Transformational Leadership of School Middle-Leaders: Antecedents and Consequences for Teachers’ Professional and Organizational Commitment

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Abstract

In this age of pedagogical innovativeness, the tasks assigned to the school principal keep multiplying. This multiplication of tasks creates the need to distribute leadership responsibility throughout the schoolwork levels. School principals have increasingly come to rely for support on school middle-leaders in carrying out their leadership role (Benoliel, 2017). This study focuses on middle-leaders – classroom teachers of high status/position and organizational knowledge, who hold key positions affecting school achievement and effectiveness (Leithwood, 2016) – and proposes to examine the antecedents to transformational leadership of middle-leaders, and its consequence for teachers work attitudes and behaviors.

Transformational leadership is defined as leadership based on emotional relationship and partnership accompanied by motivational arousal (Boehm, 2009). It includes the following sub-dimensions: (1) Idealized influence, relating to the extent to which a leader behaves in a way his followers wish to emulate. (2) Inspirational motivation, relating to the extent to which a leader expresses an inspirational vision. (3) Individualized consideration, relating to the extent to which a leader takes care of teachers' personal needs and inspirations. (4) Intellectual challenging, relating to the extent to which the leader challenges prejudice (Boies, Fiset, & Gill, 2015). Transformational leadership inspires to motivate teachers to do more than was expected of them under ordinary circumstances and beyond the expectations that they had defined for themselves before setting on their mission (Northouse, 2000; Raftar-Ozery, 2014). The approach of the present study leans on recent studies that enhance the importance of examining transformational leadership as a multidimensional variable, since the sub-dimensions of transformational leadership such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003) have been found as having differential effect on teacher attitudes and behaviors (Boies et al., 2015).

The objective of the present study is therefore twofold: first, we aim to examine the effect of the middle-leaders’ personality traits from the Big Five typology, namely, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness and neuroticism on their tendency to engage in the following five sub-dimensions of transformational leadership. (1) Extraversion, which describes talkative, energetic, ambitious, friendly and warm people, who tend toward
doing and organizing (Bekkers, 2002; Watson & Clark, 1997). (2) Conscientiousness, which describes responsible, diligent, pedantic people, who are work oriented and highly determined to reach their goals (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Lindley & Borgen, 2000). (3) Openness to experience, which describes imaginative, curious, creative people who seek cultural experiences and are motivated by the unknown and the complex (Buchanan, Johnson, & Goldberg, 2005). (4) Agreeableness, which describes warm, altruistic, generous and kind people, and includes features such as tact, love for the other, trust, sharing, humbleness and avoidance of conflicts (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; McCrae & Costa, 1987). (5) Neuroticism, which describes anxious, worried, insecure people. This trait reflects sensitiveness to psychological distress and a general tendency to experience negative emotions such as fear, sadness, anger and guilt (McCrae & John, 1992; Lindley & Borgen, 2000). We have focused on the Big Five personality traits because research suggests that these personality traits are associated with leaders’ attitudes and behaviors, and how they perceive, interpret, and use information to decide how to allocate resources and what policies to implement (Benoliel, 2017).

Second, we aim to investigate the differential relationship between the sub-dimensions of middle-leaders’ transformational leadership, namely, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration and the organizational and professional commitment of teachers. Organizational commitment is defined as the relative strength of the individual identification and involvement with the organization (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979), and the professional commitment is defined as the extent to which an individual invests in her work (Zaitman-Speiser, 2005). Such investigation is important because organizational and professional commitment are related to school effectiveness and a positive and healthy schoolwork environment (Bogler & Nir, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

The main assumptions of the study are that various relationships might be found between the personality traits from the Big Five typology, that is, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness and neuroticism of middle-leaders and their tendency to engage in the sub-dimensions of transformational leadership, that is, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. The other assumptions are that positive relationships would be found between middle-leaders’ transformational leadership and the organizational and professional commitment of teachers.

