PSIWORLD 2012

The teacher-headmaster and his relationship with himself

Gabriel Albu

Education Sciences Dept., Faculty of Letters and Sciences, Petroleum-Gas University, Bd. Bucuresti 39, Ploiesti 100680 Romania

Abstract

The moment a teacher accepts a position as a headmaster (in his school), his relationship with himself changes. This study suggests a model with four stances. Based on his particular circumstance, the teacher may either insist to remain in office as a headmaster or to step down and seek to devote himself to studying, researching in his field, and resign to his passion for his unmediated work with students. Some feel better with themselves as headmasters and some when they are teachers. What matters the most is their contribution to school image and prestige.

1. Introduction

The teacher in a position to be a headmaster is facing two complex horizons: one of leadership and one of knowledge and learning.

a. The horizon of leadership. In its dynamics and assumptions, leading entails, inter alia, to work with people, to relate permanently to their life, interests, aspirations, grievances and hopes, either as individuals or as a group. (Zlate, 2004, p. 25). Also, it calls for creating a domestic environment (within the institution) which stimulates people in their activities and their engagement in fulfilling their work tasks. In this context, it is necessary – notes M. Zlate (2004) – that „the man in charge should manifest care with respect to acquiring knowledge and psychosocial techniques that could help him in creating a perfectly efficient ambience. At the same time, he needs to get acquainted with the latest advances in the leadership science.” (p. 26). Once a headmaster, the teacher sees himself chained by the responsibilities and constraints of the institutional-organizational situation that keep him under pressure every day.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40723228415
E-mail address: gabrielalbu04@yahoo.com.
b. Knowledge and learning horizon. The first and foremost preoccupation of the teacher is knowledge and learning. By choosing his profession the teacher puts himself in a position to absorb knowledge and then share it with his students. The great teachers focus on ideas (either their own or others'), on their searches, experiments and questions (Bell, 2008, p. 114). They trigger a chain of interrogations which they will pursue during their entire professional career; as – according to the famous incompleteness theorem of K. Gödel (apud Gleick, 2012) – „any axiom system (like the mathematical one) leads to questions that cannot be answered by means of the respective axioms; new axioms must therefore be added. By adding new axioms, there emerge new questions that cannot be answered, and so on, endlessly.” (Bowen, 2011, p. 98). In short, the state of the teacher is an interrogative-investigative one. Few things fuel the students’ enthusiasm for learning, knowledge and research more than witnessing their mentor’s enthusiasm for learning, knowledge and research (Bell, 2008, p. 133).

2. The teacher-headmaster and the stances of his relationship with himself

The teacher, vested in his position as a headmaster, will cover a stage in his professional life at the crossroads of two horizons: one of leadership and leading a group of people; and one of knowledge and learning. Therefore, the challenge of the teacher-headmaster is to satisfy the requirements of both horizons, at the heights of his self-exigency and of the legal-administrative-bureaucratic standards imposed by the organizational structures.

In this (exciting) investigation we have discovered the following (four) possible situations:

(a). The first situation is when the teacher – (freshly) appointed a headmaster – realizes he cannot live solely as a teacher, preoccupied only by his classes and his students. He cannot spend his entire time just for the sake of his specialty and psycho-pedagogic training. The teacher cannot focus (exclusively) on the issues and questions raised by his scientific field. The time allocated for preparing his meetings with students and peers (from the same scientific community or from other related ones) has alarmingly diminished. Here the danger of dysfunctional impulsivity could occur (Vasile, 2012).

Nevertheless, the teacher-headmaster doesn’t want to be overwhelmed by this (new and vaguely predictable) situation. He does not give in. He is looking for a solution to further satisfy his thirst for knowledge and learning and his desire for discovering/learning new things. The teacher-headmaster seeks to maintain the same pace, to preserve the same intensity of his research work (according to his uncurbed appetite). He does not think he has lost too much, even if – sometimes – he suspects he is somehow more superficial and the (novel) cognitive meanings are harder to grasp. In short, he is (still) content with his cognitive-conceptual results.

