School Leadership Between Accountability and Values

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Abstract

This article presents a critical update on the concept of constructivist leadership, which was developed in the 1990s in the school context. Firstly, it is emphasized that, although the concept was initially introduced in the educational context, its implementation in these settings faces some difficulties. A discrepancy is highlighted between the leader-centric view, which views the leader as the central figure determining the actions of followers, and a true constructivist approach, which prioritizes the process of co-producing leadership and organizational change. Research in the field of school leadership highlights the importance of shared values, such as trust and integrity, but it is observed that new problems emerge that require changes in the norms and values of educational institutions. To address these challenges, educational organizations need to develop the capacity for learning to learn, adapt their values and promote social capital for both individuals and the whole school network. The concept of a network learning organization is proposed as an organization capable of fostering the growth of social networks reinforcing shared values through exchanges and discussions. Finally, a revision of the concept of accountability is suggested, actively involving all social actors, including students and families, in promoting the quality of education and student well-being.

Keywords: Leadership; Accountability; Education; Social networks; Growth

Leadership and co-production

This opinion paper aims to provide a critical inspection of the concept of *constructivist leadership*. This concept emerged in the 1990s as an innovative approach capable of integrating leadership studies in an interdisciplinary manner [1], but it is already implicitly present in the literature on organizational administration, as seen in works such as Barnard [2].

In recent years, research in this field has grown and expanded [3], along with the increasing interest that the *constructivist* approach has gained in the study of social processes and organizations.

In our view, the *constructivist leadership* concept, as described in the literature, shows some critical issues when applied to a school context. It is important to note that the concept itself was initially introduced and studied precisely about these types of institutions [4-6]. Fairhurst and Grant [7] consider this a "*leader-centric approach in which the leader's personality, style, and/or behavior are the primary (read, only) determining influences on the follower's thoughts and action.*"

This vision appears to be in contrast with a "genuine" constructivist approach, at the center of which lies the process of *co-production* of both leadership, as a recognized reality, and the leader, as the one who guides and inspires the organization's development.

The four principles of knowledge co-production - attention to context, pluralism, goal orientation, and interactivity - considered fundamental for decision-making processes in complex contexts such as schools [8], seem to contrast with a rigid division between leaders and followers.

Upon closer examination of the actual practices of school life, it does not seem that a true leader figure emerges, which could be thought of as embodied in the school principal [9]. This role is subject to continuous negotiation in which social actors seek to define their respective tasks, rights, and duties. Thus, we find ourselves facing a process of *co-production* of leadership that is oriented from time to time towards concrete problems, and legitimacy is based on shared and common values.

In the international literature on school leadership, there is often a reference to different shared values. For example, for the US, Shapiro [3] and Bryk and Schneider [6] highlight trust in relationships based on the four pillars of *respect, competence, integrity, and personal regard for others*. Vázquez-Toledo et. al. (2023), speaking of priorities emerging in leadership work, mention, for Spain and Portugal, actions such as creating a satisfactory *organizational climate, promoting positive relationships,* enhancing *participation,* cultivating *solidarity* and *democratic values,* creating, and preserving a *tolerant atmosphere*, and fostering *collaboration*, all of which can be considered correlated with values such as *altruism*, *cooperation*, and *generativity*. D'Souza [9], in the UK, from a series of interviews with principals, highlights aspects such as the quality of *relationships, aspiration, achievement, fulfilment, responsibility*, and *reflexivity*. Finally, for Italy, Paletta [10] speaks of the school principal as a builder of *social value*.

School as a Network Learning Organization

Often, the vision of *constructivist leadership* goes hand in hand with a view of the school institution as a learning organization, especially because, as emphasized by Peter Senge [11], the development of meaning because of collective work is an essential characteristic of a *learning organization*. This vision works well until the organization finds itself needing to address new problems for which changes in the norms and values governing the relationships among various social actors are necessary. In this case, only organizations that have developed the capacity for learning to learn (*deutero-learning)*, in [12] will be able to *co-production* new meanings and values around which to organize their response to changes.

