

School leadership: results from a case study at a teacher training school in Benguela province

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, the research problem lies in school leaders' context, particularly in how teachers at a teacher's training school in Benguela province perceives the leadership of the school principal.

To answer the research problem were defined three objectives: i) characterize how teachers of the training school for teachers in Benguela province perceive the leadership led by the school principal; ii) understand the influence of the school principal in the teaching work dynamics iii) develop knowledge about the style of leadership developed in the training school for teachers in Benguela province.

The adopted research methodology assumed predominantly a qualitative nature, and case study was the chosen research strategy. The empirical study took place in the academic year 2014 in a teacher training school in Benguela province. The main data collection technique was the MLQ questionnaire of Avolio & Bass (2004) applied to all the teachers (n=20). A simple statistical analysis was the privileged data processing technique.

The school principal of the teacher's training school in Benguela province reveal behavioral attitudes and positions in line with the *Laissez-Faire* Leadership and some categories of Transformational Leadership were the main results of this study.

KEYWORDS: School leadership, School principal, Leadership styles.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in school context and their effectiveness in improving schools has been a recurring theme in recent decades. In addition, studies in this specific area of research have emphasized leadership importance as one of the factors of change, development and improvement of school organizations (Day *et al.*, 2000, Elmore 2000, Fullan 2001, Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). However, in current context of change and uncertainty, where school is a dynamic and complex organization, mobilization of different educational actors towards common goals, in a climate of flexibility, responsibility and creativity, becomes urgent. In fact, leading a school organization refers to the ability to delineate a personal vision for the school, to know how to communicate it to the different educational actors and to inspire them in order to influence them to adopt this vision (Barreto, 2009).

In this sense, the efficiency and effectiveness of an organization, in the particular case of a school, depends on the capacity of its leader to adapt the leadership style, not only to the context, but also to the needs of the followers (Hargreaves, Fink, 2007; Fullan, 2001). In this context, the present research is carried out within the framework of the Master's Degree in Administration and Management of Education, in Portucalense University. It aims to understand how teachers of a teacher's training school in Benguela province (Angola) perceive the leadership of school's principal.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

School leadership has become a major issue, being one of the most studied topics by specialists in organizational behavior. However, the polysemy of the concept is undeniable, and leadership is a difficult concept to describe (Bennis, 1995), but easy to perceive and feel. In this sense, considering vast literature concerning leadership theories and taking into account the data collection instrument used in our empirical study - Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) we have selected three theories: *Transformational Leadership*, *Transactional* and *Laissez-Faire*.

According to *transformational* leadership theory, transformational leaders are not limited to solving diagnosed problems to achieve already outlined goals, but rather question themselves in order to contribute to a collective goal achievement (Bass & Avolio, 1993). As such, these leaders "are able to transform their subordinates into, committed, willing, and able to adopt spontaneous and innovative behaviors" (Barreto, 2009, 19). However, the followers' commitment level depends, in this case, on satisfaction and confidence inspired by the leader, as well as on the way in which the

organization recognizes the followers' contributions and is concerned with their well-being (Barreto, 2009).

In synthesis, transformational leaders are perceived as proactive, committed to optimizing development and innovation of individuals, groups and organizations; promoting high moral and ethical levels in followers and, simultaneously, performance indices higher than expected.

Concerning transactional leadership, it focuses on a system of rewards and punishments to be applied by the leader as a result of compliance or failure to achieve predefined objectives. In this type of leadership, the leader merely indicates what behaviors his subordinates should adopt and what goals to achieve, not influencing or motivating their followers (Rego & Cunha, 2003).

The transactional leadership is based on "a clear dichotomy between the leader as superior and the follower as dependent, in a perspective of conformity rather than creativity in face of the challenges and goals imposed by the organizational reality" (Castanheira & Costa, 2007 p.142).

This style of leadership is based on transactions that take place between leader and follower. On one hand, leader defines objectives, clarifies roles of each follower and task requirements; on the other hand, they fulfill what they are told because of the possibility of being compensated or the risk of being punished.

Regarding the *laissez-faire* style of leadership, the emphasis is on subordinates. Thus, in Chiavenato's perspective, "the leader has a minimal participation, giving total freedom to group members to make decisions. They only intervene if requested, not carrying out any type of evaluation or controlling events. The group members choose and divide tasks "(2005, p. 125).

The *laissez-faire* leadership is characterized, therefore, by the absence of leadership behaviors or by apathetic attitudes towards problems, allowing their accumulation and aggravation to the point of conditioning a normal functioning of the organization. Leaders avoid getting involved in important issues, are absent when they are needed, and shy away from decision-making moments (Barreto, 2009).

