate with the job of principal through the use of metaphors proposed by teachers in training.

2.2 Participants

To achieve our objective we relied on the participation of 113 students enrolled on the Pre-School Education and Primary Education degree courses in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alicante (Spain) during the academic year 2016/17. With students enrolled in each year of these courses, we had access to 10 groups. As far as the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are concerned, there were 94 women (84.7%) and 17 men (15.3%), whose ages ranged mainly between 18 and 23 (84.7%). The preponderance of women in the group of participants is consistent with the preponderance of women traditionally found on teacher training courses. As regards the course year these students were enrolled on, it is interesting to see that, although all years were represented, the participants were mainly first-year (57.7%) and third-year (26.1%) students.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Data was collected via an ad hoc questionnaire validated by three experts on education research. The instrument comprised ten open questions designed to identify the leadership models that the teachers in training associated with the job of principal, what they had been taught about the subject and the motivations that would lead them to occupy the position in the course of their future careers. The present study concentrates on only one of the questions involved, that asking these future teachers to suggest a metaphor with which to describe the job of principal.

The University of Alicante’s virtual campus (UACloud) was used to administer the questionnaire. By way of an announcement that the researchers published on the platform, students were given a link to the questionnaire along with information about the purpose of the study, the anonymity of the data and the fact that participation was voluntary.

The data was processed using AQUAD 7 software [32], which helps classify participants’ discourses into a series of emerging thematic areas. After repeated reading of the narratives, directed content analysis [33] was performed with the help of the leadership model classification proposed by Bush and Glover [23] and the collaborative model suggested by Chrislip [28]. Dual-focus coding was carried out which took into account not only the three leadership models that the participants’ metaphors suggested, but also the individual or social character of these models. Finally, a summative content analysis was performed by looking at the frequencies that complemented the narrative information.
3 RESULTS

The information that emerges from what the participants say can be organized around three codes and two aspects arising from the dual-focus combination. The three codes refer to the leadership models analysed (managerial, instructional and collaborative), while the two aspects refer to the character the leadership model takes on when put into practice (individual or social). Table 1 shows the frequencies (%F for the different codes in the study. These percentages correspond to the proportion of times out of the total that participants refer to a particular unit of meaning. It is the result of the formula \( F \times 100 / \text{total} \ F \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Managerial leadership</td>
<td>46.99%</td>
<td>4.82%</td>
<td>51.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Collaborative leadership</td>
<td>15.66%</td>
<td>12.05%</td>
<td>27.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Instructional leadership</td>
<td>19.28%</td>
<td>1.20%</td>
<td>20.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>81.93</td>
<td>18.07</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the basis of the metaphors they suggest, it can be seen that over half the participants associate the job of principal with a managerial style of leadership focused mainly on administrative and management tasks (\( FA_{\text{total}}(\%) = 51.81 \)). In this case the future teachers make direct allusions to the authority and formal power exercised by principals resulting from their privileged position at the top of the school organization. Mainly considered to be managers or bosses, their functions are limited to being in charge of and supervising the school, acting as its representative and taking decisions. As for the character that this particular focus may adopt, a high proportion of participants stress its personalist nature. This individual character of the principal’s leadership in most cases overshadows any contributions that other members of the school might make to the institutional dialogue. The following narratives demonstrate this:

*The principal as president. President because there are schools where the principal forgets what the job’s all about and makes decisions without listening to other people’s ideas (Student_27).*

*Guardian angel because, for me, they’re the person in charge of the school and they do their best to find solutions to dilemmas, obstacles and problems as well as getting important events off the ground and monitoring them, like the Day of Peace. That doesn’t mean they actually do it all themselves, but they coordinate things so it all works (Student_43).*

*The figure of the principal can be seen represented as the conductor of an orchestra, since both of them have full responsibility for a project, whether it’s a concert or an academic year (Student_63).*

From this viewpoint the participants also mention how important the principal is when it comes to running the organization, given the knowledge and experience gained over the course of their professional career. The indispensable character of the principal is also used by these future teachers to stress the possible negative consequences for school life if they did not exercise full authority. The narratives below illustrate these points:

*He’d be like an owl, full of wisdom, able to observe a wide field of vision around him and get an overall but at the same time detailed idea of what the school needs. The owl’s head can turn almost all the way round. Attention, precision and speed to act at the right time, like when the owl hunts its prey (Student_83).*

*The principal is the captain of a ship, which is the school, and without their hand on the tiller everything would go adrift (Student_71).*

Compared to the individual character of the managerial model, only a few participants suggest metaphors that describe this type of principal with a more social point of view. Although in this case they recognize the existence of a group in which all the members are necessary and have similar status, the principal continues to be concerned with the technical and administrative tasks involved in management. The following is a typical example of this minority view among the future teachers:
The figure of the principal is the heart of the school, but it needs all the organs and other body components in order to function correctly (Student _20).

Although with a lower frequency, the teachers in training also refer to the collaborative leadership model, focused on the development of all those making up the school community (FAtotal(%)= 27.71). The metaphors stress the idea of a group or team. Nevertheless, despite the open, participative nature of this viewpoint, the highest frequency again points to the individual character of the leadership. The principal is still responsible for single-handedly guiding, directing and supervising all the members of the educational community because of the knowledge and experience they possess. Hence the need to rely on them to guarantee the group’s stability and well-being. Examples of this view can be found in these narratives:

The principal is like the matriarch of a herd of elephants. They’re the person with the most useful experience who leads the herd on their journey for survival. Not experience gained through age, but because of the worth of what’s been learned. And along with the others, they also make the journey, guiding them, knowing the dangers and the best ways of doing things. And they always share this knowledge. If the principal falls, the herd may be lost (Student _47).

