

Principals as Indelible Leaders in the Context of School Culture

Munevver Cetin¹, K. Begum Dogruyol-Aladak²

¹Faculty of Education, Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey

²Faculty of Education, Suleyman Demirel University, Isparta, Turkey

Correspondence: K. Begum Dogruyol-Aladak, Faculty of Education, Suleyman Demirel University, Isparta, Turkey.

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the views of teachers on the leadership characteristics of school principals who leave marks in the context of school culture. For this purpose, the focus is on exploring the opinions of teachers based on the components of the school culture and the theory of indelible leadership which constitutes the theoretical framework of this study. With this purpose; the study was conducted as a phenomenological qualitative research design. Criterion sampling was used to access rich knowledge and experience and eight teachers who met the criteria were involved in the study. The data were collected through interviews with a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researcher. The descriptive analysis approach was used to analyze the data of the study. As a result of the descriptive analysis; three themes have been identified: "The Characteristics of Indelible Leaders", "The Process of Being Indelible to Create School Culture" and "Suggestions." By examining the characteristics of the leader who leaves marks; it is concluded that as a continuous learner, the leader is both essential and dispensable, supports teacher learning and sees a student as a change agent. Besides, in this study, it can be said that according to teacher opinions, the school principal's ability to create and reshape organizational culture can be shown as a trait of principals as indelible leaders.

Keywords: school culture, leadership, indelible leadership

1. Introduction

Leadership is a phenomenon that humanity has been making sense throughout history. Leadership is studied in all disciplines and is one of the subjects of interdisciplinary studies. As well as it is a subject studied in education discipline; leadership is one of the qualifications of school principals in educational organizations (Heck, 1992; Leithwood, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1987). When the literature is examined, there are studies in which leadership and school culture are discussed together (Bates, 1992; Carpenter, 2015; Stolp, 1996).

In studies where leadership is based on theories and related to school culture, it is seen that leadership of school principals is examined through transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016); charismatic leadership (Shamir & Howell, 1999) and shared leadership (Liljenberg, 2015). In this study, the theory of "Indelible Leadership" which is introduced by Fullan (2016) constitutes the theoretical framework of the study. Indelible leaders are defined as leaders who are self-aware and deeply focused on change and mobilize other leaders at all levels of the system, thus, create capacity for today and tomorrow (Fullan, 2016). In this theory, if the leaders who leave marks learn every day and help others how to learn, when they leave, others continue to learn. At this point, it can be said that the leader is the main function in making an impression for the organization. Moreover, the main emphasis in this theory is on deep learning. Deep learning is a basic strategy in which the students draw meaning and understanding from course materials and their experiences (Warburton, 2003). In other words, it can be said that learning by making sense of information is the opposite of superficial learning which is information processing by trying to memorize pieces of information without creating any coherent structure (Rocconi, Ribera & Laird, 2015). According to this; there is a need for deep leadership that is committed to achieving deep learning outcomes (Fullan, 2016). Deep learning outcomes, on the other hand, are characterized as 6 global competences: "character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking" (Fullan, 2016). This theory focuses on what kind of leadership characteristics creates such learning outcomes for the whole system. Indelible leadership theory consists of 6 dimensions (Fullan, 2016):

1. Combining moral imperative and uplifting leadership
2. Mastering content and process
3. Leading and learning in equal measure
4. Seeing students as change agents
5. Feeding and be Fed by the system
6. Being essential and dispensable

Managing these six dimensions is not designed to be followed step by step or as a linear process; on the contrary, they are monitored simultaneously which serve each other (Loose, 2017). These factors can be learned for effective leadership and can be encouraged to their members by indelible leaders (Fullan, 2016).

