Characteristics of a School Leader According to the Views of School Principals: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to determine the strong and weak characteristics of current school leaders and trying to estimate and draw an overview about characteristics of future school leaders depending on the views of school principals. The study was conducted by qualitative interviewing. The study group in the research was determined by two types of purposeful sampling: 1) convenience sampling and 2) maximum variation sampling. The study group consisted of 29 international educational leaders (Principals). In the analysis, NVivo 10 was used and the data were analysed by content analysis technique. As for the future leadership characteristics the respondents gives the first priority to skills about making use of technological opportunities and second to professional management skills.

Keywords: Leadership, school leader, uncertainty of future, characteristics of leaders

1. Introduction

In this study, we discussed current state of school leadership theoretically and tried to find answers to the characteristics of a school leader today and the characteristics which will be required in the near future regarding uncertainty of the future. Coates (2010) argues that the past is open to interpretation, the present to perception and the future is inevitably about speculation. Fink (2005) argues that leadership in recent years has become a growth industry. Politicians demand more of it, academics decry the lack of it, and potential school leaders are deciding "to hell with it".

In the OECD publications, it has been stressed that there is a growing concern that the role of school principal, has not evolved to deal with the complex challenges that schools are preparing children and young people to face in the 21st century. So the major attention must be first on the need to improve teaching and learning, secondly, the change in pedagogy, thirdly, the shift in the centres of autonomy and accountability, fourthly, policy and practice coherency, and finally, schools are confronted with an increasingly complex environment.

In this process the key elements for an effective school leadership needed were suggested to be 1) a more active role in instructional leadership 2) providing a more powerful forms of active, constructivist learning 3) sufficient autonomy to make important decisions about the curriculum and teacher recruitment and development 4) coherent governmental policy and practice with school-level processes, systems and priorities and 5) enabling teachers and students to deal effectively with the processes of change (OECD, 2009).

In the first section of this paper we raised some important questions on the current state of school leadership based on literature in order to create an impression of the flow of the logic of the paper. Later we tried to discuss how school leadership has been seen today and what kind of estimations about the characteristics of future school leaders have been suggested in the related literature. In the second section, the methodology has been explained. In the third part, the findings about first, the current state of leadership by means of strong and weak characteristics and secondly, findings about estimations for future leadership were given. In the final we discussed the findings and concluded.

2. Literature Review

The argument on whether the principals are in the least favourable position to provide proactive leadership or not, lie behind the fact that "principals find themselves locked in with less and less room to manoeuvre (Fullan, 1998). The answer may be "yes" for many countries depending on the amount of principal's autonomy on the school policy. For example Leithwood, Steinbach and Jantzi (2002) reported that the majority of the teachers and managers believe that the government's policies about improvement of teaching and learning do not reflect their own professional goals. If so, as Leithwood et al. (2002) suggested further questions need to be addressed to seek for the reasons behind the fact and draw outcomes for the future of school leadership such as: Are the principals surrounded by a tight costume made of regulations? Is their unfavourable position because they are arrested by their psychological guards? Or is that because they are led by a conservative social pressure? And finally, how flexible are they to react to change demand? On the other hand, how rapid turnover or in other words instability in school management positions effects leadership characteristics and creates significant barriers to educational change (Fink and Brayman, 2006). Each question is vital in that the possible convincing answers to each of them will help us to understand the characteristics of leadership today and provide inspiring clues to estimate how leaders will be in the future.