One metaphor could be that a principal is like the three musketeers, with one for all and all for one as their motto. I think this because the phrase tells us that teamwork is important, that together we can do better things, and that although the leader leads, he’s a great mediator and spokesperson. If we all work together, we can go further (Student _48).

The other side of the coin shows us those who give the model a more social character. Metaphors from this perspective emphasize the idea of openness, participation and unity together with the existence of more democratic relations between all members of the group. Leadership is no longer concentrated in just one person and one post but becomes a job taken on by the collective as a whole, all of whom work together for the advancement and development of the community. The principal steps down from the top of the school structure and adopts a more egalitarian, horizontal role, becoming just another member of the group. In association with this point of view, the participants also allude to innovation and educational change.

They’re one of the pieces of a jigsaw. In other words they’re on the same level as the other pieces, but essential in order for the structure to be complete (Student _36).

It’s being one of the cogs (Student _73).

Watching the series Vikings, King Ragnar Lothbrok would be a good example that comes to mind. Leadership skill, new and revolutionary ideas. But always seeking consensus and shared leadership (Student _82).

Finally, some participants associate the job of principal with aspects typical of the school’s pedagogical environment, which would be related to an instructional leadership model (FAtotal(%)=20.48). In this case the model’s individual character predominates. The metaphors revolve around the idea of a guide, direction finder or visionary, placing the emphasis on the figure’s importance when it comes to making the most of institutional resources so as to improve the school, its academic results and the students’ personal development. Participants also believe that the role is crucial when encouraging teachers to fulfil their potential and getting the best out of each member of the educational team. Recognition of the principal’s capacity to advise the educational community and increase the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process are also included in the metaphors associated with this code. This is made clear in some of the participants’ narratives:

The farmer who guides his flock and sets it on the way to where it needs to go. This means that the farmer, in this case the principal, leads all the members of the school, the flock, whether teachers, coordinators, students, etc., towards educational progress (Student _59).

A principal is comparable to a football trainer. The principal heads the leadership of a primary school. He’s the person that represents it. But there’s no point to his job if he doesn’t get the best performances from his teachers and the best results from his pupils. Like the football trainer he has to lead his players to victory, and in the case of the principal, victory would be for his pupils to improve academically and also grow as people (Student _81).

With the lowest frequency (F(%)= 1.20), participants describe the instructional model from a more social standpoint with the focus on responsibilities typical of the pedagogical area. Here again we can appreciate the egalitarian, democratic character of the relations. All members of the school community
are indispensable, especially when it concerns tasks in connection with the teaching and learning process. The following extract is a good example of this viewpoint:

Being part of the cog machinery in which the principal can’t tackle the job without the help of the other staff and teachers (Student _38).

4 CONCLUSIONS

Based on our initial recognition of the metaphor as a useful instrument for exploring a particular field of knowledge in more detail ([5][6]), a series of conclusions has been set out that extends the field of study of the conceptions that teachers in training have about the most common leadership models that determine the way the job of principal is carried out.

First of all it can clearly been seen that the individual character of the principal’s job is the main aspect identified by participants. Regardless of the model they focus on, their contributions reveal that they see the post as an individualist position in which the leader’s personal vision predominates over the community’s. They perceive the principal to be a source of authority who possesses a certain professional maturity and whose judgement and actions are essential for the school to function correctly. This viewpoint is in contrast to contributions in the scientific literature, which stress the value of shared, distributed leadership models, and it therefore needs to be adjusted so as to take into account new school scenarios and challenges ([24] [34]).

Similarly, most participants associate principalship with a managerial leadership model and of all the principal’s functions they focus in particular on those aimed at ensuring the organization runs smoothly. It is interesting that the model they least associate with the principal is instructional leadership. One would expect that, given that the participants are undergoing initial teacher training (during which the importance of the teaching and learning processes are stressed time and again), they would recognize the fundamental role the principal plays in encouraging the teachers’ professional development and thereby improving the students’ learning results [35]. It must be said that they do refer to the collaborative model to a greater extent than in the previous case. It is also notable that with this model the individual or social character indicated by their metaphors for principalship is more equal, which could be determined by the degree of openness and the social character that this model originally has. This is promising insofar as it confirms that there is a collective of students whose conceptions about the job of principal are more in line with the trends endorsed by the scientific literature.

To conclude, the participants’ conceptions about the job of principal remain anchored in traditional, individualist models. This might be explained by their previous experience as students, which would have given them the opportunity to interact with or at the very least observe this figure on one or more occasions. However, they may also have been influenced by the information they receive about leadership on their initial teacher training courses. It would therefore be a good idea to build up the content load on this subject in the teacher training syllabus, since their conceptions in this regard could have an effect on their future practices [17]. In fact we would go as far as to say that the metaphor could be used in these teacher training processes as an element to make the students actively think about the figure of the school principal ([14] [13]). This would perhaps help to counteract some of the mistaken ideas they have and stimulate the production of others that would enable them, in the course of their possible careers as principals, to develop practices closer to those of shared leadership. Adopting these viewpoints would in the end facilitate the transformation of schools into learning communities in which the contributions of each and every member of the organization has the same worth when it comes to constructing a shared concept of school.

REFERENCES


