

Successful Leadership Practices for Schools in Challenging Urban Contexts: Case Studies

Prácticas de Liderazgo Exitoso en Escuelas en Contextos Urbanos Desafiantes: Estudios de Caso

Práticas de Liderança de Sucesso para as Escolas em Contextos Urbanos Desafiadores: Estudos de Caso

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This paper examines some of the key aspects of successful leadership practices for schools in challenging urban context. The research question for this paper is: "What are the key aspects of successful leadership practices used by headteachers in schools in a highly disadvantaged urban context?" The study is based on a qualitative case study approach with a comparative perspective. In the study a purposeful sampling approach was adopted. In order to answer the research question multiple methods of data collection were used. The research findings show three following development phases common to the studied schools and successful leadership practices corresponding to those phases: (i) Creation of reliable foundations: toward new qualities; (ii) Building a culture of concern and achievement; and (iii) Searching for synergy: stabilization and consolidation. Teachers' leadership and building the educational partnerships are especially important practices within the phase: "Searching for synergy: stabilization and consolidation".

Keywords: Successful leadership practices, Phases of school development, Culture of school success, Teachers' leadership, Educational partnership.

Este artículo examina algunos de los aspectos clave de las prácticas de liderazgo exitoso puestas en marcha en escuelas ubicadas en contextos urbanos desafiantes. La pregunta de investigación para este artículo es: "¿Cuáles son los aspectos clave de las prácticas del liderazgo exitoso utilizadas por los directores de las escuelas en contextos urbanos altamente desfavorecidos?" El estudio se basa en un enfoque de estudio de caso cualitativo con una perspectiva comparada. Se utilizó muestreo intencional. Para responder a la pregunta de investigación se utilizaron diferentes métodos de recogida de información. Los resultados de la investigación muestran tres fases comunes en el desarrollo de las escuelas estudiadas y explicitan prácticas de liderazgo exitoso en cada una de las fases. Éstas son: (i) Creación de bases: hacia nuevas cualidades; (ii) Construcción de una cultura preocupada por el rendimiento; y (iii) Búsqueda de sinergias: estabilización y consolidación. El liderazgo docente y la construcción de las asociaciones educativas son prácticas especialmente importantes dentro de la fase: "Búsqueda de sinergias: estabilización y consolidación".

Descriptores: Prácticas de liderazgo exitoso, Fases de desarrollo de la escuela, Cultura del éxito escolar, Liderazgo docente, Asociación educativa.

Este artigo analisa alguns dos aspectos-chave de práticas de liderança de sucesso implementados nas escolas em contextos urbanos desafiadores. A questão de pesquisa para este artigo é: "Quais são os aspectos-chave de práticas de liderança de sucesso utilizadas pelos diretores em contextos urbanos altamente desfavorecidos?" O estudo baseia-se em uma abordagem de estudo de caso qualitativo, com uma perspectiva comparativa. A amostragem foi intencional. Para responder à pergunta de pesquisa foram utilizados diferentes métodos de coleta de dados. Os resultados da pesquisa mostram três fases comuns no desenvolvimento das escolas estudadas e práticas explícitas de liderança de sucesso em cada uma das fases. São eles: (i) Criação de bases: para novas qualidades; (ii) Construção de uma cultura preocupada com o desempenho; e (iii) Procurar sinergias: estabilização e consolidação. Liderança dos professores e criação de parcerias educacionais são práticas especialmente importantes dentro fase: "Procurar sinergias: estabilização e consolidação".

Palavras-chave: Práticas de liderança de sucesso, Estágios de desenvolvimento da escola, Cultura de sucesso escolar, Liderança docente, Associação educativa.

Introduction

Leadership is a significant factor in hampering or facilitating change within schools. This confident statement is supported by analysis of the relevant educational literature. Increasingly this literature includes research reports describing links between leadership, school development and pupils' educational achievements (Day et al., 2009; Madalińska-Michalak, 2012). Academic studies on school development reveal the role which leadership plays in the process of reforming school (Harris, 2002; Harris & Chapman, 2002, 2004). They indicate the need for a new approach to managing schools which concentrates on a headteacher as a leader and on utilising leadership potential which lies in teachers (Michalak & Jones, 2010; OECD, 2014; Rutherford, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the key aspects of successful leadership practices for schools in socially disadvantaged areas and to critically consider the broader socio-cultural-economic context in which the school and the headteacher's work are immersed. The operation of schools in areas, in which the majority of pupils come from marginalised environments or are members of disadvantaged groups, is an area of educational research that deserves more investment and attention. There is a high risk that pupils in such schools may fail to achieve their full potential, which in turn may produce negative impact on their professional and personal lives into the future. Therefore, it seems crucial to study aspects of school leadership that may improve this situation.

