Jean Kasereka Lutswamba

School Leadership and Educational Quality in Schools in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Abstract

In many schools in Sub-Sahara Africa, school principals and teachers experience problems to provide quality teaching. Most teaching methods are traditional. Some teachers are still using corporal punishment. The school principals behave as corporals and their feedbacks are destructive. In some regions, the best teachers leave the system. The unfortunate consequence of this situation on the pupils is school failure (EPT DRC, 2009). However, scientific research in education shows that school leadership has a great influence on the school performance, particularly, when leadership is based on constructive feedback. By its two main functions of information and strengthening, constructive feedback acquires power to motivate those who receive it to improve their performances or their behavior. This article reflects these problems and strategies how to address them by trainings are discussed.

Keywords: *School leadership, constructive feedback, educational quality*

Zusammenfassung

In vielen Schulen in Subsahara-Afrika haben Schulleiter und Lehrer Probleme guten Unterricht anzubieten. Die meisten Lehrmethoden sind traditionell. Einige Lehrer verwenden immer noch Körperstrafen. Schulleiter verhalten sich wie Offiziere und ihre Rückmeldungen sind destruktiv. In manchen Regionen verlassen die besten Lehrer das System. Die unglückliche Folge dieser Situation bei den Schülern ist Schulversagen (EPT DRC, 2009). Allerdings zeigt die wissenschaftliche Bildungsforschung, dass die Schulleitung einen großen Einfluss auf die Schulleistung hat, vor allem, wenn die Führung auf konstruktivem Feedback basiert. Durch die beiden Hauptfunktionen der Information und Stärkung ermöglicht konstruktives Feedback, diejenigen zu motivieren, die es erhalten, ihre Leistungen oder ihr Verhalten zu verbessern. Dieser Artikel reflektiert diese Probleme und diskutiert Strategien, wie sie durch Schulungen thematisiert werden können.

Schlüsselworte: *Schulleitung, konstruktives Feedback, Bildungsqualität*

Introduction

This article provides a summary of research on school leadership conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In this country, as elsewhere in Sub-Sahara Africa, the issue of quality education is acute. The DRC has subscribed to the Millennium Development Goals to improve the quality of the school system: increase access to school for all children of school age, improve teaching quality and governance in schools. Unfortunately, despite the will expressed in the texts of the Ministry of Education, the country still faces academic failure: school dropouts (dropouts and repetition school), level of performance and skills of students sometimes deplorable (Mokonzi, 2009). According to UNESCO (2005), quality education depends on several dimensions such as the learner, the teaching and learning process, the learning environment and the school system as a whole. Regarding the process of "teaching and learning" and the learning environment, there is need also to underline the education quality criteria such as classroom management, cognitive activation by tasks, good learning climate, school leadership, communication. It is the combination of all these dimensions and criteria that lead to quality education.

The study to be presented focuses on school leadership as one indicator of quality education and especially the feedback from principals to teachers and those from teachers to students. The article firstly describes the conceptual background of feedback as a tool for leadership and secondly the training on constructive feedback conducted for school principals. After this, the research methodology is introduces and the results are presented.

Conceptual background: Feedback as a contribution to effective leadership

Looking at school leadership, an autocratic management of schools and the use of destructive feedback between different educational stakeholders (between school principals and teachers, among teachers and students) are still to be observed in DRC schools and this – as a consequence – contributes to a poor learning climate leading to school dropout. Research shows that good school leadership contributes to student success. Constructive feedback is important in improving the process of teaching and learning (Hattie, 2012). It orientates the work of teachers and by this, promotes the learning of pupils or students. In addition, the lack of feedback delays learning and leads students to abandoning relevant modes of action (O'Brian, Marks & Charlin 2003).

