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The features of schools which conducted a comenius project and evaluation of features in terms of collaborative leadership characteristics

Berrin BURGAZ^{a*}, Selçuk TURAN^b

^aHacettepe University, Beytepe Campus, Ankara/TURKEY

^bHacettepe University, Beytepe Campus, Ankara/TURKEY

Abstract

The major aim of this study is to identify the differences between the schools, one of which had implemented a Comenius Project and the other not, depending on the views of teachers. It also aims at determining the extent to which school administrators have collaborative leadership characteristics depending on stated school features. The study is a qualitative research. The data were collected through interviews and analysed with the descriptive statistical technique. The findings showed that each school has different school features and school administrators in the school involved in project have much more collaborative characteristics.

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1. Introduction

The Comenius Program is a European Union educational project. It concerns school-level education, and is part of the EU's Lifelong Learning Program 2007–2013. Its major aim is to assist both students and educational staff in having a better understanding of the range of European cultures, languages and values. Turkey is part of the program

* Corresponding author : Berrin BURGAZ. Tel.: +90532 424 7408
E-mail address: burgaz@hacettepe.edu.tr

and the projects carried out under the program in Turkey are being implemented through the EU loans allocated to the Ministry of EU. In addition, the Ministry of National Education reinforces and supports schools which are planning to engage in Comenius projects or which have implementing such projects.

It is needed to be in a different organization in order to have and implement a Comenius project. School administrators, teachers and students collaboratively work and spend extra time to achieve project's goals beyond the rutin school running. During the project process a lot of group studies are carried out for planning, decision-making, problem-solving and other activities related to project. Such project activities which are required extra and voluntary attempts make the school energetic and are realized through collaborative work by the participants. Therefore, implementing a Comenius project is mainly successful experience and it is worth examining what features lead to a school for success. In addition, this kind of project can also be considered as in connected to the leadership characteristics of school administrators. Collaborative leadership supports and facilitates collaborative work which requires the participation of different groups and/or people in different status in schools. However, not only leadership but also school culture should be expected to be "collaborative" for success of the activities.

1.1 Concept of School Culture and Collaborative School Culture

It can be argued that both culture and its elements are the products of human's life experience and of the interactions among people. Then these cultural products become behavioral codes guiding people's thinking ways and actions (Çetin, 2004) or cognitive programming that differentiate a group of people from other groups (Hofstede, 1980). In other words, cultural products are the reasons for or determinants of intuitions, ideas, values, emotions, attitudes and acts guiding groups of people and shaping people's life. It is asserted that both content and quality of culture also change when interactions among people change.

This social fact is also observed in the organizations. Schools which are among social organizations have been studied in terms of their culture. The concept of school culture was first used by Waller (cited in Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). Waller argued that schools have their own unique identity resulting from folkways, mores, sanctions and moral codes and that it guides relationships within schools. The concept of school culture began to be studied again when the concept of organizational culture became popular in the 1980s. Although there was no commonly agreed definition of the concept during this period some definitions became known. For instance, Deal and Peterson describes school culture as

"Culture influences everything that goes on in schools: how staff dress, what they talk about, their willingness to change, the practice of instruction, and the emphasis given student and faculty learning" (1998, p.28)

As stated in the definition above non-written rules, norms, expectations and traditions influence the functioning of schools. More importantly, school culture fills the gaps in formal school rules and functioning and therefore, affects people in schools and the functioning of schools. In other words, school culture has significant effects on school organization. Each school has its own culture. Those schools with collaborative culture provides teachers with opportunities to realize their energy, creative thinking, efficiency and attempts (Kohm & Nance, 2009). It is further argued that such schools increase professional solidarity among teachers, leading to having effective outcomes (Rubin, 2009). Basic characteristics of schools with collaborative culture include solving complex problems, professional networks to exchange information, taking much more risks and making experiments, having a rich technical language shared by educators in school, higher levels of organizational commitment and job satisfaction and continuous and comprehensive attempts to improve school (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). Collaborative school culture is based on "collaborative" thinking which is a prerequisite of democracy (Rubin, 2009) and is not suitable for hierarchical leadership models (Bowman, 2003). Collaborative school culture necessitates "collaborative leadership" to survive its entity.