The ideas and underpinning research presented in this paper were developed over several years. Key questions were raised for me by my research work on teachers' professional success and the conditions that enabled it (Michalak, 2007). My experiences gained from participation in the international research work entitled "Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context: Strategies for Improvement" (Michalak, 2009) helped to further develop my thinking. In deciding to conduct research on successful leadership for schools in socially disadvantaged areas I was convinced that empirical research should emerge from the belief that social life can be better organized. For example that a school, due to its greater sensitivity to the issue of exclusion, can shape conditions of teaching and learning in a way that enhances pupils' educational opportunities. I was equally convinced of the need to conduct educational research which is focused not only on negative phenomena taking place in education such as

deficiencies of teacher and school performance, but rather on positive aspects of school performance. These positive aspects to a large extent depend on headteachers' and teachers' work.

While addressing the issue of successful leadership in schools I would like to indicate in this paper some of the chosen aspects of those leadership practices, which were a particular driving force behind the changes introduced into the lives of the researched schools. Those practices resulted from the headteachers striving to find answers not only to the question 'How to act?', but also 'What should be done?' and 'Why?'

The research revealed development phases common to the studied schools and successful leadership practices corresponding to those phases. The research showed that although there was no single development path for the schools managed by the researched headteachers, the experiences of those schools included distinct similarities. The development paths consisted of three basic phases, which I named as follows: (i) Creation of reliable foundations: toward new qualities; (ii) Building a culture of concern and achievement; and (iii) Searching for synergy: stabilization and consolidation (see: Madalińska-Michalak, 2012). Each of the development phases was connected to dominating leadership practices characteristic of it. They were based on values and behavior standards accepted (shared) in schools, and also on particular goals. It is characteristic of the highlighted phases that when considered together they did not constitute a linear sequence within a school's improvement, but they took the form of a circular flow. The phases were connected one with another and it would be rather difficult to draw distinct boundaries between them. Considered together they constituted evidence for the complexity of leadership within the researched schools. The phases also indicated key aspects of that leadership. Seemingly isolated leadership practices reinforced one another, and their combined existence was conducive to the schools' improvement.

Using the research findings illustrated by selected fragments of statements by headteachers, I will concentrate on the third of the highlighted development phases, that is on the phase I have named: "Searching for synergy: stabilization and consolidation". While discussing this phase, I will highlight some of the leadership practices that were evident in this phase and consider the assumptions underpinning them.

1. Methodology and methods

The research design consisted of two overlapping phases: the first was a literature review to ascertain 'what is known' about the nature and effects of successful school leadership in challenging urban contexts; while the second involved a case study approach (Bassegy, 1999) to explore key leadership strategies used to create a culture of school success "against the odds". The study is situated within a non-positivist and qualitative paradigm, whilst aiming to make use of as many "concrete" reference points as possible such as official reports and data. The methodological approach in the study employs "interpretivist" methods of data collection and analysis, without relying on the data alone for the generation of concepts and theoretical issues.

In the study I adopted the premise that the people participating in the research give symbolic meanings to artefacts, they create norms and values, and personalised ways understand the system in which they function. I perceived my own role as a researcher

in the context of undertaking research activities which would enable me to reconstruct views and assumptions concerning the researched subject through studies of the selected cases which were unique and unrepeatable in themselves. In the course of my research I endeavoured to avoid arbitrarily attributing functional meanings to what I observed. It should be noted that this interpretative approach might tend to create an excessive focus on meanings and motives at the expense of the analysis of conditions triggering particular actions. In order not to burden the research with such flaws, I endeavoured to analyse the process of becoming a successful leader and the key aspects of successful leadership practices in school development. While doing this I took into consideration the involvement of this process and these practices in social, cultural, economic and political dependencies. The analysis of leadership practices of the participants in the research followed the analysis of the context in which these participants operated (school location, school description: history, perception, challenges, teachers, pupils, parents) and of the biographies of the participating headteachers. The research work reported in this study meant, in accordance with the adopted methodological basis, not only the exploration of “the point of view of the participant in a social life” –i.e. the headteachers invited to take part in the research– but also making an effort to learn in what way the experience which is the object of this research is placed in wider, often hidden, social positions, networks, situations and relations. The analysis of the gathered qualitative data was related to particular time, place and situation. In the course of the research process, while trying to reconstruct the process of becoming a successful leader and identify key aspects of successful leadership at school in socially unprivileged areas, I conducted the research not only at the level of an individual (headteachers), but also at the level of a school and its surroundings. This enabled me to take into consideration social, cultural, economic and political situations.