Constructive feedback has two features that give it the power to improve learning: the informative function and the reinforcing function. For the informative function, constructive feedback informs the learner of whether the objective set is

achieved or not. At this level, the teacher shows the student mistakes in regard to the expected standard. But this is not enough yet. "Knowing the results, by informing the student about whether or not the criterion of success is met, is the simplest form of response to the student's performance. But it provides only a minimum of information to the student, and does not allow knowing directly how to modify his behavior to succeed the task." (Inacio, 2006, p. 7; translation: S. Krogull) Thus, in addition to the information about the mistake, the teacher must place particular emphasis on the student's reinforcement. The objective is to emphasize what the student is already capable of doing and motivate the student to achieve more as the feeling of one's own success is always motivating. Two important aspects should be mentioned: congratulations in case of success and encouragement in case of failure. Unfortunately, experience shows that in case of failure many teachers enjoy to threaten, criticize, and insult students and in some cases even whip them, which demotivate students and mainly lead to a sense of failure or incapacity among them. This can mark the child for long. Instead, teachers should have a rather positive attitude towards failure. By showing the student what he/she is already capable of doing and by showing his/her progress, the teacher creates an atmosphere of trust and motivation which encourages the student to persevere and to progress (Inacio, 2006). Hattie, in his meta-meta-analysis, was able to show the great impact of feedback on teaching (effect size .79). As teachers providing constructive feedback don't only provide information on the success of students and the difficulties encountered while trying to achieve goals, but also propose ways of dealing with the activity at hand in the future, constructive feedback allows to reduce the gap between what has been expected from the student and the student's actual performance. Constructive feedback allows for three questions: Where am I going? (the goals); How am I going? (strategies) and Where the next? (Hattie, 2012). The answers to these three questions, once given honestly, must lead the learner to improve his/her performance compared to the predetermined objectives (output and outcomes). The feedback allows the students to change perspective, to relate to their work and, therefore, to enhance their performance.

Intervention: Training of school principals and teachers in the DRC on constructive feedback

In order to change the negative attitudes of principals and teachers about the use of feedback, a training workshop on constructive feedback was organized in the Kivu region of the DRC. In-service training of professionals aims at raising the current competence level to the competence level needed in order to fulfill the requirements of a specific work domain (Gérard, 2007). The intervention's objective was mainly to introduce the culture of constructive feedback among principals and teachers of some Congolese schools in order to contribute to the improvement of the educational quality in their respective institutions. The intervention focused on the explanation and importance of constructive feedback, ways of giving and receiving constructive feedback, the status of the mistake as well as the relationship between constructive feedback and educational quality. The twelve participants of this intervention were later used to form the sample for the research to be carried out.

Research methodology

To learn about the implementation of constructive feedback and the principals' experiences during the implementation, a small research project was designed. As very little is known about the use of constructive feedback in schools in the DRC, a qualitative approach was chosen (Dumez, 2011), using structured interviews for data collection and a thematic analysis for data analysis (Savin-Baden & Mayor, 2013). The structured interview was chosen because of the comparability of the results. As the same questions are asked to every interviewee, this enables the researcher to easily compare responses of different interviewees, thereby identifying similarities and differences in the experiences of the principals and in relation to the themes discussed.

The sample of the study consisted of three principals who had followed the intervention (called principal A, principal B, principal C). Following the interview guide, questions were asked and the testimonies of the persons were collected in audio recording. The recording was accompanied by written notes that might facilitate the analysis of the data later on (Temporal & Larmarange, 2006). After recording the interviews, the audio data were transcribed.

The next step was to formulate the themes of the interviews which were related to aspects of the improvement of educational quality by the school leadership based on the use of feedback. Thus, with the thematic analysis, the various interviews could be confronted and compared with one another, thereby identifying similarities and differences according to formulated themes. The analysis followed some of the steps defined by Savin-Baden and Major (2013).

Results

When analyzing the data, three themes emerged and stood in relation to school leadership: participative school leadership, teaching and learning process, and feedback and the status of mistakes.

Participative school leadership

Regarding the theme "school leadership", all interviewed school principals agree that participative school leadership contributes to the improvement of educational quality in their institutions. When asked about the role of school principals, they all mentioned taking care of all school concerns, and in addition to this the collaboration between the headmaster and the teachers, the sharing of tasks, the notion of responsibility, autonomy and positive listening, getting together in order to solve problems, and mutual complementarity. In this regard, principal A said: "The work is going well because we collaborate; everyone is trying to get to work. (...) We complement each other with teachers and things work out well." (Verbatim) Principal B indicates the importance of accountability, empowerment, democratic attitude and positive listening for a head teacher to make teaching effective. He expresses it in the following words: "The experience that I have about positive feedback is when teachers find out that you listen to them and that there's a good exchange on the issue in a positive listening climate, they become more responsible. The corporate spirit that you work because the boss is there disappears among the teachers. This is what I can give as positive experience I have on feedback here." (Verbatim)

Still at the level of school leadership, principal C mentioned the importance of ensuring the welfare of teachers as to say

that the management of teachers must not only stop at the professional level. They need to feel socially and economically supported so that they give their best. This reality is even more important in the DRC where the teacher's salary provided by the government does not allow the teacher to satisfy their basic needs and make ends meet at the end of the month.

