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The ELO Project – Educational Leadership Observatory

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Abstract

In spite of the great importance that is given to school leadership as a relevant factor in school improvement and of the increasing number of studies that are being developed in this area in several countries, in Portugal only recently did we begin to have studies that are focused directly in this issue.

Perhaps due to the slow development of this area of research in Portugal, there is still no gathering and conceptual systemization of the research that has been done on school leadership in our country. Thus, one of the main goals of the project that we are presenting is the creation of a School Leadership Observatory, gathering and making available information and research work on school leadership that have been recently carried out in Portugal. We have specifically focused on PhD thesis, Master dissertations, articles in scientific journals and proceedings of scientific meetings. This information that is being collected will be analyzed according to a theoretic-conceptual framework that will allow drawing a portrait of the results, perspectives and tendencies of this kind of research in our country.

1. The ELO Project[2]

School leadership is one of the most discussed topics in what concerns the students' academic performance and the professional satisfaction of the school's staff (Leithwood et al., 2006).

When compared to other countries, research on school leadership in Portugal is relatively embryonic. The research on educational leadership in our country started very recently due to the previous conditions in which the country lived during the dictatorship that determined that leadership was not valued. Leadership, and school leadership in particular, was for a long time associated with the unrestricted use of power by some over a number of

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powerless individuals. In addition, the centralized management model and the limited school autonomy that have characterized most of the history of the Portuguese educational system, as well as the collegial management style that has been in use in the last thirty years in Portuguese schools has made even more difficult the upcoming of school leadership (Ventura et al., 2006; Ventura & Costa, 2002).

Therefore, the types and models of leadership most common in our country are not known since they have never been the subject of a large scale study. In addition, the characteristics of school leadership in Portugal in what concerns their theoretical and conceptual categorization are also unexplored. There are some studies regarding school administration and management, but there are no specific large-scale studies on school leadership in Portugal. Master and PhD theses on school leadership in Portugal are fairly recent; the first theses came up five years ago, and have a limited scope. There are, nonetheless, some studies in Portugal, many of them made by the research team, on school management (Castanheira & Costa, 2008; Costa, 2002; Ventura et al., 2006; Ventura & Costa, 2002; Cunha & Costa, 2004). With this research project we aim at knowing and theoretically characterizing school leadership in Portugal by creating an educational leadership observatory that can perform as a forerunner for a centre for educational leadership similar to those that are based in universities in countries worldwide. The further aim is to establish contacts with centres for educational leadership, namely in England and in Canada, countries that have a great number of these centres and of research on school leadership, in order to create the conditions for the future establishment of a centre for educational leadership in Portugal that can enhance and to deepen the study of school leadership in our country, bringing this area to the fore as it is worldwide.

2. Research Methods

The research team aims at, in a first stage, knowing the scientific production that already exists regarding school leadership in Portugal by analysing PhD and Masters Theses, articles in scientific journals and papers published in congress annals from the first ten years of this millennium. After this gathering of the scientific production, the research team will conduct content analysis and theoretical-conceptual framing of the results bearing in mind the most recent and discussed educational leadership theoretical frameworks. This way, the research team expects to characterize educational leadership in Portugal as it is seen by the main researchers in the country. This is something that has never been done on a national scale in Portugal and that is crucial to the development of strategies for school leadership and improvement and to the research on this area.

In a second stage of the project, the research team will analyze OCDE reports on school leadership from selected countries that have centers for educational leadership with which we intend to establish partnerships. Thus, the team aims at knowing the types and characteristics of school leadership in those countries in order to develop a comparative analysis of school leadership in Portugal and in those countries. With this comparative analysis the research team aims at looking for common and divergent points in the characteristics of school leadership in the selected countries so as to establish a ground for partnerships with the centers for educational leadership. The establishment of partnerships with these centers for educational leadership intends to create the basis for the future establishment of a centre for educational leadership in Portugal with an international outlook on school leadership that can contribute to the improvement of the quality of leadership in our schools and, thus, in the academic success of the students. During the course of the project, the research team members will contact centers for educational leadership in order to establish partnerships.