School culture is defined as the basic values, norms, beliefs, expectations, symbols, ceremonies, practices, perception and emotion shared by the stakeholders (principals, teachers, students, parents, etc.) of education (Hoy, 1990; Schein, 2004). Symbols in school culture; words, shapes, clothes, and language, etc. can be shown as stimulants that stimulate emotions (Berberoglu, 1990). In school culture, ceremonies can be shown as the functions that bring together members of the organization within the organization's objectives and provide organizational continuity (Terzi, 1999). Factors affecting school culture include policies, procedures and expectations for teaching, learning and student achievement (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). According to Schein (2004), culture refers to the norms, values, behaviors, rituals and traditions. School culture reflects examples of traditions, beliefs and values shaped in time (Ozdemir, 2006). For school context, school culture is shaped by the leadership of school principals (Celikten, 2003). School leaders follow three important ways of shaping culture (Peterson & Deal, 2011):

1. School leaders read the history and the recent conditions of the culture to know the deeper meanings which are embedded in school before attempting to reshape culture.
2. School leaders reveal and express core values, seek out what is best for students and encourage student-centered professionalism as to determine which aspects of culture are destructive or constructive.
3. School leaders create a positive context and strengthen negative and non-functional cultural elements.

Although previous research suggested that the leadership role of school principals is essential to shape school culture (Peterson & Deal, 2011; Schooley, 2005; Turan & Bektas, 2013), there has not been any qualitative research conducted to receive teachers' opinions regarding previous principals they worked with. This study aims to determine the views of teachers on the leadership role of school principals who leave marks in the context of school culture. For this purpose, the focus is on exploring the opinions of teachers based on the school culture and the theory of indelible leadership which constitutes the theoretical framework of this study.

2. Method

2.1 Design of the Study

In this research, it is aimed to investigate the indelible leadership characteristics of school principals according to the teachers' opinions by benefiting from their experiences. By following this purpose; the study was conducted as a phenomenological qualitative research design. The phenomenological study expresses the common meaning of a concept or experience for individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

2.2 Participants and Sampling

The study group was determined by criterion sampling method which is one of the purposive sampling methods. Criterion sampling is the sampling of individuals, events, objects or situations with identified qualifications associated with a problem (Buyukozturk, 2012). The basis of this sampling is to study and review all situations that meet certain predetermined criteria (Patton, 2014). The criteria can be created by the researcher or a list of criteria prepared beforehand can be taken into consideration (Yildirim & Simsek, 2016). To access rich knowledge and experience in the study, the criteria of having worked at least 5 different schools, having at least 10 years professional experience or having worked at a rooted school were determined by the researcher. Eight teachers who met the criteria were involved in the study. The basic rule for ideal sample size is the repetition cycle that occurs when the information reaches saturation. At some point, the entire new sample will present the data presented in the previous section of the research (Morgan & Morgan, 2008). In the event of this recurrence, the data collection phase of the study should be stopped and the sample size should be fixed in a place where the repetition was first seen (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007).

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through interviews with the teachers. In the study, the semi-structured interview form was prepared by the researcher and was structured by getting an expert opinion.

2.3.1 Semi-structured Interview Form

The semi-structured interview form consists of open-ended questions. During the development of the form, expert opinion was consulted and the pilot application was made. The final version of the form was created by making changes in the direction of the pilot scheme and the expert opinion. The interviews were recorded on the voice recorder with permission from the participants. Interviews ranged from 25 to 45 minutes.

2.4 Data Analysis

The descriptive analysis approach was used to analyze the qualitative data of the study. The data obtained in the descriptive analysis is systematically and transparently described, edited and interpreted and transmitted to the reader (Yildirim & Simsek, 2016). All the obtained data were written. The data were organized according to the themes which emerged from the semi-structured interview questions. The data collected under each theme were reviewed and edited. Findings and comments were created and expert opinion was consulted.

2.5 Validity and Reliability of Research

In the analysis of qualitative data, the names of the teachers who formed the working group were kept confidential to ensure data reliability. The participants were given the codes as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7 and T8.

To ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research, “member checking” was applied (Merriam, 2013). In this study, qualitative research findings were shared with the participants and feedback was obtained from the accuracy of the findings. At the same time, expert opinions were included in the research process to ensure validity and reliability.