Grogan and Andrews (2002) noted that the changes in education, and the nation as a whole, could present an entirely different set of challenges about leadership in the future. As in Coates (2010) similitude "The established route of the train journey gives way to the flexibility of the car" Fullan (1998) claims that school leaders need a new mindset and guidelines for action to break through the bonds of dependency that have entrapped those who want to make a difference in their schools. Responsiveness to the rapidly changing environment and set of circumstances might be a key argument for educational leaders. Twenty-first century schooling necessitates a shift away from vertical, policy-driven change to lateral, capacity building change. Schools are becoming more complex places. In the future they will need to be more responsive to a rapidly changing environment and set of circumstances. They will need to be highly adaptable structures that are versatile and responsive to shifting needs and priorities. Therefore the leadership practice has to also be adaptive, flexible and highly responsive to external and internal imperatives for change (Harris, 2010; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008). Barendsen and Gardner (2006) proposed that the best leaders to adjust to rapidly changing times need to exhibit three distinct meanings of good: 1) an excellent technical and professional quality and competence, 2) an ethical orientation, and 3) a completely engaged sense of fulfilment and meaningfulness. According to Coates (2010) a future thinking engages individuals and teams with innovation and there is a move from replication to regeneration, from predictability to possibility. Sandmann and Vandenberg (1995) asserted that leadership development for the 21st century is holistic: it is centred in groups or organizations, rather than individuals, and engages the group in heart, mind, spirit, and energy. The driving forces of this philosophy, then, are community, the heart of a group's leadership; vision, which engages the spirit; learning, which stimulates the mind; and action, which compels energy. Mariasse (1985) considered leaders as not to simply maintain the existing situation. To the writer, leaders are involved in change, and without change or movement, there is no leadership. To actively change an organization, leaders must make decisions about the nature of the desired state. Making choices requires both information about current realities and future possibilities. According to Reilly (2007) a global leader is a learner and believes that everyone around him is also a learner and values innovation. Collay (2006) writes that aspiring principals are urged to create democratic organizations and professional learning communities.

These demanding educational settings require bold, socially responsible leadership by both principals *and* teachers, continually expanding the roles and responsibilities each must fulfil. Goldring (2002) concentrates on student achievement in explaining effective educational leadership in the 21st century. He asserts that a leader will require strategies that make it possible for all children to succeed academically. Day, Harris and Hadfield (2001) put a stress on the capacity of leaders to make a difference. They assert that interpretation of and responses to the constraints, demands and choices that they face help leaders to make a difference. Leaders capture their past, present and future pressures, challenges, and concerns and aspirations with which they are daily faced and which are reflect the multi-faceted demands of the role. Slater (2008) thinks that building leadership capacity or eliciting effort in others requires effort, unique insight, and explicit skills on the part of leaders. Leaders may learn to use communication skills and strategies as a pathway to building leadership capacity. As principals and other leaders share the lead and the load, the success of their performance will be determined by their ability to inspire a culture of empowerment. Leaders' success then will be measured not by the number of followers they have, but rather by the number of individuals that they have inspired to become leaders themselves. According to Witziers, Bosker and Krüger (2003) principals should not only perform tasks related to coordination and evaluation of the educational system but also in relation to further developing the educational system via transformation of the school culture. One of the main tasks of school principals is to help create a working environment in which teachers collaborate and identify with the school's mission and goals. Murphy and Walberg (2002) points out to trust and dialogue. To them, new leaders dedicated to school improvement should gain knowledge not only about best practices but also about how to foster dialogue and trust within schools and between schools and the communities they serve. Moreover, school staff should be given the knowledge about new leadership concepts and scientific evidence that they need to accept innovative leaders. Grogan and Andrews (2002) point out to critical characteristics of a preparation of aspiring educational leaders programme such as collaborative instructional leadership, practice based knowledge, opportunities for novices and experts, selection of aspiring principals, assessment of development, contribution to standards, ethical and moral obligations, long term internship and learning opportunities in diverse settings and address to successors.

The purpose of this paper is to determine the strong and weak characteristics of current school leaders and trying to estimate and draw an overview about characteristics of future school leaders depending on the views of school principals. For this reason the following specific questions were addressed to them:

1. What are your weak characteristics as a school leader?
2. What are your strong characteristics as school leaders?
3. According to you, what kind of characteristics a school leader will need in the forthcoming twenty-five years?

3. Methodology

Our research was conducted by qualitative interviewing. The data were gathered by standardized open-ended interviews. The standardized open-ended interview minimizes the interviewer effects by asking the same question of each respondent. It also makes data analysis easier because it is possible quickly to locate each respondent's answer to the same question (Kuş, 2007; Mason, 2002; Patton, 1990; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). The interview form consisted of two parts. In the first part questions about demographic information took part with an explanation about the purpose of the study. In the second part, the respondents were addressed three specific questions to in order first to understand the current state (strong and weak characteristics of current education leaders) and secondly to explore some clues for future leadership characteristics.