In the case of educational systems, this occurs when there are legislative changes, such as educational reforms, the enactment of new roles and professional figures, and political decisions regarding the organization of the school's learning and teaching systems. These changes are quite frequent also considering the role that the educational system plays in transmitting power within society. In recent years, another important factor that is changing educational settings is the introduction of educational and mobile technologies, again we are witnessing a reconfiguration of roles and management mechanisms, requiring a complete rethinking of the organization [13,14].

Changes occur both within and outside of school institutions, leading the organization and the social actors involved to become *isomorphic entities* [15], meaning that organizations mimic each other, and different actors within individual organizations tend to align with similar cognitive styles, adopting the values that characterize them.

The effectiveness of school *constructivist leadership* must be evaluated by considering how well it fosters the development of an educational environment capable of *learning to learn* from

changes, adapting its values, and generating *social capital* [16] for both individuals and school network, to create a sustainable school capable of flexibly responding to changes.

The theory of *social capital* is based on the idea that interpersonal relationships, mutual trust, and social networks represent vital resources for the development of communities, organizations, and school institutions. Studying the concept of *social capital* involves immersing oneself in a complex world of human connections, social norms, and collective participation, where the fabric of relationships becomes an important catalyst for positive impacts on both individual and collective life [17].

Specifically, *social capital* within an organization is the set of values that members decide to share, and, at the same time, it is the *social network* that is created among institutions, communities, and internal actors.

The school as an organization that *learns to learn* must be capable of mobilizing all its internal and external resources to reconfigure its value system and rewire its relational network in response to the challenges of today's society. In this way, a virtuous circle is created in which values self reinforce through the circulation and creation of ever-new *social capital*.

At this point, it would be interesting to introduce the new and "challenging" concept of the school as a *network learning organization*, that is as an organization aimed at promoting the growth of social networks capable of self-nourishing their own "value genetic heritage" through the exchange and sharing of each member's values.

The school viewed as a *network learning organization* is therefore not just a simple place of learning but a complex ecosystem in which values are the fundamental building blocks that construct and support the culture and identity of the educational community.

It could be interesting and stimulating to think of this type of organization as a set of "cells". In this perspective, the "cell" is understood as a container of values, where the "cell nucleus" can be equated with school leadership, which encapsulates the institution's DNA, and the "organelles" as vectors that carry specific values, such as *trust, safety, responsibility, respect*, and *inclusion*, within the school institution.

The relationships between the "cells" of the school community manifest as social networks, like interactions among the cells themselves. These interconnected networks of values and relationships form the *network learning organization*, i.e. the entire educational community, where shared values act as the glue that holds the school, the community, and its members together as a cohesive, functional, and responsible whole.

Shared Accountability

From this perspective, the concept of *accountability* should also be revisited, moving towards *shared accountability* [10]. By

accountability, we mean the current developments in reporting, such as social reporting. Generally, there are various definitions regarding the concept of *accountability*, on a continuous spectrum ranging from moral responsibility to legal responsibility [18], and on the other hand, from focusing on outcomes to considering the impacts and consequences of actions taken.

This idea of *accountability* highlights a moral and/or institutional relationship, whereby all social actors are recognized the right to question and, if necessary, sanction the exercise of power by other parties [19]. In this sense, *accountability* in the educational institution can represent a crucial element in ensuring the quality of education and student well-being, extending far beyond simple financial analysis, and involving responsibility towards academic results, teaching practices, and resource management [16].

An educational context that promotes *shared accountability* recognizes and enhances the *network learning organization*, and the values it promotes, acknowledging the active role of students and families in school decision-making processes, leading to open and honest collaboration among all these actors. This collaboration not only constitutes a condition of quality for service provision but also represents a fundamental prerequisite for making the results of joint efforts transparent and shareable.

One of the central aspects of *constructivist leadership* must therefore consist of promoting *social networks* to ensure that all those with a stake in the game can contribute to the development of *social capital* directed towards *shared accountability*.

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