3. Results

As a result of the descriptive analysis, which was conducted to determine the opinions of teachers about school principals as indelible leaders; three themes have been identified: “The Characteristics of Indelible Leaders”, “The Process of Being Indelible to Create School Culture” and “Suggestions”. Under the theme of “Characteristics of Indelible Leaders”, sub-themes of (i) personal characteristics and (ii) professional characteristics have emerged. Under the theme of “The Process of Being Indelible to Create School Culture”, sub-themes of (i) creating/initiating culture and (ii) sustainability of culture have emerged. Finally, the theme of “Suggestions” has occurred. The main theme and sub-themes are presented in Figure 1:

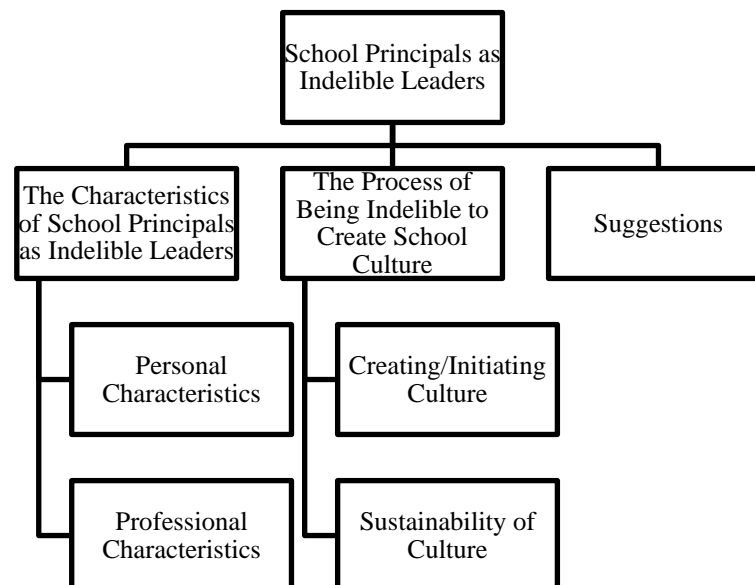


Figure 1. The Main Theme of School Principals as Indelible Leaders

3.1 Findings Regarding the Theme of the Process of Being Indelible to Create School Culture

According to findings regarding the theme of the characteristics of school principals as indelible leaders; the opinions of participants emerged as two sub-themes: (i) personal characteristics and (ii) professional characteristics. Sub-themes and codes are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Theme of the Characteristics of School Principals as Indelible Leaders

Characteristics	Frequency
1. Personal Characteristics	
Open to learning	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Planned	T1, T2, T4, T6, T8
Fair	T1, T3, T4, T5, T8
Kind but firm	T1, T3, T4, T5, T6
Innovative	T2, T3, T5, T6, T7
Empathetic	T1, T5, T6, T7, T8
Considerate	T1, T5, T7, T8
2. Professional Characteristics	
Seniority	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Supporting teachers	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Supporting students	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Developing a strong parent association	T1, T3, T4, T6, T7

Some participant statements regarding this theme are stated as follows. Participant T5 stated his opinion about being open to learning:

“He was incredibly open to learning... I gave an example from Kafka to the children. He (the principal) said to me, 'I've never read Kafka, I'm a music teacher, and I'm a bit embarrassed.' Then I gave him one of Kafka's works. Then he bought his book series. It's a very simple example... He considered how we could make the school a more beautiful place. For example, what should we put in the canteen so that the children could study in a comfortable environment? Like in American movies, our school had a different motto to have a culture. I would say that he was incredibly open-minded person.”

Participant T2, mentioned his principal as being planned: "...he made planning, actually, he made proper planning. At that time, there were no courses. He opened courses after school. He arranged them..." The participants thought that school principals, who made impressions on them, constituted fair and equitable treatment of students.. Participant T3 stated that the school principal was fair: "He treated all teachers equally ... He was fair..."