The study group in the research was determined by two types of purposeful sampling: 1) convenience sampling was used for the countries other than Turkey because of the difficulty in interviewing the respondents and 2) maximum variation sampling was used for Turkish respondents considering gender, marital status, being occupied in full or half day education and various education levels, seniority (length in managerial position) and finally various positions in managerial hierarchy (Patton, 1990; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). As a result the study group consisted of 29 international educational leaders (Principals) from city centre of Antalya, Turkey (21), Austria (1), Germany (1), Norway (1), Portugal (1), Romania (1), South Cyprus (1), Spain (1) and United Kingdom (1). 79,3% (23) of the participants are male and 20,7% (6) are female. Married administrators are 86,2% (25), 13,8% (4) of the sample group are single. 82,8% (24) of the administrators work in schools which run full day education, the others, 17,2% (5) work in schools with half day education. Administrators participated the study mostly (65,5%, f=19) work in primary schools.

Others work in high schools (17,2%, f=5), pre education schools (13,8%, f=4) and vocational high schools (3,4%, f=1). 69,0% of the participants are school principals and 31 % (9) of them are assistant principals. Average seniority of the administrators in the study are 13,4 years. In order to improve the validity and reliability transparency, consistency-coherency, and communicability were considered (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). In the analysis, NVivo 10 was used and the data were analysed by content analysis technique (Patton, 1990; Yıldırım and Şimsek, 2006).

4. Results

In this part, findings about weak and strong characteristics of current school leaders were presented and evaluated.
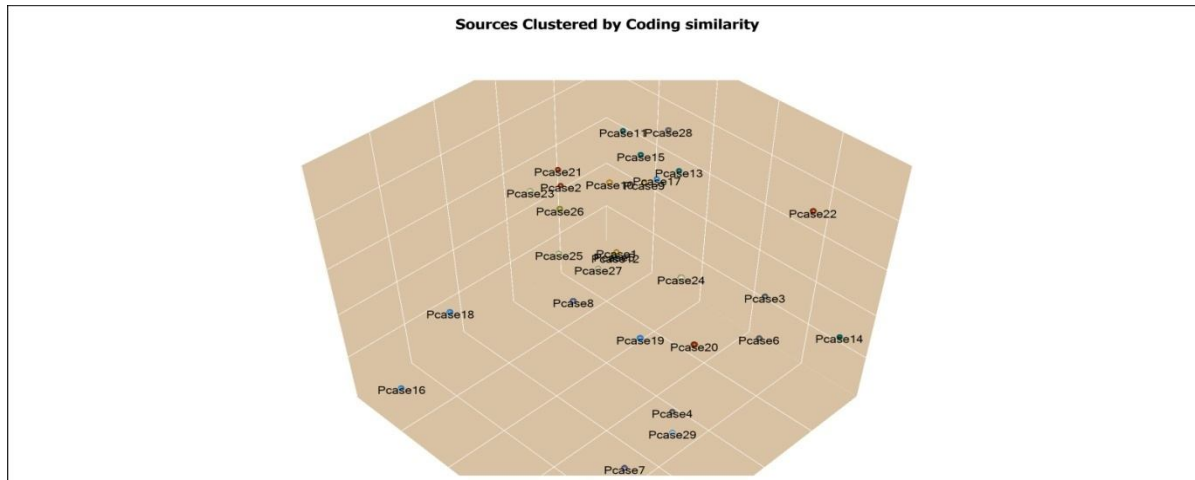
Figure 1: Coding similarity of Educational leaders' views (Three Dimensional)

According to figure 1, the way the respondents understood and answered the questions were in the scope of research questions and quite similar. On the other hand, the views which seem to be a little bit isolated from the centre provided some additional critical issues given in table 4.

Table 1: Weak Characteristics of Current School Leaders

Views	n
1. Lack of time planning, organizing, monitoring, follow up, motivation abilities.	8
2. To bow down to and feel lost in financial problems with a limited expertise and ignoring instructional issues.	7
3. Weakness about the talent to coordinate between objectives of a school and environmental wishes and demands.	6
4. Difficulties in overcoming continuous change in governmental regulations.	5
5. Spending too much time and energy on formal requirements.	5
6. Incapability and impatience in human relations.	5
7. Inadequacy in communication skills and strategies.	4
8. Incompetent in analyzing and understanding child pedagogy, human attitude and human behaviour.	3
9. Lack of skills in using technological equipments.	3
10. Suffering from insufficient pre-service and in-service training on management issues.	2
11. Lack of experience in managerial requirements.	2
12. Feeling forced to act with short term strategies because of less authority and much more responsibility.	2
13. Lack of skills in formulating strategies depending on experiences.	2
14. Professional inadequacy, such as lack of speaking a second language, in following up changes and developments.	2
15. Tendency to use position power.	2
16. Inadequacy to develop strategies about determining and meeting teachers' needs.	2
17. Lack of theoretical background in supervising and inspecting the staff.	2
18. Teachers' resistance because of opposing to the applications of centrally appointment to the management positions by superiors.	2
19. Difficulty in beating off the demands from the politicians.	1
20. Avoiding risk taking.	1