Using a qualitative case study approach one of the research question was formulated as follows: “What are the key aspects of successful leadership practices used by headteachers in schools in a highly disadvantaged urban context?”

The aim of the study was to establish “fuzzy generalisations” through plausible accounts of events and phenomena (Basse, 1999). The study, as I mentioned earlier, was an attempt to “get below the surface” of individual leaders’ values and to capture the complex school leadership task in these communities, with trustworthiness being achieved through comparing and contrasting evidence from a range of people and methods. The primary purpose of the research effort presented in this paper was to generate a deeper understanding of what key aspects of successful leadership practices are used by the examined headteachers to create a culture of success “against the odds”.

A purposeful sampling approach was adopted, aiming for “information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 1990: 52). Given the goals of the study, particular importance was placed on selecting schools from highly disadvantaged urban contexts:

- that have a good reputation (schools which aim to raise the achievements of all its students and have successes in improvements in these achievements, schools that achieve a rising level of: 'value-added' results regarding pupils' achievements, pupil attendance and social climate in the school and community);

- are led by the headteachers who (i) are constantly seeking to improve achievements of all school students, (ii) are widely acknowledged by their professional peers as being 'successful' leaders.

Inspectors from Local Authority's Education Service were asked to indicate headteachers whom they regarded as successful on the basis of the school evaluation, student achievement and peer acknowledgement.

In the presented study a comparative perspective was used. It allowed to have a better understanding of the successful key leadership practices in the researched schools in two different countries in reference to the socio-cultural, economic and political circumstances of these countries. According to Michael Sadler, one of the founders of comparative education, "In studying foreign systems of education, we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside (Sadler 1900, quoted in Higginson, 1979:49). It was assumed that analysis of the impact of these circumstances on key leadership practices can contribute to the development of knowledge on successful leadership practices in schools in challenging urban context. Regarding the Sadler's stance that practical benefits from comparative studies of foreign education systems lies in the fact that we begin to better understand our own educational system (ibid.), one can have an assumption that familiarity with foreign solutions can lead to the search for ways to improve national education, supporting the development of institutions and educational activities.

In the presented study qualitative data has been collected from groups of schools in challenging urban contexts in two major cities in England and Poland. These cities (Sheffield and Lodz) are long-established manufacturing centers that have suffered a decline and undergone more recent attempts to reconfigure their local economies, with mixed success. The Yewlands community in Sheffield is in the poorest five percent nationally, according to official data. Inner city Lodz is even poorer in absolute terms than its English counterpart, with incomes 60% below the national median, in a country with low levels of income overall. Both countries have relatively high levels of child poverty and disparity in living standards between rich and poor, with Poland having the highest levels of these in the EU (Marlier et al., 2007).

The final purposeful sample consisted of four primary schools and two lower secondary schools –with the majority of their students drawn from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds (the majority of the students live in neighborhoods which suffer poverty) where attendance and behaviour problems have existed. Whilst the schools did not have to be the most successful, they all met the following criteria: (i) the positive reputation of the school and the positive reputation of the current headteacher, and (ii) evidence of success in terms of students' educational achievements.

In order to explore the key aspects of successful leadership practices used by headteachers in schools in a highly disadvantaged urban context, a research design was constructed that incorporated multiple methods of data collection. Different methods were used to triangulate data, to build rather than test theory.

Multiple methods of data collection included a one-to-one semi-structured interview with the headteacher and an interview with a group of four classroom teachers at each school and interview with the groups of up to six parents and up to six students at each school. Researchers used a common interview protocol. The schedule included themes

like changes in the school, perceptions of success and headteachers role in the school's success, the relationships between the headteacher, leadership colleagues, teachers, students and parents, and the headteachers actions in pursuit of student achievement. In addition, a wide range of documentary data (relevant "concrete" evidence, e.g. inspection reports, performance data) was collected concerning each school. In the early stages of the research, clear sets of ethical and practical guidelines were agreed with the participants.

An interpretivist approach to data analysis established primary patterns in the data and identified meaningful and significant issues (Dey, 1993; Patton, 1990). All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Transcripts were returned to the interviewees for correction and validation purposes. Interview data enabled in-depth, cross-case comparisons to be undertaken. This analysis led to the emergence of a number of common themes and key findings.

