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School Leadership Innovations and Creativity: The case of communication between school and parents.

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Abstract

In this work we examine how the creativity of the school leaders improves the relationships between school and parents through the innovations. Our study is based on a quantitative approach to the issue through interviews with 6 headmasters of primary schools (3 in Greece and 3 in Cyprus) and 18 parents (3 of each school, one mother and two fathers). The results showed that the creativity of the school headmaster or school principal is a main factor to establish a strong communication based between school and parents. School leader has the power to “meet parents where they are” and none parent be exclusive from school life.

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Keywords: communication, innovation, creativity, school leadership, parents, headmaster, school principal.

1. Introduction

The school leadership is one from the most fascinating subjects in the organizational behavior and depending on style of power appears the influence that is practiced in the other via the social interaction (Athanasoula - Reppa 2008). In order to we occupy the leadership, it should we examine the nature and the quality of social interactions that is involved. The “heart” and the substance of subject are the significance of force: which type force it is included also how this is practiced?

Different types of power exist via which somebody can try it influences other people, and this types they emanate from different sources (Day, 2000). The head teachers that have fresh, exciting ideas – who have a vision for the future - that the others embrace and want to share, they build a referent power (Pasiardis, 2006). The teachers and the parents tend to admire the head teachers who express their vision with vividly, those who inspire the enthusiasm, those who involve others in dialogue with a view to develop ideas, those who import innovations, those who communicate with their creative way together, and those who cause them to see a connection between the “vision” and their own personal desires to achieve something meaningful, to be part of a new and better future that is unfolding (Athanasoula- Reppa 2008). This is an important source of power for head teachers who would be leaders.

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At the same time the way that the school leader communicates with the staff, the students and the parents is exceptionally interesting, because from the style of use the power depends also the way of creative communication of school leader and the results of the communication. In this work we examine how the creative communication of the school leaders improves the relationships between schools and parents through to import innovations in school life.

2. School Leadership and Communication

Communication is a human phenomenon that improves general relationship between people. Except personal communication there is and the organizational communication. In some organizations, like schools, the communication is the main point for the good relationship and the effectiveness of the school. In the other hand parents are too a main factor for school effectiveness. So the school leader must be a good communicator and a creative person to inspire parents involve with school issues.

Bennis (1966) compared the leadership with the beauty: “it is difficult to determine it but it is quite clear when someone sees it”. Generally, the writers for theoretical leadership issue agree in two things about it: a) the leadership is a group operation: it is presented only in the processes when two or more persons interactive to each other. b). leaders seek deliberately to influence the behavior of other persons. Thus, somebody who he leads cannot be without power. But from the other hand the exercise of power is not also essentially oppressive.

Even the authority of principals, in a lot of cases of, is limited scope for the benefit of material motives, however a lot of schoolteachers and parents they find that the principals reward highly this behavior, that has disposal of help, when is supporting, collaborative, not criticism and focus in the self-development and self – improvement. When they find a such behavior satisfactory, because the moral reward from the principal, then, their support for the principal is increased and in consequence increases itself also the power of principal to lead (Lyman, and Villani, 2004).

The teachers and the parents recognize the power of official places of organism because they appreciate it. They respect and they accept the legal authority of those that occupies the official places in the hierarchy of organism (Day, 2000).

The teachers and the parents tend to recognize and to see as powerful those principals who are experts in the use of collaborative, collective methods of work, to determine and resolve together the common problems, they communicate direct also sincerely with parents and with clear messages and they leave to them margins for initiatives (Reppa, 2007). Such methods reward personally the parents and the teachers in the highest levels of significances of motivators of Maslow and facilitate the growth strong relations and beams between school and parents. The creative and sincere communication with the high degree of emotional intelligence they are the two basic factors, that promote the effective collaboration so from the side of school leader, and from the side of parents.

2.1 Verbal and non verbal communication – Personal and Organizational Communication

The communication includes verbal and not verbal messages. The communication is conscious but also unconscious. The 90% of interpersonal communication are carried out via the not verbal road (Verderber and Verderber 1998). Communication is a continuous and inevitable process (communication continuous) in the frame of which is transport, “circulates” emotions and meanings. When an individual finds itself in the view of other, when an individual conceives other via his senses, it realizes or no, his mental situation is influenced. The individuals communicate from each other, without essentially by words, because each one of them, without it wants and also without knows, it is carrier of importance for the other (Navridis, 1994). Into frame of communication the persons use the verbal road for the exchange of mainly information and not verbal to expression emotions and feelings. The verbal messages are mainly conscious and are mediate the linguistic body. It can however drop out and unconscious material. Not verbal messages can be: completely unconscious, partially conscious, partially unconscious and completely checked (Papadaki - Michailidi, 1998). Some channels of not verbal communication are: the appearance, the clothing, the expressions of person, the look, the movements and the attitude of body, the smell, the vital space, the degree of bodily, the “scenic thing” (setting) in which the individual is activated and the communication is developed.