Similarly, the (freshly) appointed headmaster is (increasingly) aware that he has a major new responsibility, which he must take care of according to institutional rules of management. This significant responsibility connects him to the administrative and organizational matters and puts him in control of his school. There appear again and again (new) issues to solve, (new) requirements, (new) written reports, (new) statistics that he – as a headmaster – is compelled to deal with, to solve and to prepare with extreme care and with a real sense of responsibility. At the same time he realizes he cannot play with decisions (which affect the lives of every member of the team and the evolution of the institution itself). It is about ensuring the proper functioning of the school (and the achievement of its goals) and also about providing a pleasant atmosphere of trust within it.

Consequently, the teacher-headmaster in this first situation has to reconcile both the requirements of his professional training (scientific and pedagogical) and its institutional accountability requirements. If he knows how to organize his time better (according to the priority rule!), then he creates his own chance to succeed, responding (very good) to both challenges. He does not want to give up neither to his study, to his specialty training, nor to his leadership position. He is satisfied with what he is doing and sees no obstacle in dealing with both. In short, he is satisfied with himself both in terms of knowledge / learning, but also in terms of governance.

(b). The second situation is that of a teacher-headmaster who realizes that he cannot study / research and cannot prepare (for the meetings with students or colleagues of the same scientific community) as he once did
(i.e., in the days previous to his appointment as a manager). From time to time (and as though more rarely) he has some conceptual jolts but unfortunately he cannot track them to exhaustion; he no longer has time to refine ideas, to perfect them, to place the foundations, to let them unfold the entire way. He also realizes that there is no time (or possibility) to build a demonstration in all its logical (and / or practical-applicative) extent; he is increasingly concerned that he is no longer able to enrich, color and beautify his speech with ideas, metaphors, reflections, concepts and statements (either famous or deep) collected from the works of renowned thinkers and researchers. He feels that - lately, since he had accepted this position of headmaster – he is becoming more superficial and more reckless with his cognitive concerns in general, and with those of his field of study, in particular. Basically, you could say that he’s lost his headway; there’s no breakthrough, his offensive towards the unknown has stopped. He hasn’t met with a new idea, a new reflection, a new research and he has not produced - as he was once able to - a new thought, a new idea. In short, he is unhappy.

Instead, he feels he is (increasingly) delighted by his administrative and institutional status, even if, at first, he had some difficulty in comprehending the (detailed) structure and organization of the institution, of its specific (optimal) function, to get to know (in more detail) the teaching and non-teaching staff in the school. Along the way, he developed and started to - better - know what to do, with whom and by what means, he felt he could control people's behaviors and reactions. He feels more at ease as a manager. He is satisfied with himself and with what he does. He is proud of his achievements, of which he has tangible evidence. Basically, since he’s a headmaster, the school has grown, there is more order, everyone knows what to do and people seem satisfied.

The teacher-headmaster feels that he has found a new dimension of life and that he faces the fundamental challenge that he seems to (also) need. He has discovered (in himself) new skills and new competences related to leadership. He is excited about his new position and his recent institutional developments. Therefore, the teacher-headmaster feels that power satisfies him and it gave him a new impetus. Basically, his life was revived; it is (much) richer, (much) animated and (much) fuller. He realizes that he is the right man at the right place. In short, he is satisfied.

(c). A third situation is when the teacher-headmaster continues (almost undisturbed) his program of study / research. Whatever happens, he will not give up and is not going to give up what he is passionate about and attracts him so strong in life. He has (already) arrived to the belief that what he does (in school – with the students - and in his office / lab) is very important and fulfills him. In a word, he has found a purpose and a role. The teacher-headmaster is - still - deeply involved in the knowledge competition (and does not want, does not think to stop or abandon it). Study and research have become a way of life, a purpose to breathe, to exist. This is an interesting, long and exciting fight with the unattainable, the unknown and the ‘come what may’. The teacher has moments when he feels he no longer belongs to himself. He realizes he cannot stop; it's too late. He is always captivated by new ideas and he wants to know their depths.

But, increasingly, more bureaucratic administrative concerns (be they more or less alluring or important) interfere with his cognitive concerns. His mind is (increasingly) absorbed by the growing problems of leadership, organization and control (of people). Administrative problems require much more of his time and energy than he thought (when he accepted the position of leadership) and - for him – it all seems quite intricate. There always arise more and more requests, reports, events - more or less unexpected (whether it's students or teachers or the relationship between them). Worries and concerns triggered by his position as a headmaster create the feeling that he is not the best person for the job he holds (for some time).