The findings, given in table 1, show that, managerial skills required and financial issues were mostly mentioned views about weak school leadership characteristics. About the first view one of the respondents said that "*I have difficulty in motivating teachers about tasks that I don't have arbitrament about*" (Pcase18> Reference 3). About frustration on not to concentrate on instruction one respondent uttered the following words "*Our weak facet is to be caring economic fields instead of education and instruction, because we are not business administrator.*" (Pcase22>Reference 1). Another respondent added that *"Both having less or no authority versus much more responsibility and limited finance causes us to consume extreme energy for effective operation of school."* (Pcase13> Reference 2). The third view was generated from ideas such as "*Coping with groups other than school pressure groups; managing expectations of persons and groups such as politicians, unions that accept themselves as the authority over schools* are so to say our weak characteristics" (Pcase3>Reference 1). Some respondents complained about governmental changes in regulations about education. For example one respondent said "*I sometimes feel desperate when I try to follow new fledged implementations or regulations. I feel incompetent dealing with challenges related to regulations.*" (Pcase11>Reference 2,5). View 5 symbolizes bureaucratic oriented organizations one of the school leaders complain that "*We are dependent on excessive formality.*" (Pcase5>Reference 1). Some school leaders complained about personal peculiarities with the following words "*I am impatient against illogicality. (Res. note: what he believes illogical)*" (Pcase25> Reference 1).

Weakness in communication skills, stated in view 7 by some respondents is also remarkable. One respondent said "*We must have training about communication skills, problem (conflict) solving and temper control."* (Pcase8>Reference 1).

Table 2: Strong Characteristics of Current School Leaders

Views	n
1. Successful in setting two way communication processes.	10
2. Sufficient at human resource management and maintaining organizational integrity.	10
3. Skilful at establishing effective human relations with subordinates and other professional counterparts.	7
4. Enthusiastic for participative decision making.	5
5. Skilful at encouraging and organizing the staff to work in teams.	4
6. Courageous to take risks when there is an opportunity for achievement.	3
7. Care on teacher needs, morale and motivation.	3
8. Adopt scientific approach to all management processes.	3
9. Willing at encouraging innovative and creative ideas.	3
10. Adopt consulting role and encourage contributions for problem solving.	2
11. Can deal well with bureaucratic necessities of the organization.	2
12. Reflect charisma in my oral and behavioural expressions.	2
13. Show a relative success at managing financial issues.	1
14. Carry on student centred and achievement oriented policies.	1
15. Good at environmental relations.	1
16. Successful at following technological developments.	1
17. Good at coaching the staff to set achievable goals.	1

The views given in table 2 show strong characteristics of current school leaders. Among these, one of the most agreed strong characteristics seems to be communication although some of the respondents stated their weakness in this skill in table 1. One respondent said "*As an administrator, I mind communicating the staff effectively. My communication ability makes me feel as a successful organizational leader.* " (Pcase18>Reference 1). The second view was inferred from such ideas as "*I feel strong in managing human resources. I also feel successful at achieving unity among the staff.* " (Pcase20>Reference 23). Human relations given in view 3, is also mentioned to be an important leadership issue. Among the respondents one said: "*My social facet is strong.*" (Pcase28>Reference 1). Another contribution was made in the following words: "*I think that I am perfect on human relations.*" (Pcase15>Reference 1). From the expressions it is inferred that participative decision making was evaluated as a positive characteristics of a school leader. One of the respondents said: "*I make vice principals, group presidents and other management partners participate in decision making process. I care consultation.*" (Pcase21>Reference 1).

Some respondents seem to examine their strong characteristics about team work issues. For example one respondent said *"I am good at organizing team studies, getting feedback periodically, and making improvements. I also try to establish network among staff by evaluating all school staff as a team member"* (Pcase24>Reference 5). Risk taking was mentioned among the strong leadership characteristics in view 6 with the following words: *"I usually do not hesitate to take brave steps."* (Pcase2> Reference 1).