Notions such as communication, constructive feedback, organization of self-training sessions and self-assessment for a participatory leadership were also raised by schools principals as part of the levers of quality teaching.

Process of teaching and learning

Concerning the process of teaching and learning, the interviewed school leaders are unanimous on the use of constructive feedback as a means to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In this regard, principal A states: "(…) I have found that with the feedback, when it is given in a positive and constructive way, it encourages even the teacher to do better next time with his lesson." (Verbatim) Concerning students, the use of constructive feedback by teachers prevents them to discourage students. The same headmaster continues: "Really in the classrooms, I may not say that this teacher or that teacher discourages learners or gives them negative feedback. I think teachers have understood what it is about." (Verbatim)

Constructive feedback and the status of mistakes

Regarding constructive feedback and the status of mistakes, all school principals emphasize its importance in improving the process of teaching and learning. According to the interviewees, at teacher level, constructive feedback allows not only to welcome someone's strengths but also to accept his weaknesses and promise an improvement in the future. Indeed, experience shows that they are rare, those who openly admit their mistakes especially in a selective school system like the French system that the DRC has inherited. This argumentation of principal C on his teachers and the implementation of constructive feedback in his school is very eloquent on this subject: "My experience on the feedback: in previous years, we experienced difficulties with some teachers who refused to accept negative comments during evaluation of their lessons. But since the day we had the training on constructive feedback, because there, we must first begin by appreciating the teacher. After these appreciations, you now show them the points to be improved next time, thanks to this, now teachers do not show difficulties anymore to accept the advices given to them, they are ready to promise that they will improve next time." (Verbatim)

School leaders add that constructive feedback allows to eliminate any feeling of complex between teachers and their principal and to find compromises where there would be discord or disharmony. It therefore contributes to improving teaching quality.

Discussion of results

This research has shown, three themes: the relevance of participative school leadership, the power of constructive feedback and the status of mistakes in the process of learning. By establishing a connection between these three themes and results of the intervention, it is appropriate to draw some conclusions:

The relevance of participatory leadership school

The findings of my research show the relevance of participatory leadership in improving the quality of education. Research on leadership shows that effective school leadership is no longer that of a single person (the school principal), regardless of his/her intellectual, social, managerial, etc. qualities, but that of a leader who involves others in the school management, or the company. This may also be called distributed leadership. "The days of the principal as the lone instructional leaders are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for an entire school year without the substantial participation of other educators." (Spillane, 2008, p. 37) Leadership is no longer understood as the personal authority of a headmaster who has pedagogical power. Instead leadership in the school context is understood as a pedagogical initiative and any teacher can be the vehicle of this pedagogical initiative that needs to be shared among all actors and which is coordinated by the headmaster (Gauthier, 2007).

It is important to capture how and in which way school leadership can contribute to school success. Hattie, in his meta-meta-analysis, provides partly answers this question by defining some elements that promote learning: structured school climate and collegial and cooperative practices with motivated and stable teams (Hattie, 2009). Furthermore, research has shown that each type of school leadership has an effect on student achievement. The effect of the teacher on student achievement intervenes at 10 %, while the social background and the school context have an effect of 5 % (Bressoux, 2008). The way of recruiting teachers, their mobilization for pedagogical action, the desired pedagogical practices at school, the school organization and the type of relations among all school partners play a major role in student success. All of these elements depend to a larger extent on school leaders.