The organizational communication has its own codes, that many times are not more suitable in order to attract the parents (Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2005). For this reason, the creative school leaders, who believe in the force of communication, use the informal communication, the interpersonal communication and mainly they activate the system of non-verbal communication in order to bring better results. In any case however, an effective communication makes how much the Encoding-Decoding approach of communication is more clear and successful, where speakers and messengers encode their ideas in words or non-words signals, and listeners decode these signals in order to recover the underlying ideas (Papadaki - Michailidi, 1998).

3. Methodology

Our study is based on a quantitative approach to the issue through interviews with 6 headmasters of primary schools (3 in Greece and 3 in Cyprus, 2 men of each country and 1 woman too) and 18 parents (3 of each school, one mother and two fathers because fathers are not involved active with school life). In all schools the headmasters tried to insert new Information Technologies in school life not only in the class, but and after the class to improve the communication and participation with parents. So they prepare a place for multiple activities, where some PC, a system of home cinema and internet are available to teachers, parents and students. In order to attract the parents the two principals from each country used aspects of creative communication with the parents, as interpersonal communication via telephone and e-mail (where it existed the possibility) and formal communication with sending an invitation letter to the parents. One principal from each country remained in a conventional road of communication with sending an official written invitation to the parents in the frame of organizational communication. We mention that this principal was a man, because of women underrepresented in two countries in the school administration while, on the contrary they were overrepresented in the teaching.

The experiment took place at the school year 2007-08 at the duration of which one of the authors worked as a visiting professor in the University of Cyprus and simultaneously as a tutor in the Greek Open University. In Cyprus it collaborated with the school principals that took part in the experiment via the program of training of executives of education of Cyprus Pedagogical Institute and in Greece in the frame of Postgraduate Program "Studies in Education" in the Thematic Unit "Administration of Educational Units". Thus, the author had been ensured an initial person-to-person communicational relation with the principals and afterwards an interpersonal relation via internet and telephone, at the all academic year.

The school principals accepted voluntarily to participate in the import of this innovation in the creative communication with the parents, in the frame of their action for exercise of internal educational policy in their school unit. The author had continuous communication with the all principals and she guided them in the all course, for the content of invitation-letter, the way of approach of interpersonal communication, as well as the content of meetings of principals and parents. The research, even it was carried out in voluntary base, however was surrounded with the all formal process and in particular was given also a title: **"Making the parents to feel welcome in the school"**.

The program began in the means of November 2007 and consisted in total for 6 meetings (November, December, January, February, March and May) at the afternoon hours 5-7. The total of registered parents in each school was approximately 100 parents for Greek and 150 for Cypriot schools. The composition of parents included a big breadth from characteristics that concerned in the age, the nationality, socio-economic status, the language, the cultural characteristics etc. By the qualitative methods was preferred the interview and specifically the semi-oriented interview. In the semi-oriented type of interview the subject has enough initiative in the formulation of his answers, the expert limits in minimal his interventions, but it attends it directs the interviewed person to speak for subjects that the aim of research requires to cover during the available time. The interview, despite the number of stages that includes also the various moments in which it can exist faults, remains, from the most precious tools of social sciences, because it uses an essential need of person, that is the need for communication (Grawitz, 2006). This need was the driver of our own effort on the export of trials of our conclusions, because with the present research we mainly examine the opinions and perceptions of subjects and also their emotions and feelings. We are interested in details as certain incidents and experiences that potentially have influenced the perceptions and their behavior, that have been impressed in their memory and are revealed through the interview. The interviews of school principals were given in the spaces of Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus and in the spaces of Group Advisory Meetings of Greek Open University. The parents

interviews were given in the spaces of school, where was imported the innovation. Beyond the interviews for the pumping of elements we used also the method of content analysis for the written communication and the electronic messages.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of 6 meetings showed that in the schools that the principal used creative ways of communication, made use of elements of emotional intelligence and was facilitating and supporting to the parents. The participation and also the factual support in the work of school were spectacular. As well as the acceptance from all the principal as a leader. On the contrary in the two schools of each country of (Greece and Cyprus) where the principal remained a good processor of everyday routine, even the application of innovation in his school, it was not recorded as school leader by the parents. The participation of the parents existed exceptionally small and the factual support of work of school became after a lot of efforts of the principal, except the school of Cyprus where the units of parents have tradition in to evolve in work of school.