The participants mentioned that the principal was kind but firm. According to the opinions of the participants, being kind but firm was explained as both to fulfill the requirements of the administration and to create a positive atmosphere in the school while maintaining the fine line. In other words; it was revealed that teachers expressed the balance of formal and informal relations in school. The participant T4 stated that the school principal struck that balance:

“There's a fine line between being a friend and managing administration... If you are a friend, the teachers will relax ... they may think that it's not a job, but the situation is the opposite if it is too strict. Maybe he (the teacher) does, but he doesn't do his job properly. There is a fine line. When the fine line is observed, a good administration is seen. I had a school principal, who paid attention to this line, worked completely that way.”

The participants stated that the school principal, who made impressions on them, was open to innovations. The participant T7 stated that the school principal was open to new ideas as follows:

“When I first started to work at school, nobody knew about the counseling. I was the only school counselor. He (the principal) said: ‘What do you want to do?’ I said: ‘We should make teachers' board meeting...with a special agenda. I will tell what I am gonna do...’ This was an innovation for the school. The principal wouldn't support me if he wasn't open to new ideas. Other principals who I worked always said that there was no need when I wanted to do various activities...”

The participants felt that the school principals were good listeners and had high empathy skills. Participant T1 explained this situation with the following words:

“We felt that we were important, and this was for each of us. It made us feel special... Because he listened to us, his empathy skill was so great ...”

Participant T6 said that the school principal was considerate and stated this in the following words:

“... the school that I worked in was religious. He (the principal) was able to talk to everyone from the same distance without looking at the appearance of people ... For example, I'm not bothered that I'm not wearing a hijab.”

Participant T1 stated that the school principal was considerate and said in the following way:

“... he would ask for your sake. ‘How are you, my dear teacher?’ You would say, ‘I'm fine, my teacher...’. Then he would say ‘I'm so glad.. I saw you unhappy but I misunderstood.’ So, he would observe you and be worried about you.”

In the sub-theme of the professional characteristics of school principals; codes of seniority, supporting teachers and students and developing a strong parent association were created. All of the participants stated that the school principal, whom they expressed as an indelible leader, was a senior. Four of the eight school principals had more than 10 years experience and seniority; and the other four had 20 years experience or more seniority.

The participants stated that the school principal, whom they mentioned as an indelible leader, supported the teacher, supported teacher learning and the teacher due to the trust of the teacher. The participant T8 stated that the principal encouraged the teacher learning with the following words: “...For example, the principal let us know if there is a course/seminar. Or even if we were late to attend, he made us get there.” The participant T5 expressed his view similarly: “He asked teachers to carry out activities that would increase and develop their competence.” Participant T3 also stated that the principal supported the teacher: “If there was a seminar, he made announcements to the teachers. He used to say it would be useful and good in the future.” Participant T6 thought that the school principal supported the teacher: “When the parents had a problem with the teacher, he always supported the teacher.” T1 similarly stated:

“... The teacher wants to be supervised. When he (the teacher) is sick, he wants to answer the phone fearlessly. If you are sick, there is no excuse. There is no excuse for teaching except for big problems. If a teacher doesn't have a big problem, he must do his job. He (the principal) trusted us and he knew there was no excuse...”

All of the participants stated that the school principal, whom they expressed as an indelible leader, supported the student. The participant T2 stated:

“... it is true that he would support. Even then, students' appearance was a problem. Their costumes, hairstyle etc. I never forget, for example, one day of the week, everything was free. You could put jelly on your hair...He (the principal) gave permission... then it was forbidden.”

Participant T1 expressed as follows:

“...He(the principal) supports both the students and the teachers. The scope of the project was not important but the idea was important. ‘Ali, look at the horse’ is not important. The important thing is that the students create it...”

Participant T5 gave a concrete example from his school experiences:

“... the students were producing ideas. They said that they should increase their eating of raw nuts at lunch. They organized posters and distributed dried nuts to everyone at lunch breaks. The principal approved this project. It was a small project for the school but good.”

The participants stated that the school principal attempted to develop good relations with parents. Participant T1 stated that the school principal respected the parents and they were always welcomed with cologne and candy at the door. Similarly, the participant T6 commented that the parent meetings were held with breakfast and it developed good relations with the parents.