2. Findings: searching for synergy

In the next section of this paper I will focus on some findings connected with the one of the identified phases of school development, which I named: "Searching for synergy: stabilization and consolidation". While discussing this phase I will focus on the successful leadership practices employed and on the assumptions underpinning them.

I named the phase discussed in this section "Searching for synergy: stabilization and consolidation" because experiences of the research participants stressed integration of activities of many educational entities within the school's development in order to increase the chances for educational success of pupils. Research participants were convinced that results gained through synergy are incomparably better than the results of individual actions. The synergy phenomenon is accompanied by activation of collective energy, which in turn appears when people work together. When acting alone you are not able to carry out the things that become the result of cooperation (Corning, 1985).

It should be emphasized that the researched headteachers were involved in discovering cultural patterns and in disseminating and strengthening them (see: Madalińska-Michalak, 2013). In practice, this led to emergence of clear cultural patterns in schools, to implementation of those patterns, and to activities responsible for stabilizing the selected development path of the school. Thanks to this, when discussing this development phase, it was possible to refer to terms like: stabilization and consolidation (Sikorski, 2006). The research participants concentrated on cooperation reinforced by mutual trust not only at school, but also outside of it. In the same way they provided foundations for creation of practitioner communities acting within different learning networks. Key aspects of successful leadership – within the school development phase discussed here – were visible in activities connected to favoring the teachers' leadership. They were also related to building a relationship with the local community in order to create a cooperative network and to promote collaboration between the school and institutions or organizations outside school.

2.1. Teachers' leadership

The analysis indicates that the researched school headteachers were involved in creating conditions facilitating teachers' participation in management and leadership of the

school. A basic element of the headteachers' approach to school management was increasing the part that the teachers played in the school's life and increasing their involvement in decision-making. This approach also involved increasing information flow between the headteacher and the teachers and this was described by one of the research participants as "sharing the leadership". The research participants appreciated real participation of the teachers; they perceived it as a chance for solving difficult problems occurring in the school. Here is an exemplary, and characteristic, statement:

I have always assumed that leadership is not something that is innate. On my own example I can see that you can learn leadership. Of course, some predispositions for being a leader are necessary. And that is also something I have learned first hand. Nevertheless, more important than the predispositions are headteachers and their learning ability. It is the headteacher who is responsible for encouraging the teachers, for reinforcing their sense of effectiveness and self-esteem. A team of people and not just one director should manage school. This is my motto at work. These are the convictions that I strove to pass on to my teachers. Step by step I have tried to give everyone at school the opportunity to become a leader, and for everyone to be responsible for the events taking place at school. (Headteacher, primary school, England)

The excerpt above illustrates that the research participants did not perceive leadership as a defined place in a hierarchy, but rather as a process for which many of the school staff were responsible. Understanding the leadership as connected to a vision of a strong individual, a person able to change the school on their own, was foreign to the researched headteachers. While striving to alter the school's image they rather made an effort to place their trust and respect in the teachers, and above all to encourage them to act. At the same time they were convinced that achieving positive results was much more probable in situations where the teachers took action, rather than merely reacted to actions. Research participants were in favor of including the teachers in the decision making processes through clear and supportive organizational structure of the school. Reconstruction of the professional experiences of participants has revealed that they put an emphasis on their cooperation with the teachers, and as the result of that, in practice decisions of all kinds were not their exclusive domain.

Nevertheless, it was the research participants, as headteachers, who were ultimately liable; they were the ones accountable for the success or failure of their schools. The analysis revealed that the headteachers were conscious of the fact that it was their discretion to what extent the leadership was spread in the school. First of all, it was the headteacher who was responsible for creating the conditions which encouraged the teachers to take up challenges, to participate in decision-making, and to lead others at school and in its environment.