He wonders (though, increasingly more often) how did he get there, why did he get involved, what more could he do to improve the school atmosphere and turn it into an environment of understanding, openness, closeness between team members. In short, he is unhappy (with himself).

(d). The fourth situation that we encounter in school reality is of the teacher-headmaster who is forced - as in other previous cases - to rethink his (daily) program and with it, his priorities and energy metering.

He feels that after an eventful day at work and numerous administrative-legal-bureaucratic demands, his resources are insufficient to deal with knowledge (as well). He feels tired, trite and mediocre. Each time, he
promises to himself that after his working day he will return to his study table (where, in fact, he believes he
belongs). He has always wanted (and has always fought) to have time to cultivate his mind. He cannot live
without charging with profound, original ideas, with updates in his field of knowledge (and / or those adjoining
it). As soon as the moment he would return to his study table grows distant, the teacher-headmaster is
overwhelmed by feelings of revolt. He is unhappy with the state of intellectual cognitive decline. He is
dissatisfied with the dull, inertial way to present himself to his students. He feels like he’s always reheating an
already rotten meal. The teacher-headmaster finds that the break with the world of knowledge and learning
deepens and his teaching work - turning into routine - is becoming increasingly uninteresting, more boring, and
more lacking its nerve.

Also, even after a reasonable period, he cannot say to himself that the place he occupies at the forefront of the
institution is indeed what he wants. He’s not drawn / not interested, though. He hasn’t found himself. From his
self-evaluation, it appears that nothing remarkable has happened (since he is leading the school). He always
confronts with the inertia, the low motivation of colleagues in solving institutional problems (and even their
professional improvement), the tendency of most members of the team to make things formally, just because they
are required (and only those that are required) by the annual evaluation grid (or by the merit award grid; or both ...
).

In turn, many students do not respect school property, have frequent conflicts between them; some do not
come to school; others are depressed, many parents are indifferent and ready to throw all responsibility on the
school. The teacher-headmaster is ever in the position to negotiate, to mediate, play the counselor or the
guarantor of internal order and maintaining the best conditions for the instruction of students.

This is complemented by his existential risks and uncertainties. He has moments when he feels he is
outnumbered by the diversity and complexity of the school problems. It seems that he will never bridge the gap
with the world of administration and leadership. In short, as he is discontent with his relationship with the world
of knowledge and learning, so is he by his relationship with the leadership position. He has lost his point in one
matter and in the other matter the point still would not become apparent.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

When appointed a headmaster, the life of the teacher changes. There appears - in his life – a need to divide his
time and his energy between knowledge and learning on the one hand and institutional problem solving and
coordinating relations with other institutions on the other.

In the face of such realities, we discover the following categories of teacher-headmasters: a. pleased with
themselves that they can reconcile the curriculum with the requirements of the management position; they are
satisfied that they may do both just as they wish; b. unhappy about the fact that they neglect their curriculum and
preparation for class, their professional and personal self-improvement, but happy, satisfied with the new status
and role they have in the school; c. pleased that they may pursue their program of study and satisfied by their
cognitive outcomes, with their presence in front of students, but dissatisfied with the wear and tear posed by
multiple, diverse and intricate (more or less legal) administrative-bureaucratic tasks; d. dissatisfied with both
their cognitive status, that grows more superficial and poor, with their uninteresting presence in front of their
students and also with their administrative position, a source of stress, exposed to frequent legislative changes
and to the more or less formal behavior of team members.

Accepting the position of headmaster, the teacher oscillates between being part of the world of knowledge and
learning, of study, away from the social and organizational noise, from the superficiality of common sense and
being in the spotlight as the most important person in school from a decision-making and administrative
standpoint.

It is recommended that the headmaster be not appointed from among the teachers dedicated to the study,
research and development potential of their students. He should rather be a specialist in the management and
institutional leadership science, with a propensity towards education issues and a desire to support and enhance the influence of education in social life.

References