1.2 Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership refers to collaborative relationships between school administrators and school staff and others in school (Gruenert & Valentine, 1998). It is shared by the school administrator, teachers and others, and

focuses on schoolwide activities to improve school. It requires the use and adoption of administrative processes that gives authority to both staff and students, encourages active participation in decision-making process, and supports shared accountability for student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Gruenert and Valentine (1998) list the common characteristics of collaborative leaders as follows:

- 1) Leaders value teachers’ ideas
- 2) Leaders trust the professional judgments of teachers
- 3) Leaders take time to praise teachers that perform well
- 4) Leaders engage teachers in decision-making process
- 5) Leaders facilitate teachers working together
- 6) Leaders inform teachers on current issues in the school
- 7) Leaders believe that teachers’ involvement in policy making is serious
- 8) Leaders reward teachers for their experimenting with new ideas and techniques
- 9) Leaders support risk-taking and innovation in teaching
- 10) Leaders protect instruction
- 11) Leaders encouraged teachers to share ideas

Characteristics of collaborative leadership are desired ones for people to lead to collaborative activities in schools. For instance, the Comenius projects carried out by joint efforts by school administrators, teachers and students are examples of such activities. For any project to be successful effective and continuous activities by stakeholders are needed (Hammick, Freeth, Copperman & Goodsmith, 2009). Therefore the study which finds out whether or not any Comenius project school’s organisational features stem from the characteristics of collaborative leadership may contribute to explain the relation between them.

Based on this basic aim the present study tries to answer the following two major research questions:

- 1) What are the school features of the schools which involved and did not involve in a Comenius project in terms of a) administrative activities, b) teaching-learning activities, c) social and cultural activities and d) school-parents cooperation, and do such characteristics vary between two groups of schools?
- 2) Do the school features indicate that the school administrators have the characteristics of collaborative leadership?

2. Method

The study was designed and carried out as a qualitative case study.

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study are primary school teachers working at four different schools in Zonguldak province during the academic year of 2012-2013. Two schools implemented the Comenius projects, and the other two schools did not have any such project. Total number of the participants is eight, two from each school. Since mostly English language teachers are active in the Comenius Projects, one of two teachers from each school in the study was chosen from them. Therefore, the critical case sampling which part of the purposive sampling techniques was employed in the study.

The data of the study were collected through interviews with the teachers sampled. Then the interviews were transcribed and coded for data analysis. These codes also used in the tables used for the presentation of findings. The schools sampled were coded with the letters as A, B, C and D and teachers were coded with T. The characteristics of teachers are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants of the study

Schools	Type of schools	Code of participants	Teaching field	Experience	Gender	Educational background
Project schools	Primary school (A)	A.T1	English language	9	E	Undergraduate
		A.T2	Turkish language	14	K	Undergraduate
	Primary school (B)	B.T1	English language	6	E	Undergraduate
		B.T2	Mathematics	4	E	Undergraduate
Non project schools	Primary school (C)	C.T1	English language	5	K	Undergraduate
		C.T2	Classroom teaching	20	E	Undergraduate
	Primary school (D)	D.T1	English language	7	K	Undergraduate
		D.T2	Physical education	8	E	Undergraduate

2.2 Data collection

As stated earlier the data of the study were gathered through semi-structured interviews which are among qualitative research techniques. The interviewing technique provides the researcher with the opportunity to ask the participants both major questions and related secondary questions to express their views about a specific subject (Türnüklü, 2000). In order to develop the interview questions a literature review was done to identify the basic processes of school functioning. The questions developed were categorized based on the related process. They were also simplified to facilitate the understanding of teachers. The interview forms were reviewed by three faculty members and some secondary questions were added. In the final form there are four major questions in regard to four main processes and there are 18 secondary questions.

In order to test the understandability and content of questions a pilot study was carried out on a sample of four teachers from four schools (again, two project schools and two non project schools) in Zonguldak. The findings of the pilot study indicated that the interview form is convenient to use in the study. The interviews were carried out between 1-30 April 2013. The minimum and maximum duration of the interviews were 50 minutes and 95 minutes, respectively. All interviews were made in a quiet room in the schools where the participants were working.

2.3 Data analysis

The data obtained were analysed through descriptive statistical techniques and related information was recorded for each question. In the descriptive analysis two steps were followed (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The first step is to develop a framework for descriptive analysis. In this step the framework was developed including a) administrative activities, b) teaching-learning activities, c) social and cultural activities and d) school-parents cooperation. The second step is to process the data based on the framework developed. In this second step data were categorized based on the major themes given above.

3. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study obtained concerning school features, and the relationship between these features and the characteristics of collaborative leadership.

3.1 Teachers' views about administrative activities

The views of the teachers about administrative activities working at project schools and non-project schools were collected through the questions given below:

- a) You or your colleagues have a new idea which you or the others believe that it will be useful to your school. How your administrators behave or react when you or others explain the idea at that time?
- b) Do school administrators support your participation in school-related decision-making processes?
- c) Except for formal meetings and your official duties can you talk to the school administrator?
- d) How do your administrators react when you ask permission for personal reasons or you tell about your private problem?
- e) Do school administrator participate in the meetings of commission or committee which are in the responsibility of teachers in school. Do they have any interest in such meetings?
- f) What are the reactions of school administrator when you express your ideas about the current functioning of school which can be useful for the school itself or students?

Table 2 presents the school features and the characteristics of collaborative leadership depending on teacher views related to the questions above. The responses of teachers were grouped under six sub-themes and it is found that there are some differences in their views.

Table 2. School features and collaborative leadership characteristics based on teacher views about administrative activities

Themes	Views of teachers in project schools	Views of teachers in non project schools	Evaluation in terms of collaborative leadership
Support for new ideas/Openness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Initiative *Practices out of regularities *Safe environment *Equipment support *Attempts to overcome barriers *Being open to new ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Very limited support *Strict use of regularities *Less motivation *Not being able to finalize activities *No interest and avoidance *Getting anxious about potential problem 	<p>*Project schools In these schools administrators exhibit the following characteristics; valuing teacher views, trust in teacher judgements and making possible for teachers to take part in decision making process, facilitating the common work of teachers, and encouraging teachers to share their ideas.</p>
Participation in decision-making process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Continuous dialogue *Constructive and friendly setting *Take care of common decision making process *Variety in topics to be decided *Exchange of views in informal settings *Flexible exchange of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Rare exchange of ideas *Only notification of decisions *Limited participation in the decision making process about themselves *Strict use of regularities 	
Informal relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Good relations with everybody *Openness to dialogue *Positive dialogue setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Limited conversations about school *Short conversations 	<p>*Non project schools</p>
Sensitivity to personal problems and ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Continuous support and understanding *Sensitivity to permissions (related to professional development activities, graduate studies and health issues) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Support under regulations *Asking for excuses for permissions 	<p>In these schools administrators do not exhibit any characteristics of collaborative leadership concerning administrative activities.</p>
Interest in teacher activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Participation with enthusiasm *Frequent participation *Conveying the ideas openly and positively and not intervention *Also participation of vice principals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Participation to only some meetings *Mostly participation of vice principals *Mostly talk of principals 	
Interest in teacher views about school activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Taking into consideration *Realization when possible *Easy expression of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Taking into consideration *Realization of ideas which require low levels of financial support 	

3.2 Teacher views about teaching-learning activities

The views of the teachers about teaching-learning activities working at project schools and non-project schools were collected through the questions given below:

1. Do you assign your students collaborative research projects? Do you allow your students to share the findings of these projects in your classroom? What is the attitude or reaction of school administrators to these activities?
2. Do you use various sources for your courses other than textbooks and other supplementary sources recommended by the Ministry of National Education (MONE)? What is the reaction of school administrators to these activities?
3. Do you have professional cooperation with your colleagues who some of which are in your field and the others not? What is the attitude or reaction of school administrators to these activities?
4. Do you regularly observe and follow and evaluate your students? Do you inform them about their incomplete knowledge revealed by your evaluation? Do you take steps to overcome these? How? What is the attitude of school administrators to these activities?
5. Do you use new ways of teaching and try them in your teaching activities? What is the attitude or reaction of school administrators to these activities?

Table 3 presents the teacher responses to the questions above in relation to the features of schools and characteristics of collaborative leadership. The responses of teachers about teaching-learning activities were grouped

under five sub themes and it is found that there are some differences in their views.