A strong emphasis on leadership distribution was put by the British headteachers, who also stated that the teachers' participation in leadership was the basis for releasing their potential, for facilitating their development, for increasing and reinforcing their sense of responsibility. This can be seen in their statements cited below:

My work at school taught me to perceive other people's potential. I try to carefully observe what the teachers can give the school from themselves, because this is a very important thing. I always try to encourage the teachers to take on the leadership responsibility for their work and to show them that I am not alone in the school. If we are going to change anything, we have to act together. (Headteacher, secondary school, England)

I have learned to observe the principle that leadership in school should not be limited to the school director alone, but to selected teachers. It is important to me for my teachers to be willing to take responsibility for their work. I avoid the role of a main arbiter. Instead, I

strive for the decisions to be made together, for the teachers to lead others in their professional development process or in creating curricula. (Headteacher, primary school, England)

Headteachers in Poland had –especially at the beginning of their work– all kinds of difficulties with releasing the leadership potential among the teachers. There were situations, where they felt they could not, despite their own beliefs, share problem solving with their teachers or making decisions with them. Sometimes the difficulties had a more external nature, sometime they were connected to the headteacher himself/herself. An example of such state of affairs can be seen in the following statement:

It was important to me to build a sense of achievement in the teachers. I wanted them to start believing that in that school many things depend on them, because they can make important decisions and take responsibility for them. It turned out to be a big problem because, on the one hand, I am inclined to do things on my own and, on the other hand, it was a small school. In practice this meant that I instinctively wanted to take care of different things personally and not involve the teachers. But the realization that it is not right, as well as my previous experiences, told me that I should imagine a red light every time when such a temptation appears. (Headteacher, primary school, Poland)

The data analysis showed that the basic leadership skill of the headteachers, especially of the Polish headteachers, was their skill of handling the boundaries between an autocratic and democratic manner of decision making. Performing the leading function at school forces the involved person to decide how he/she wants to see themselves in the role of a school headteacher.

A true involvement takes a lot of time that should be devoted to the teachers. Because it is much more time-consuming than keeping your distance, I have very carefully selected the right moment to directly interact with the teachers. The whole trick is to know how to be close and distant, if it is necessary. My whole problem was that I had to learn how to get involved in the teachers' work without giving the impression that I am their buddy. (Headteacher, primary school, Poland)

Many headteachers prefer to keep their distance towards the teachers, because getting involved can entail unpredictable consequences or incline the teachers to ask questions, which they cannot answer, or which they would prefer to avoid. My practice has proved to me that this risk is worth its price. An open, more informal nature of the professional relations helped me discover new areas. Nevertheless, in the beginning I had many problems with leaving that excessive distance, which was it a way imposed on me together with the role of a director. (Headteacher, secondary school, Poland)

The analysis showed that the researched headteachers acknowledged that some of the managing tasks should be delegated to the teachers, so that their execution involved independent actions by the teachers. Such active participation of the teachers in school management can be conducive to seeing the school's issues in a broader perspective. Headteachers of Polish schools, similarly to the headteachers of British schools, emphasized the importance of the teachers participation in the school management process and of the teachers' leadership connected to that participation. A distinct characteristic of the headteachers' work was their coping with distrust, which they encountered at schools. The professional experiences of researched headteachers suggest that both parties (the headteacher and the teachers) have to be prepared for participation in school management process. Sharing the leadership in school means accepting the importance of involvement and responsibility of each member of the school community. Research participants pointed out activities and circumstances that weakened trust, especially in the early stages of their work, and how this contributed to

the difficulties of building relations between the headteachers and the school's teaching staff.

2.2. Educational partnerships

Analysis of the data shows that the headteachers gave priority to the school's openness to cooperation with parents and with local community. The headteachers put an emphasis on circumstances that would allow for active support of the students' development by giving their parents a part in the education of their children and by tightening the relations with parents. One of the headteachers of primary school in England stated that "if parents are not on your side, you lose" and this would stand as a motto for all of the research participants. Because of this the headteachers strove not only for the school to offer the parents various opportunities for cooperation, but perceiving the parents as their allies, with whom their common ground is their concern for the child's development, they also put much effort into convincing the parents to engage with the school.

In the early stages of the headteachers' work cooperation with parents in all of the researched schools was a kind of everyday "problem". Both parties, school and parents, were at least in part responsible for this state of affairs. The headteachers, not wanting to maintain this state any longer, tried to change the situation at least partially. During the interviews the headteachers discussed this directly. Below a few excerpts from their comments are cited.