The study sample comprised 371 participants. One hundred and fourteen of them were middle-leaders, and the other 257 were teachers working in teams under the leadership of middle-leaders. To avoid problems associated with common method and same-source bias, the middle-leaders responded to a personality traits questionnaire, the NEO-Five Factor Inventory.
Data analysis included intra-class correlation (ICC) analysis, in order to check whether there is a dependence between the teacher members of the team led by the middle-leaders, and whether the data should be aggregated at team level. Findings from the ICC (1) indicated there was no dependence between teachers within the same team. Therefore, analysis was performed at the individual level. In order to test the proposed hypothesis, we first conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for transformational leadership survey in order to identify the subdimensions. Second, individual level analyses included hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Finally, to test an integrative model we use structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques with the AMOS 21 program.

The findings of the EFA, first indicated that transformational leadership is a one-factor variable, in contrast to the suggested multidimensional research approach. Thus, neither differential relationships of the personality traits to the sub-dimensions of transformational leadership, nor a differential impact on the teachers’ outcomes were found. Although those findings are surprising, this results are in line with previous studies performed in the educational context (see, for example, Berkovich & Eyal, 2017a) indicating that there are no distinctions between the sub-dimensions of transformational leadership and that it is not always possible to view transformational leadership as a multi-factor variable.

Secondly, no relationship were found between personality traits of middle-leaders and transformational leadership. However, SEM findings for the integrated model indicated that transformational leadership and the personality traits openness to experience and agreeableness of middle-leaders explain 51% of the variance in professional commitment of teachers. In addition, transformational leadership was found to explain 59% of the variance in organizational commitment of teachers ($\chi^2$/df=3.149 (19); CFI=.974; TLI=.944; IFI=.974; RMSEA=.08). These findings demonstrate a direct relationship between transformational leadership and teachers' outcomes of organizational and professional commitment as well as a direct relationship between the leader's personality traits openness to experience and agreeableness and teachers' outcomes of organizational and professional commitment. The more the teachers perceive their middle-leaders as transformational leaders, and the more the middle-leader personality is seen as agreeable and open to experience, the higher the teachers' professional commitment is. In
addition, when the levels of transformational leadership are high, the organizational commitment of teachers grows higher as well.

The conclusions deriving from the findings as to the one-dimensionality of the transformational leadership questionnaire are that the teachers perceived the middle-leaders as transformational leaders without distinguishing the sub-dimensions of the transformational leadership. There is a lack of consistency in the literature as to the differential effect of the sub-dimensions of transformational leadership. This suggests that there is a need to reexamine the effect of the sub-dimensions on larger samples and more varied populations (in addition to that of teachers), in order to investigate what causes the differential effect of the sub-dimensions of transformational leadership, or, alternatively, its one-dimensional effect. Although no relationship was found between middle-leaders' personality traits and transformational leadership, positive relations were found between two of the five personality traits, agreeableness and openness to experience and the professional commitment of teachers. In other words, in accordance with the Person-Environment Fit theory, the better the middle-leader's personality provides the teachers with their needs, the higher their professional and organizational commitment grows. The Person-Environment Fit theory is compatible with the present study model, showing the fit between a person and her organization. According to this theory, the middle-leader provides teachers with what they need, and consequently their organizational and professional commitment grows, which implies how important transformational leadership is for the teachers.

The present study has theoretical and practical implications. From the theoretical point of view, this study might expand the extant literature on the effect of interpersonal variance on teachers' professional commitment. In addition, the study might broaden the existing knowledge on the effect of transformational leadership as a one-dimensional factor on the teachers' professional and organizational commitment. Regardless of the importance of the role of middle-leaders, the literature on school middle-leadership often ignores their important contribution.

From the practical point of view, the study findings might enable school principals to acquire tools for creating a broad organizational base by which principals would be able to choose rationally the role holders – the middle-leaders that will share the multiple tasks assigned to them. The choice might be guided by the transformational leadership of the middle-leaders or by their personality. These two mechanisms might raise the professional and organizational commitment of their teacher community. Moreover, the findings might help professional development policy makers delineate tools for developing transformational leadership in teacher
continuing education programs, so that they can influence teacher outcomes and allow them to conduct collegial and cooperative working relationships.