3.2 Findings Regarding the Theme of the Process of Being Indelible to Create School Culture

According to the results, the participants' opinions about the school principals' indelibility of creating school culture, the sub-themes of (i) creating/initiating culture and (ii) sustainability of culture have emerged. Sub-themes and codes related to the theme are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Theme of the Process of Being Indelible to Create School Culture

The Process of Being Indelible	Frequency
1. Creating/Initiating Culture	
Developing Informal Relationships	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Creating Traditions	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Promoting Practices	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
2. Sustainability of Culture	
Cultural Continuity	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Reflection of Culture	T2, T3

Stating the importance of the role of the school principal who made impressions on developing informal relationships, creating traditions and promoting practices, the participants gave examples of the traditions in their schools:

- Participant T1 stated that the school principal organized and traditionalized food activities, invited retired teachers to the school's special occasions and developed informal relations with out-of-school meetings;
- Participant T2 stated that the school principal opened courses in the school and increased student success, organized food activities, organized social and sports activities, and appointed teachers under the supervision of the school canteen to create a healthy canteen culture;
- Participant T3 stated that the school principal transformed the school into a school that runs without a bell and organized food and breakfast activities;
- Participant T4 stated that the school principal held exhibitions within and outside the province and encouraged students to participate in sports events;
- Participant T5 stated that the school principal traditionalized to participate in scientific projects, implemented the project of distributing raw nuts to the students at lunchtime, published the school magazine;
- Participant T6 stated that the school principal traditionalized breakfast activities, created Whatsapp group for the teachers and the students to prepare them for the central exams, encouraged their participation in various competitions and supported scientific projects;
- Participant T7 stated that the school principal provided scholarships to students in need; organized theater, folklore events, year-end nights, graduation, social activities, and sports activities, and provided resources for school trips in and out of the province;
- The participant T8 stated that the school principal encouraged scientific projects, organized food activities and traditionalized them.

In the sub-theme of sustainability of culture, it was concluded that the participants gave positive opinions about the cultural continuity when the school principal, who created a culture in the school and maintained it, left the school. In other words; they stated that the school principal was both essential and dispensable for the school. Participant T5 explained this situation as follows:

"... after the school culture was established and settled, the students inevitably adapted to it. For example, 11th grade students used to ask questions to the 12th grade students. If the students could not solve the questions, they would lead us to do it. This is an example of creating a school culture. The principal had no control mechanism for this."

The participants pointed out the reflection of the culture created by the school principals. Moreover, they stated that the culture created by the school principal also began at different schools immediately after. The participant T2 stated that the culture created by the principal affected him greatly and continued:

"He completely removed bells from the school and hung clocks around the school and everyone went to class and took a break on time. No bells... We created a school without a bell... This practice continued after the school principal left the school... Even the nearby schools saw this practice and also implemented it in their schools."

3.3 Findings Regarding the Theme of Suggestions

According to the views of the teachers, within the framework of suggestions, the codes of supporting teachers, supporting students, fair, senior, supporting school activities, innovative, kind but firm, planned, brave and having vision and mission emerged. The codes are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Theme of Suggestions

Suggestions	Frequency
Supporting Teachers	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Supporting Students	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Fair	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6
Senior	T1, T3, T6, T7, T8
Supporting School Activities	T4, T5, T7, T8
Innovative	T3, T7, T8
Kind But Firm	T1, T4, T6
Planned	T2, T7
Brave	T7, T8
Having Vision and Mission	T1, T7

Regarding the code of supporting teachers, it was suggested that the school principal should think about the teacher, give the teacher autonomy to take the initiative, trust and support his / her studies to be permanent in the school. Some of the suggestions such as supporting the success of the students and directing the students to various activities (sports, social, etc.) were offered in the suggestions to support students.