I was shocked when I have observed something that could be called pro-school passivity of the parents. I was wondering where it came from. I turned my attention to teachers. And I must admit that if someone observed this school for a longer while they could get an impression that some of the teachers treated cooperation with the parents like a heavy burden. There was no way that this could be ignored. (Headteacher, secondary school, England)

If teachers complain about the lack of cooperation with parents, I think that first and foremost they should take a long good look at their own work. It is often the case that the teachers complain because the teachers do not strive for that kind of contact. Someone always has to make the first step. If we just keep sitting around, nothing is going to change. We just need to meet the parents halfway. If parents do not make that first step, then we have to do it. And then tell them we are organizing for example aerobics for mums. And it does not matter that there are going to be only two mums. But they are the ones that want to do this. (Headteacher, primary school, Poland)

These comments indicate that in the researched schools both teachers and parents were convinced that they were mutually responsible for their behavior towards each other, for their relation to the importance of cooperation and for its implementation, for their realization of activity goals and of the means they had available. One of the chosen comment below illustrate further this state of affairs:

You cannot rest on your laurels here. Every day is a challenge for someone else. Everyday brings something new. We learn different things. At any moment a superintendent of schools can approach one or another person and tell them something that makes your hair stand on end, so this is a challenge. For a person who does not like to be bored, yes, this school is a right place for such a person. Things are happening all the time here. So if you like nice and quiet, you need to find yourself a more peaceful, more stable school, where you will be able to work quietly until the day you retire. I will say that again: I like those kids because they are honest. I like those parents because even when they do not have a spare cent they will come and ask – not all of them – how they can help or "I don't have any money but I do have time, so maybe I could help paint something". Those parents, when they had been shown that

something is changing in this school, that we want to actually do something, they started to come to us of their own will. (Headteacher, primary school, Poland)

Convincing parents to play a part in the school's work was perceived as a difficult task by all the researched headteachers. The basis for such difficulties was lack of educational aspirations prevalent in the family environment and a particular disbelief in the possibility of changing the personal situation. One of the headteacher commented it as follows:

All the projects we organize for parents and for the local community are very difficult. Recently, together with other schools, we organized a 3-day event. Unfortunately, only a handful of parents decided to participate in it. Reasons for this reservation can be found in the local history and in the culture of this environment, which is characterized by a significant distrust and lack of aspirations. (Headteacher, primary school, England)

This statement was complemented by conversation on the same topic with teachers. One of them said:

Recently I have talked to one of the pupils about her plans for the future. When I asked her what she would like to do when she finishes school, she told me: <nothing>>. So I asked: "What do you mean by: <<nothing>>." And she said "OK, my dad doesn't do anything, my brother doesn't do anything, my grandfather didn't do anything and I won't be doing anything... <<nothing>>". (Teacher, primary school, England)

Analysis of the collected data shows that the headteachers of primary schools were in a somewhat better situation when it came to tightening relations with the parents, than the headteachers of lower secondary schools. Each of the researched primary headteachers in the course of interview emphasized that the effort they invested in stimulating cooperation with parents resulted in noticeable success. Parents were more and more involved in school and they played a part in the school's life. On the other hand, at the secondary school level parents were barely involved in school and not very active. As the child moves to a higher level of education the parents become less and less active and unwilling to get involved in the school issues.

Despite this general picture the researched headteachers were satisfied with what they managed to achieve, in terms of making their schools more open to parents. Comments by the parents' and teachers' clearly spoke of positive changes where cooperation between the school and parents was concerned. The researched headteachers, especially British ones, emphasized that parents participated in all kinds of independent study teams, which were available to them at schools. Work in those teams helped the parents to understand the meaning of education and to build hope around the opportunity to change their personal situation and the situation of their children. Children who could observe change in their parents' attitude, expressed through their involvement in solving various problems, or in their greater persistence in undertaken tasks, approached their school duties with greater enthusiasm themselves and treated school as a place that was important for their development.

The headteachers' statements strongly emphasized cooperation, building educational partnerships – not only with the family environment of the students, but also with the local community. Research participants were well aware that if the schools managed by them were to develop, then they needed a strong rooting in the local environment. Hence they really valued building close relations with local communities and with education authorities. For the research participants it was important for their school to be visible in the local environment, to be needed not only by pupils but also by their parents and the entire community.

The headteachers strove to combine the potential of subject teachers, guidance counselors and school psychologists, specialists from all kinds of establishments and institutions located in the school's vicinity. In their comments the headteachers also mentioned building social capital. They stressed the benefits their work could bring to the local community. They talked about their schools being open to the local community, its needs and its peculiarities. Researched parents often used the expression "our school". This indicated how important a role the school plays in their lives and how strongly they were attached to that school.

Polish headteachers tried to create, as one of the headteacher of Polish school described it, "a coalition supporting the students' development", which necessitated ensuring conditions that would allow for effective everyday cooperation of this "coalition", as well as developing standards and rules of cooperation. In contrast the headteachers of British schools created networks facilitating learning. These networks were used for exchanging experiences, sharing knowledge and skills, and searching for problem solutions through team work. British headteachers attributed a special role to headteacher networks and to problem networks. Within those networks meetings were organized, during which areas of work, goals, and schedules for activity were established. Once the planned activities were implemented the headteachers worked out recommendations and proposals for further work. Specialists who were able to support the work of each network were invited to subsequent meetings.