Table 3. School features and collaborative leadership characteristics based on teacher views about teaching learning activities

Themes	Views of teachers in project schools	Views of teachers in non project schools	Evaluation in terms of collaborative leadership
Making students do the projects in cooperation	*Frequently *Continous attempts *Rewarding the best *Sharing with class *Administrators' support	*Rare (once a year) *Not project but assignment *Limited sharing with class *No administrators' support	*Project schools In these schools administrators exhibit the following characteristics; taking risks and supporting taking risks, and trusting in teachers' professional judgements, faciliating joint teacher work, informing teachers about new practices, supporting to share ideas and new activities.
Using various and different sources	*Using various sources (not advised by MONE) *Support by both administrators and parents	*Using various sources (not advised by MONE) *Support by both administrators and parents	
Professional cooperation among teachers and support for professional development	*Continous cooperation *Extensive exchange of ideas *Support in professional problems *Proper setting created by administrators and support by them for professional development	*Rare guiding *Weak professional solidarity *Indifferent administrators to professional development	
Identifying the students' incomplete knowledge-base/sharing it with them and taking steps to improve it	*Continous evaluation of student achievement (careful and systematical follow-up) *Identification of incomplete knowledge-base *Recognition of self-defiancy (self-motivation/how can I teach?) *Taking personal steps for students (individualized teaching and assignments) *Relecturing on incomplete topics *Assigning projects and presentations *Reviewing exam papers *Special attention and support by administrators	*Summative evaluations based on examinations instead of continous and time-consuming evaluations *Being informed to inform school supervisors *Interest in student achievement since it is obligatory *Not taking special steps to improve student achievement *Additional assignments for unsuccessful students *Responding students' questions only during recess *More exercises *Interest by school administrators to inform school supervisors	*Non-project schools In this regard the school administrators only take into account the teacher views about using various sources.
Taking risks over teaching/ trying new activities	*High levels of interest in teaching-learning activities *Eagerness to have additional education on professional development *Openness to new activities *Encouragement and support of administrators (for additional education, being informed about new approaches)	*Limited learning about new activities *Involunteerness to try new ways *Limited administrator support	

3.3 Teacher views about social and cultural activities

The views of the teachers about social and cultural activities working at project schools and non-project schools were collected through the questions given below.

1. Is there any school or class newspaper or bulletin in your school? What is the attitude or reaction of school administrators to these activities?

2. Is there any active drama group in your school? What is the attitude of school administrators to these activities?

3. Is there any competition of sports or a poetry reading and quiz competition or in other fields? What is the attitude of school administrators to these activities?

4. Is there any school or social trip that school administrators, teachers, parents and students take part in?

What is the reaction of school administrators to these activities?

5. Do you have opportunity to come together with your administrators outside of school? What is the attitude of school administrators to these activities?

6. Do administrators and teachers regularly generate a fund among them to spend for certain common objectives (i.e. for any social activity, for poor people, educational grant for some students, etc.)? What is the reaction of school administrators to these activities?

Table 4 presents the teacher responses to the questions above in relation to the features of schools and characteristics of collaborative leadership. The responses of teachers about teaching-learning activities were grouped under six sub themes and it is found that there are no difference in their views.

Table 4. School features and collaborative leadership characteristics based on teacher views about social and cultural activities

Themes	Views of teachers in project schools	Views of teachers in non project schools	Evaluation in terms of collaborative leadership
Publications such as school newspapers, bulletins etc.	*Monthly thematic bulletins *Newsletters *Bulletinboard by students clubs *No administrative support	*Newsletter *No administrative support	*Both project and non project schools
Drama activities	*Smallscaled class dramas *Smallscaled plays in special days *Lack of experience teachers *No administrators' support	*A small play under the heading of "English drama exercise" (2 years ago) *No administrators' support	Any result can not be inferred that indicates collaborative leadership caharacteristics based on obtained data.
Competitions	*Frequently *Varied competitions *Support by administrators	*Frequently but only in sports *Support by school administrators	However, in project schools there are more various activities and there are more varied interactions between teachers and administrators than non-project schools.
School trips	*Certainly in each semester *With parents if it is out of city *With administrators if it is out of city	*Each year a in city and out of city trips *With administrators if it is out of city	
Extra-curricular activities	*Frequently *Astroturf match *Picnics *School trips *Home visits *When anyone leaves school *When anyone marriages *In teachers' day *Few participants *Frequent participation of school administrators	*Rarely *Only teachers *For only in official duties *In "Teachers' Day" *Rare participation by school administrators	
Welfare	*When necessary at once *All people in the schools *Sense of welfare *Participation and support by administrators	*When necessary *Rarely *Only some teachers *Participation and support by administrators	

3.4 Teacher views about school-parents cooperation

The views of the teachers about school-parents activities working at project schools and non-project schools were collected through the questions given below.