Reflecting on leadership in a school context, Sergiovanni believes that "schools need special leadership because they are special places"; on the other hand highlights that schools have "to respond to the unique political realities they face" (2004, p.172).

Although there are different ways of leading schools, the results of some studies point out that success depends on whether the school principal is able to (or not) find the values and the appropriate means to manage tensions and dilemmas that emerge daily in school context. (Barreto, 2009, Day et al., 2000, 2009 and Fullan, 2001)

3. METHODOLOGY.

In the present study, the research problem is related to the analysis and understanding of leaderships in a school context centered on the school principal. In this sense, the problem is assumed as a framing question, namely: What are the perceptions of the teachers of a Teacher Training School (TTS) of the province of Benguela about school principal's leadership? Thus, in order to produce knowledge on this research problem, three research objectives were defined: i) to characterize the way in which TTS teachers in Benguela province perceive the leadership carried out by the school principal; ii) understand school principal's influence in dynamics of teaching work; and iii) to develop knowledge about leadership style advocated in TTS in Benguela province.

A qualitative research method took place -the Case Study of a descriptive nature since, according to Yin (2005), it's a method that is adequate to investigate a current phenomenon in their real context. Although the case study is often associated with context of qualitative methodologies, it does not mean that it can be excluded from quantitative approaches (Latorre *et al.*, 2003), since this research used the questionnaire survey technique, of a quantitative nature.

The empirical study took place during 2014 school year, and was selected an TTS, whose faculty consisted of 20 teachers. The main technique of data collection was the questionnaire survey: Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) by Avolio & Bass (2004), applied to all teachers, to which all the respondents answered and all of them were validated, aiming to identify types of leadership and efficacy behaviors associated with the leader's individual success and the organization's.

The MLQ consists of 45 assertions that identify and measure different behaviors, which are associated with a particular leadership style and its results (Barreto, 2009; Castanheira & Costa, 2007). The scale used is ordinal of five points (Likert type), representing the frequency with which these behaviors are manifested by the leader and perceived by the respondents. In the questionnaire we also integrated three questions to obtain data on personal and professional characterization of the responding teachers.

4. RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The school where the present research took place is an TTS aiming initial formation of teachers, enabling them to exercise teaching activity of two disciplines in the secondary schools.

Regardless of the context in which it is inserted, leadership is a process characterized by the complexity inherent in it. In the particular case of this study, where the context was one of the Teachers' Training Schools of

Benguela province, the presented results are not subject to possible generalizations, since they are restricted to a specific and delimited context. However, they may be a potential contribution to the understanding of this problem in other teacher training schools in Benguela province.

In the school year of 2014, 365 students were enrolled, of which 183 were female. School leadership was composed by three members: a principal, a teaching assistant and an administrative assistant, two of which were graduates and one was a bachelor. Teaching team consisted of 20 teachers. Non-teaching staff was composed by 11 members.

Regarding personal and professional characterization of responding teachers to the questionnaire, the majority of respondent teachers (90%) are male, a fact that is in opposition to different studies that associate teaching with a professional activity developed by sex teachers feminine (Montero, 2005).

The age range between 25 and 30 years was the predominant one in respondent teachers (45%), followed by the interval between the 31 and 35 years of age indicated by 30% of the teachers. This reality reveals that the Benguela TTS has a young teaching staff, since only 15% of the professors stated that they were over 40 years of age. The majority of respondent teachers (85%) had between 7 and 18 years of teaching time and the remaining teachers (15%) had between 4 and 6 years of service time. The BA degree was the most prevalent academic degree in the group of respondent teachers (55%), and 35% had a bachelors degree and 10% professed to have completed a postgraduate course. With reference to the first research objective that related to the way in which teachers of an TTS of Benguela province perceive the leadership carried out by the school principal, we found that the global average values of each of the three types of leadership, similar to those of the respective categories, assumed low values, considering the scale where 0 corresponds to the minimum value and 4 to the maximum value. We recall that, in descending order, we have the *laissez-faire* leadership with the global average value of 1.78, secondly the transformational leadership with a global average value of 1.08 and lastly the transactional leadership with a value of 0.94. The three categories with the lowest mean values were, in ascending order, the Reward for Objectives attained (RO) with a value of 0.81, the Individual Consideration (IC) with 0.85 and the Intellectual Stimulation (IS) with a value of 0.96, the former being associated with transactional leadership and the others with transformational leadership.