The findings show that when British headteachers talked about changes in school and about a changed school, they emphasized the importance of learning, especially organizational and systemic learning. Polish school headteachers, on the other hand, when talking about learning and change in the interviews, did not mention systemic learning. British headteachers acted in accordance with the rule, mentioned by John MacBeath in the work: "What do we know about learning?" (2009), that four levels of learning can be distinguished at school: students learning, teachers learning, organizational learning, and systemic learning. Systemic learning means going beyond the concern for a single institution by building a network in order to improve the communication process and to build social capital (MacBeath, 2009:6-7).

The reasons for British headteachers' strong interest in the environment, in work for the local community, can be found in changes present for a long time now in the British educational policy and in local education conditions. In the last decades of the 20th century and in the beginning of the 21st century many programs were created whose goal was to involve parents and local community in school education. Local education authorities, in accordance with the newest legal regulations, have been responsible for ensuring quality in schools and for promoting high education standards for students of school age in their areas. The basic assumption of educational policy developed within "Every Child Matters. Change for Children" (DfES, 2004) was integration of services provided to children, as well as a more effective reflection of the real needs of children and teenagers, and of their families, in the services provided. At the end of 2007 a Children's Plan was published, which included a long term vision for improving the educational system and the services for integrated family support. One of the key elements of this program was establishing the school's role as the center of local community. Relations between parents, schools, health benefits sector, and other institutions providing services for the youngest are supposed to pave the way to happiness, health, and good conditions for learning for all the children. British

headteachers, according to “National Standards for Headteachers”, are obliged to develop and maintain an effective partnership with other schools, children agencies, local authorities, universities, and employers. Building on the support of the local community the school headteacher is responsible for creation of a learning environment that corresponds to the child's needs and is conducive to their development.

3. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis has revealed key aspects of successful leadership in schools. Within the school development phase described here, leadership activities of the researched headteachers favored teachers' leadership and "opening" the school to cooperation with parents and the local community by developing educational partnerships.

Researched headteachers strove to create an environment, where all the teachers would feel responsible for improving the school and for achieving elected goals together. Teachers' involvement in the work connected to planning activities important for the school's life and for decision making processes and these activities strengthened their sense of responsibility. The headteachers stressed what each person could give to the school and they appreciated the teachers' contribution in improving the school. At the same time they tried to discourage the teachers from the type of thinking that assumes that the headteacher is supposed to "solve" all the school's problems. Leadership of the researched headteachers, after Thomas Sergiovanni (1992), can be referred to as a moral leadership, a serving-oriented leadership, a leadership that is determined by personal value systems rather than by instrumental, managerial affairs.

The headteachers were involved in leadership concentrated on people, encompassing constant creation, maintenance, and renewal of learning among pupils, teachers, parents, and local communities. As Norman Longworth and Keith Davies (1996) would say – they have received from an excessively demanding society a task impossible to fulfill (*ibidem*, p. 40). However, these headteachers retained hope, optimism, and trust in their own abilities, which are important sources of an successful learning and of positive changes at school. Together with acceptance of the responsibility for a constant development of schools and for creating opportunities for better teaching and learning, these qualities never left them despite ever growing levels of accountability, emphasis on test results, unending school audits, and increasing bureaucracy.

Each of the schools managed by the researched headteachers treated cooperation as a source of strength that contributes to the development of leadership and improves the quality of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, establishing contact with local community in the British context seems to have been somewhat easier than in Poland. In Poland it seems to have been more difficult to build educational partnerships with other schools, especially with schools of the same type, located in a neighboring school district. The reason for such state of affairs is strong competition between the schools that still exists. Meanwhile, together with the new assumptions of British policy there appear foundations for the schools to strive towards cooperation, to create educational partnerships described by David Frost, John MacBeath and Jorunn Møller in the work: “Leaving a legacy: helping schools to collaborate in a climate of competition” (2009).

The research has shown that the headteachers can be perceived as leaders, who preferred to release a sense of power in the teachers rather than hand power to them.

Those headteachers not only guided, organized and supervised activities, not only built relations with school community, they also focused their attention on values which were supposed to ensure cohesion of the school. They acted in a way that excluded autocratic decision making at school, preferring for the decisions to be dependent on team activities.