It is characteristic that from the initial meeting until final existed added tendency in the attendance of parents in the all schools. This is interpreted as follows: for the schools that the principal used creative communicational techniques this was expected as verification in the hypothesis of our work, that consists in the follow: as more creative communicational techniques uses a school leader, so much bigger participation of parents will have. For the school of Cyprus, where the principal did not use creative communicational techniques, the interpretation is that the units of parents there have a tradition to participate actively in the school life. For the Greek school that also the principal did not use creative communicational techniques, the participation and the interest was increased because one of the parents became animator and leader.

More specifically, the percentage of parents participation of initial meeting in the 4 schools, that the principals used creative communicational techniques, oscillated between the 50 -60% for Greek schools and 95% for the schools of Cyprus. While for the schools with the conventional communicational techniques oscillated from 15-20% for Greek and 85% for the Cypriot. The final score parents' participation in the meetings, it oscillated for the schools with the creative communicational techniques between 63-85% for Greek schools and 96% for Cypriot, while respectively in them with the conventional methods oscillated in 40-50% for Greek and 95% for the Cypriot.

However, even if participation of parents increased, the active involvement in the school life with undertaking of responsibilities existed low. This, as one degree is explained because the parents saw their participation in this program as a presence and support in the work of school and in the other hand as pause for entertainment in their program. The parents had the possibility of seeing selectively movies, to comment it by a special teacher or an exterior volunteer, to play with their children (video games), to inform and learn information from the internet, to discuss for the subjects of school and the school life and to learn for various careers from the parents, who were willing to discuss the profile of their own job with positive and his negatives elements. As generally speaking it results, that the parents felt satisfaction that participated in “**a learning community**”, as they themselves named these meetings.

From the data and mainly the content of letters of school principals, it resulted that the principals - leaders used in their invitation to the parents such a verbal communication that expressed feelings, sincerity, warmth and above all faith in the “vision” and in the mission of these meetings. Of course the letters of two women principals contained words that were more emotionally than those of men principals (Mylonakou - Keke I. 2006). Moreover these principals addressed personally also with the first name to parents, contrary to the others who wrote a common anonymous letter for the all parents. Still the principals who used creative communicational methods were present in the all meetings and did not stop verbally and not verbally inspire the parents and to speak face to face with each parent. On the contrary the principals who used only formal communication in two from the six meetings did not participate and they did not develop the interpersonal communication with each parent, but remain to common with all. (Athanasoula – Reppa, 2003).

So much the principals who used creative communicational techniques, as and parents, who participated in their meetings, reported that a lot of problems and dysfunctions of school were solved through these informal meetings, despite through formal. The same result referred also by the parent - leader in the Greek school, where the principal followed only the official communication. This point is interpreted by the international bibliography which refers

that, sometimes the non formal organization has more powerful bonds of its members and catholic acceptance of her aims and mission, than the formal (Lyman, and Villani, 2004, Pasiardis, 2006, Day, 2000).

5. Conclusions

From all this analysis it seems that in order to we execute with success the managerial and leader role and mission, it should, we know to communicate effectively with the other people. We need to understand the various behavioral processes which may be at work in school, and use our knowledge to influenced or “lead” individuals or groups of parents. In a meeting we can influence much more effectively the decisions by using the behavioral ‘process’ than by simply rewording our arguments, as long as rightly and if they are (Athanasoula – Reppa 2008). How we use the knowledge of mechanisms of behavioral process is a key aspect of Managerial ethics. Do we use it to “manipulate” or to “facilitate”? It depends from various factors like: the management style models, the environment, the socio-economic and cultural background of parents etc. The key in all this process is the effective and creative communication. From this path the students became more socialized and have academic progress and healthy psychosocial growth. The research showed that as long as more creative techniques of communication and higher degree of emotional intelligence use the school leaders, so much more willing become the parents in the attendance and the collaboration, but also in the acceptance of innovations of school. So the school leader needs a range of communicational and creative skills to set a vision, which is not always a placid process, but often requires engagement with different worldviews of parents in group, different temperaments, different personal agendas, different level of understanding, different hopes and aspirations, and different pedagogical approaches to the future (Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2005). Perhaps the school leader can do nothing more important in empowering parents to create a process for forging and reworking the vision, or mission, of the school than to signal that it is not only important to do but it is okay to do. So all parents feel welcome to school and they will be willing to collaborate the school life (Molland, 2004, Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2005).

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