4. Discussion

The characteristics that the school principal needs to be an indelible leader are grouped into two sub-themes: personal and professional. When the participants evaluated the leaders who left their mark in terms of their personal characteristics, it was concluded that they defined the principals as open to learning. The leader who is open to learning is both a leader and a learner (Fullan, 2016). Similarly, the school principal's openness to learning in shaping organizational culture is crucial in creating traditions and introducing new practices (Ayik & Ada, 2009). In terms of professional characteristics, it is found that the school principals support teachers and students. The leader's support for the teacher; especially the support of the teacher learning constitutes a dimension of the theory of indelible leadership. Similarly, the leader sees students as change agents by supporting their learning. Therefore; the results obtained are in the same direction as in the literature (Fullan, 2016).

The participants evaluated school principals as indelible leaders in the context of organizational culture. This result demonstrated that a relationship could be established between indelible leadership and school culture. The findings obtained from other studies also revealed that there was a relationship between leadership and school culture (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; Liljenberg, 2015; Shamir & Howell, 1999; Peterson & Deal, 2011; Schooley, 2005; Turan & Bektas, 2013). It is concluded that the school principals create traditions in a school, organize activities for the development of informal relations and support activities such as projects/exhibitions/social, scientific, sports events. In other words, the school principal's tradition of creating activities and his support for various practices in the school have left a mark on teachers. This result is in line with the literature that the leadership of school principals creates strong culture effective schools (Cheng, 1993). In the study conducted by Ozdemir (2006), it is found that celebrating the anniversary of the establishment of the school, organizing graduation ceremonies, sports events, competitions, various cultural activities such as poetry, theater and exhibition were the expected behaviors from school principals. According to the results obtained from the research; it can be said that the school principals who leave their marks are in line with the literature in terms of creating and developing the school culture. As a result, various events organized by a school should not be considered as a simple activity; because these are practices that improve school culture.

Another result of this study is that school principals show the characteristics of indelible leadership while shaping the organizational culture. In other words, it was concluded that school principals were seen as indelible leaders who develop or form organizational culture. Moreover, it can be said that the school principal who leaves a mark according to the teachers' views can establish the culture permanently even after he/she has left the organization. Moreover, it is concluded that some traditions in the school were reflected in other schools and similar practices were initiated in these schools. In this respect, it can be said that the school principal is "both essential and dispensable for the school (Fullan, 2016). In other words, the culture created by the school principal exists even if he/she is not there; it is even reflected in other schools. This result is found in the literature as a feature that should be in the leader who leaves marks.

In this study, teachers' suggestions for what characteristics a school principal should have in order to leave a mark are included. According to the results; all of the participants feel that a school principal should support the teacher and the student to leave a mark. It is suggested that the principal should think about teachers, give teachers the autonomy to take the initiative, trust and support their studies. It is revealed that there is a relationship between the support for the teacher learning and the culture of the school (Jurasaitė-Harbisson & Rex, 2010). For this study, it can be said that the leadership role of the principal might reinforce teacher learning in the context of school culture. In terms of supporting the student, suggestions are made that the principal should support the success of the student and direct the student to various activities. Previous studies showed that there is an effect of leadership on student success (Cetin & Kinik, 2015; O'Donnell & White, 2005). To create a positive school culture; the principal as an indelible leader supports students and sees them as change agents (Fullan, 2016)

As a result, by examining the characteristics of the leader who leaves marks, it is revealed that as a continuous leader, the leader is both essential and dispensable, supports teacher learning and sees a student as a change agent. In addition to the literature, in this study, according to teacher opinions, it can be said that the school principal's ability to create and reshape organizational culture can be shown as a trait of indelible leaders.

For further studies, it might be suggested that school principals can develop organizational culture practices such as organizing social, scientific and sporting activities by making them traditional, organizing various events, and supporting the teacher and the student learning to leave a mark for the school. Moreover, the characteristics of the leader who shapes the school culture and leaves a mark can be taken together and studied in different samples. As another suggestion; this study was conducted qualitatively to investigate how school principals left a mark according to the teachers' opinions. The opinions of school principals can be investigated to understand how culture is shaped while principals leave marks for the organization.

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