The researched headteachers concentrated on values that guided them in their work. Their leadership originated in their ability to act together with others and to create conditions for others to act, but not under their power and control. These interesting conclusions are consistent with Mahen Tampoe's (1998) research and with findings from the project "Successful School Leaders", supervised by Christopher Day, Mark Hadfield, Alma Harris, Harry Tolley and John Beresford (2006).

The results of the research pertaining to successful leadership in schools within socially disadvantaged areas authorize me to draw the conclusion that there is no one successful model of leadership. The headteachers invited to the research followed in their work similar values. Their actions were aimed at similar goals. Ways in which the researched headteachers acted were influenced by all kinds of social, cultural, economic, or political dependencies. Headteachers, who took part in the study, tried to respond with their actions to the context in which they functioned. At the same time, they tried to change that context, in accordance with the saying "change the environment that tries to change you".

The research results have revealed the importance of the culture-forming role of the headteacher as educational leader, and they have indicated that changes introduced by a headteacher require a well thought-out idea about the school, its place in a society, and the role it is supposed to play. Researched headteachers showed consideration for shaping the school's culture (see: Madalińska-Michalak, 2013). In their everyday work they were guided by the principle that "a favorable school culture is not just a coincidence". It can be concluded that the headteachers strove to create an organizational culture that is networking, partnering, open, and friendly (see: Sikorski, 2006) because these are seen as the conditions for a culture of success "against the odds".

The conclusions presented in this paper are consistent with findings in the literature on leadership and social justice. This literature identifies schools that have demonstrated remarkable success not only with white middle-class and affluent students, but also with students from varied racial, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Maynes & Sarbit, 2000; Oakes et al., 2000; Riester, Pursch & Skrla, 2002; Scheurich, 1998). A lesson learnt from these schools and from the literature on school change is that exemplary leadership points to the necessity for change and helps make the realities of change happen (Bell, Jones, & Johnson 2002; Blackmore, 2002; Bogotch, 2002; Fullan, 1993; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Lyman & Villani, 2002; Rapp, 2002; Riester, Pursch & Skrla, 2002; Solomon, 2002).

Regarding the issues of successful school leadership practices and the conditions of creating a culture of success "against the odds", the presented study revealed not only what can be important within the school but also beyond it. The headteachers showed a considerable knowledge as far as cultural relations and conscious shaping of them goes. They influenced thinking and behavioral patterns of their teachers, striving to sensitize them to the benefits of learning in cooperation and of a collaborative search for solutions in response to various challenges. The headteachers aimed at making their school a

place of learning. They ascribed a special role not only to pupils' learning in classes but also to the school's learning as an organization. They treated teachers' learning at school both as their being capable of taking part in the school community's life, and as their ability to offer that community something of themselves, which is synonymous with involvement in social activity. The headteachers perceived teachers' learning as integrated with experiencing participation and with uniting around common values. They strove to reinforce teachers' learning by using internal potential of the school as a workplace, but also by opening that school to its environment. They were conscious of the fact that school should be the "subject of change". Hence, while leading the school they strove to inspire activities and learning of various educational subjects not only to adjust a culture to the needs of its members, but also to adjust "its members and their ways of knowing to the needs of the culture" (Bruner, 1996: 43).

We can learn from the presented study that the headteachers, running leadership roles, can –even in schools situated in disadvantaged areas– encourage practices, which raise the cohesion, integration and participation of everyone in the school. In order to develop this they should have explicit principles and values aimed to reducing and criticize the injustices in society that tend to perpetuate. They should be aware of the challenges of their roles in the in the development the school culture that promotes educational process for all students learn to their maximum capabilities.

Contemporary research on educational leadership and social justice tells us that there is not just a single model of leadership at school and there are no an exclusive practice for raising the inclusion, equity and justice. The most important contribution of the headteacher as an educational leader is to use strategies that are worthy to answer the needs school and its context (Harris, 2002; Harris & Chapman, 2002, 2004, 2006; Kugelmass, 2004; Michalak & Jones, 2009, 2010; Muijs et al., 2007), that –as we can learnt from the presented in this paper study– constitute a way to build the capacity for change in schools.

The presented study provokes to pose the questions about the role of the leaders in the school (not only the role of headteacher as a leader), about the way in which educational leaders can create a creative, inclusive educational environment at schools and how they can reverse the processes that embed inequities. It is especially important to identify, reconstruct and describe practices that are linked to social justice, its principles and ways to promote it.

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