3. A brief preview into the conceptual framework of data analysis

In order to analyze the vast corpus of data we have gathered it is crucial to use a theoretical framework that is at the same time broad enough to comprise several models of leadership, but is also compact, coherent and cohesive. After the analysis of several typologies of models of leadership, we decided to adopt, with proper adaptation, the one that seemed more suitable to the analysis we intend to carry on. This typology (Bush, 2011) is comprised of six management models (Formal, Collegial, Political, Subjective, Ambiguity and Cultural) that are subdivided into ten

types of leadership (Managerial, Transformational, Participative, Distributed, Transactional, Postmodern, Emotional, Contingent and Moral).

Formal Models defend that organizations are hierarchical systems in which managers use rational means to achieve certain goals. The school directors have authority legitimized by their formal positions inside the organization and are accountable for the management of the school (Bush, 2011, p. 40). Leadership in these models is given to the person on top of the hierarchy of the organization (Bush, 2011, p. 59). The type of leadership that is most linked to formal models is managerial leadership (Bush, 2011, p. 60).

Collegial Models defend that organizations determine policy and take decisions through a process of discussion that leads to a compromise. Power is shared between some or all the members of the organization that are understood to have a common understanding on the goals of the organization (Bush, 2011, p. 72). In these models, the leadership style is determined by the decision making process. Leaders react to the wants and desires of their colleagues and are seen as facilitators of a participative process. In collegial models authority that is the result of experience is more important than the authority that is the result of the occupation of a formal position within the hierarchy (Bush, 2011, p. 83-84). The styles of leadership that are more frequently linked with collegial models are transformational leadership, participative leadership and distributed leadership.

Political models defend that negotiation is the trigger for policies and decisions. These models state that there are interest groups that make alliances to achieve specific objectives. Conflict is seen as a natural phenomenon and power is allocated to the dominant coalitions, thus, it is not exclusive of the formal leader (Bush, 2011, p. 99). In these models the leader is seen both as a key participant in the negotiation process and as having the responsibility to keep the organization viable (Bush, 2011, p. 118). The type of leadership associated with these models is transactional leadership.

Subjective Models defend that people create organizations. Different participants have different interpretations of the same situation given their own background; therefore, organizations have different values and exist only in the understanding of their members (Bush, 2011, p. 126). Leadership is not easy to determine in these models. All of the organization members give different meanings to the same event according to their background, values and experience. All of the organization members have their own objectives. Nevertheless, the leader has to the power to impose is own interpretation of events since he/she has a formal position that grants power (Bush, 2011, p. 138).

Ambiguity Models defend that organizations have as dominant characteristics turbulence and unpredictability. Objectives and decision-making processes are not clear (Bush, 2011, p. 147). There is a greater difficulty for leaders in these models since there is turbulence and the organization characteristics are unpredictable and ambiguous (Bush, 2011, pp. 161-162). The type of leadership most commonly associated with these models is contingent leadership.

Cultural models defend that organizations are based on values and ideology. The ideas and values of individuals influence behavior and become shared traditions that are communicated inside the organization and are reinforced by symbols and rituals (Bush, 2011, p. 170). Culture is generated and transmitted mainly by the organization's leaders (Bush, 2011, p. 182). The kind o leadership associated with these models is moral leadership (Bush, 2011, p. 185).

4. Conclusion

Even though the research team plans to identify what is being done in school leadership research in Portugal and abroad, it is not the team's aim to come to a prescription of "what works", but rather to understand "what makes sense" under the Portuguese school leadership context (Simkins, 2005). The aim is not to replicate the educational leadership policies in use in other countries, but to understand the context of Portuguese school leadership and to look for the most appropriate policies to adopt in our country (Castanheira & Costa, 2008; Barzanò et al., 2002). The aim is also not to come to a definition of what it "feels" to be a school leader (Barzanò et al., 2002), but to understand and characterize school leadership in Portugal as it is seen by researchers and to search for similarities and differences between educational leadership in our country and in countries with a large and proven tradition of school leadership studies.

One of the main goals of this project, then, is the creation of a centre for educational leadership in Portugal that can be used as a consultation means for the establishment of educational policies and as research support for further studies.

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