On the other hand, the two leadership categories that obtained the highest average values corresponded to the *laissez-faire* leadership respectively: Passive Exception Management (PEM) with 1.61 and *laissez-faire* (LF) with 1.94. These results indicate that the teacher respondents consider that the leader is

resigning from his/her duties, avoiding making decisions and getting involved in important issues and issues (Barreto, 2009). In other words, these behaviors reveal that the leader tends to abdicate his responsibility and authority (Castanheira & Costa, 2007). In sum, considering the results obtained and the fact that the global mean values of the different leadership styles are less than 2, we infer that the respondent teachers do not perceive in the school principal a behavior strongly associated with any of the three types of leadership in study. However, attitudes, behaviors, and positions perceived by responding teachers tend to be closer to the characteristics associated with *laissez-faire* leadership and transformational leadership, with a prevalence of the former.

The second objective of the study was related to the understanding of the influence of the school principal in the dynamics of teaching work. The results of the study did not explicitly associate the school principal of TTS with attitudes and behaviors of any kind of leadership. Nonetheless, the *laissez-faire* leadership was the one to which, overall, respondents were most closely involved when asked to comment on the school principal's behavior.

In the *laissez-faire* leadership style the PEM category refers to a leader who: (i) avoids acting at the right time, acting only when problems escalate; ii) expects something to go wrong before acting; iii) makes the idea that while things are working should not be changed; and (iv) expects problems to become chronic before taking action. (Avolio & Bass, 2004). In turn, the LF category points to a leader who: i) avoids getting involved when important issues arise; ii) is absent at crucial moments; and (iii) excused itself from taking decisions and postponing the response to urgent issues (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Thus, we infer that a leader who presents these behavioral attitudes will tend to condition the teaching work dynamics and ultimately to cause entropy among followers. In transformational leadership style, respondent teachers highlighted two categories: idealized influence attributes (IIA) and idealized influence behavior (IIB). The first category refers to leaders who: (i) display a sense of power and leadership; ii) act in a way to be respected and a source of pride for those who are associated with it; and iii) privilege the interest of the group above the individual (Avolio & Bass, 2004). In turn, category IIB points to leaders who: i) inspire and energize in their leaders a vision for the institution; (ii) share their values and beliefs and their behavior is consistent with them; (iii) place emphasis on the collective spirit of mission; and (iv) have a strong sense of timeliness. (Barreto, 2009). In this way, we infer that a leader who manifests these behaviors can enhance the dynamics of teaching work both in terms of ability to inspire, motivate and foster team spirit, as well as the construction of a common vision and positive expectations.

The objective of the third research was to develop knowledge about the style of leadership advocated in TTS in Benguela province. Thus, we found that the respondent teachers pointed out to a school principal that privileges behaviors and attitudes associated with *laissez-faire* leadership and some aspects of transformational leadership. The analysis of the leadership results is in line with the previous results, since in the Extra Effort (EE), Efficacy (E) and Satisfaction (S) categories the global mean values translated, respectively: 0.70; 0.82 and 0.65. However, on a scale of 0 to 4, these values are low and indicate on the part of the leaders some dissatisfaction with the behavior of the leader, since they do not perceive the figure of the leader as someone who encourages them to achieve more than expected, To exceed initial expectations and to promote the will to overcome its limits. (Barreto, 2009).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In view of the results obtained, we can conclude that the school principal of TTS presents behavior is closer to the *laissez-faire* leadership and transformational leadership. The combination of characteristics listed above reveals some antagonism, since the prevalence of behaviors associated with the *laissez-faire* leadership style is connoted with a leader who abdicates his/her responsibility and authority (Antonakis et al., 2003), which may lead the leaders and the organization to entropy situations. On the other hand, behaviors associated with transformational leadership are consonant with a leader who is respected by the leaders, who inspires confidence, is proactive, motivates others and is considered an example to follow (Castanheira & Costa, 2007). This discrepancy of behaviors perceived by responding teachers in the leader / school principal of the TTS induces us to equate: i) the comprehension of the nature of the study by the responding teachers; ii) the interpretation attributed to the different assertions of the questionnaire survey; and iii) the possibility of conditioning factors at the time of response. Since the study was carried out in a specific context - Benguela province TTS - and results refer to how teachers perceived the leadership of the school principal, we suggest that this document be returned to the school in order to be discussed and analyzed with the school principal. The results obtained in the categories of leadership outcomes also revealed little global average values, which may indicate some dissatisfaction and lack of motivation among the teachers responding to the leadership that the leader of the TTS has created. In this sense, we suggest that the leadership team develop activities that promote team spirit and share a common vision, in order to mobilize all the community elements for a more active participation in improving the performance and quality of the service provided.

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