1. Do parents regularly participate in school meetings? What is the attitude of school administrators to these activities?

2. Do parents come school to be informed about their children excepting official school-parent meetings? What is the reaction of school administrators to these activities?

3. What is the level of interest of parents to social-cultural activities in school? Do you invite them to participate in these activities? What is the attitude of school administrators to these activities?

4. Is there any cooperative activities with parents? Do you have any cooperation with parents? What is the

reaction of school administrators to these activities?

Table 5 presents the teacher responses to the questions above in relation to the features of schools and characteristics of collaborative leadership. The responses of teachers about school-parents activities were grouped under five sub-themes and it is found that there are some differences in their views.

Table 5. School and collaborative leadership characteristics based on teacher views about school-parents cooperation

Themes	Views of teachers in project schools	Views of teachers in non project schools	Evaluation in terms of collaborative leadership
Participation in parent meetings	*Higher levels of participation *Good communication *Sharing problems or solutions between administrators and teachers	*Lower levels of participation *Infrequent participation *Parental concerns about asking for financial support *Controlled by administrators	*Project schools The school administrators exhibit the following characteristics: trusting in teachers' professional judgements and facilitating common teacher work.
Meeting with parents other than in meetings	*Higher levels of parental sensitivity *Frequently *Telephone calls *Administrators are pleased with parents' interests	*The same parents participate *Infrequent *Near to the end of semester *No reaction by administrators, no special effort	
Participation of parents in school activities	*Participation by parents if their children are involved *Mostly *Paying attention to participation of parents by administrators	*Participation by parents to some important activities *Mostly *Paying attention to participation of parents by administrators	*Non project schools The administrators support only for common teacher work.
Common activities	*Avoiding non attendance by students *Social activities *Support by administrators	*Kermesses *Support by administrators	

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The activities carried out by organizations are among the distinctive features of organizations (Aydın, 1994). The way they carry out activities can also be taken into consideration. It may further provides information about characteristics of centralised organizations.

The present study analysed school features through teacher views and highlighted the functioning of schools asking how. The findings about project schools show that the school administrators have higher levels of participation and interest in activities. In addition such schools are found to have the following features: provision of proper setting, continuous cooperation and support, support for professional development, constructive professional solidarity, careful and systematic follow-up and support for students, openness to new practices, positive school-community relationships, common and shared decision-making process, higher levels of interest in activities by school administrators, teachers and parents. The findings about non-project schools revealed that these schools have the following features: lower levels of interest and participation by school administrators in activities, activities limited to regularities, weak communication and cooperation, weak professional solidarity, interest in student achievement due to its being obligatory, cautious approach towards new practices, decision-making based on authority, and weak school-community relationships.

It is seen that project schools exhibit much more desired features. It can be argued that project schools are much more eligible for the features that are pertinent to common activities such as problem-solving, sharing of experience, efficient and continuous attempts (Hammick et. al., 2009), eagerness to achieve, working with others, and consecutive and simultaneous activities (Morrison & Arthur, 2013). Therefore, the administrators of the schools which are planning to be involved in project-type activities can review the schools in terms of such features.

In terms of collaborative leadership characteristics the findings are similar. School administrators of project schools are found to have more collaborative leadership characteristics. More specifically, they exhibited eight of eleven such characteristics proposed by Gruenert & Valentine (1998). The collaborative leadership characteristics that were not found in the sample are as follows: "Leaders take time to praise teachers that perform well", "Leaders inform teachers on current issues in the school", "Leaders reward teachers for their experimenting with new ideas

and techniques”. In non-project schools it is found that school administrators exhibit the collaborative characteristics of “Leaders value teachers’ ideas” and “Leaders facilitate teachers working together”. The main result of the study is that schools must have certain characteristics that are required to plan and implement projects such as the Comenius Projects which requires continuous, systematical, time-consuming common work and school administrators should have collaborative leadership characteristics.

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