The power of constructive feedback

The results of my intervention and the findings of my research have clearly confirmed the power of constructive feedback. Through the analysis of the collected data I was able to show that school principals who applied the theories of constructive feedback that they had learnt testified with conviction and practical examples how the use of constructive feedback contributed to the improvement of teachers' performance. The data also showed that when headmasters are giving feedback to teachers after the observation of lessons and they start by mentioning positive aspects of the lessons, that this prepares the teachers to be well receiving when it comes to advice on how to improve aspects of their teaching and they are willing to promise change.

The data has also revealed that the use of constructive feedback by a headmaster establishes a relationship of trust between the headmaster and the teachers, improving ipso facto the work climate at school. Constructive feedback thus leads not only to responsibility but also to autonomy.

In the introduction of this article, I described the power of constructive feedback in improving not only teachers' performance but also the performance of students. Due to the different functions of constructive feedback, which are information (informing about the objectives and describing the performance), encouragement (congratulations or encouragements) and orientation (propose alternatives and ways of improvement) construc-

tive feedback certainly helps to improve the quality of education. Teachers as well as students need to work in a climate of permanent positive motivation to produce the best of what they can. In this sense, Hattie (2012), Inacio (2009), and Perrenoud (1996) insist on individualized instruction to help every teacher, every child to progress. "By redefining negative feedback, making it positive, we can accept their feedback and apply it to improve our motivation to change." (Folkman, 2006, p. 12) In light of these authors it can be conclude that a headmaster who wants to positively change behavior of his/her teachers needs to learn to use constructive feedback.

Constructive feedback and the status of mistakes

The interviewed headmasters were almost unanimous that constructive feedback leads teachers to accept their mistakes/weaknesses. One headmaster confirmed this by describing the change in the reactions of the teachers at his school after he had been trained on constructive feedback. Teachers who were indifferent and even hostile when receiving comments and advice changed their attitudes when their headmaster changed positively his evaluation style by using constructive feedback. Some school systems have developed a phobia, horror, or allergy against mis-takes. This is the case of the DRC where mistakes are so demonized that nobody wants to hear that he/she made a mistake and it becomes an obstacle to development, to change. Yet with John Hattie, it was mentioned that mistakes are opportunities to learn, so they should not be considered as signs of failure, and one should not try to remove them from life (Hattie, 2012).

Conclusion

The problem of school failure has been addressed by pointing fingers at destructive feedback by school leaders and teachers among the causes. School failure rate (dropout and repetition) in the DRC is among the highest in Africa with more than 15 %: The repeating rate in DRC is somehow higher than the average in Africa: 15.3 % of students repeating a year in DRC versus 13 % in Sub-Sahara Africa" (UNESCO/EPT/RDC, 2009, p. 3). The report also mentions that "the difference between girls and boys is reinforced at the school course ongoing: thus, 6 years after the entrance at school (which corresponds to the end of Primary school education for a course without repeating), 16.6 % of girls have already given up versus 12.1 % of boys" (MINEPSP(RDC)/EADE, 2013, p. 50). This contradicts the millennium development goals (MDGs) concerning education quality. Developing school leadership based on constructive feedback is one of the ways to resort this problem of failure. Interviewed headmasters chosen among those who were trained have recognized the power of constructive feedback provided by a headmaster for improving the performance of teachers. Confronting these results with the educational discourse, it shows that many educational experts have already provided theories in the same direction. The OECD Talis results (OECS, 2014) and John Hattie with his meta-meta-analysis on teaching and learning (Hattie, 2012) were discussed among others. Constructive feedback is therefore a valuable tool for a school leader to encourage, motivate, mobilize staff to provide the best of himself/herself in order to achieve the shared goal of improving the quality of education. Moreover, it must be em-

phasized that the constructive feedback translates the will of a school leader who has a positive vision of professional staff and school development. Constructive feedback is not compatible with an autocratic or authoritarian leadership style in a school. Considering all the results of this study and given the context in which this study originated and was held there is need of emphasizing the importance and the crucial necessity of continuous training of school leaders and teachers on the use of constructive feedback and other criteria of quality education for the improvement of the whole school system.

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Jean Kasereka Lutswamba, M.A.

is a school coordinator and Director of Education in the Baptist Community in Central Africa where he also manages an in-service teacher training program in participatory pedagogy financially supported by Brot für die Welt/EED. Jean Kasereka is currently a PhD student at Bamberg University in Germany. His research is focused on leadership and educational quality in developing countries.