Table 3: Estimated Future Leadership Characteristic of School Leaders

Views	n
1. Will be responsive to all kinds of technological opportunities	13
2. Should be qualified by pre- and in-service training with a special focus on professional management skills.	10
3. Will be creative in supplying team spirit by inspiring the staff in terms of learning community and decision making.	8
4. Is expected to be adaptive to changes, open minded and open to be criticized, and believer of innovation.	7
5. Should be fair in setting and applying the rules to the staff, students and school environment.	7
6. Should have a command on adapting and monitoring the curriculum to the current generations' needs.	6
7. Will have strong communication skills and empathy based social relations strengthened with a second language.	5
8. Will reflect a strong intellectual background.	4
9. Will adopt value and moral based management.	4
10. Will have a communicable vision which he believes in sincerely.	4
11. Must be an expert on motivation theories and techniques.	3
12. Should be sensitive to local needs.	2
13. Will be an expert on time management.	2
14. Is expected to adopt management by accountability.	2
15. Will be sufficient to set performance indicators and make them clear to the stake holders.	2
16. Should have a talent to manage with minimized procedures.	2
17. Should reflect a good command on organizing and planning.	2
18. Will be risk taker and proactive.	2
19. Consciousness and skills to overcome undesirable behaviours.	2
20. Must be respectful to diversities.	1
21. Will be liberal thinking	1

The list in table 3, shows the findings about estimated future leadership characteristic of school leaders. According to the first view a future school leadership characteristics presumed to be about the talents to use and understand the latest and useful educational technology. About these views one respondent said "*Head teachers will therefore need to have a better understanding of the technology of the workplace (coding, social media, application development).*" (Pcase26>Reference 9). Another one said "*Head teachers and school leaders in the coming 25 years will need to respond to the demands presented by the move of society to a technological and knowledge economy.*" (Pcase26>Reference 7).

According to the inferences from the quotations, professional management skills were expected to be gained by education. The quotations which illustrate view two are given in the following lines: "*Administrators must be educated in school administration branch not in mathematics, physics etc. In addition, school administrators must have training exclusively in this field. If necessary, within the faculties, school management departments such as public administration must be opened. Passing an exam is not purely enough to be an administrator. Later, follow up and performance evaluation are also necessary. Students, parents and teachers' views must be included to elect and evaluate the administrators*." (Pcase9>Reference 2,5-7). The ability to encourage and apply team work is also expected to be primary characteristics of a future school leader. The following quotation from a respondent illustrates the view well: "*One of the main strengths of school leaders is their ability to build and lead an effective team. They use their skills in this area to build a learning community where all stakeholders in the school feel like a partner in the learning process.*" (Pcase26>Reference 1,3).

The findings in views 4, 5 and 6 show that future school leaders must have some psychological and intellectual characteristics as stated in the following quotations: Quotation 1: "*We must be the first person to recognize and inspire the innovations and changes.*" (Pcase11>Reference 1). Quotation 2: "*School principals must behave fair to the staff. Then, if possible they must have efforts in creating school culture*." (Pcase4>Reference 1).

Quotation 3: "*Principal should define new generation's interests, wants and needs well and should define a management model in school in which students participate as well.*" (Pcase21>Reference 2,3). The respondents also stressed on communication ability as a major characteristics of a future school leader as in the following quotation: "*Administrator who can empathize and whose communication is strong will be referred to as a school leader.*" (Pcase1>Reference 2,7).

Table 4: Some Critical Issues about School Leadership

Views	n
1. New criteria, reflecting the spirit of the time with satisfactory consensus, about "who will be the boss" should be raised; such as participating students' parents' and teachers to decision making processes	4
2. Educational systems will come into question about school principals' statue that is likely to be abolished or left with less responsibility or authority.	3
3. Governmental interventions, if not have long term characteristics were thought to have negative effect on future educational leadership.	2
4. Principles should be aware of the idea that he might be both the cause of a problem and a problem solver.	1
5. Effective leadership requires the principal to have the right to choose the staff he will work with.	1

As seen in many countries various ways have been applied in managing schools such as managing by a board as in England (Europedia, 2012) or by a principal and a number of assistants as in Turkey (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2009). The findings of the study given in table 4 allow and confront us with the problem of effectiveness in management by preference made about the "boss" or "bosses" and the way we choose who the leader(s) will be. The following quotation from the respondents help us to confront the problem: "*One cannot be a leader by passing an exam only.*" (Pcase9>Reference 8). This idea further can be traced in the following quotation which has a stronger stress on and gives way to think about alternative systems stated in view 2: "*Perhaps, it will be easy to put the principals aside by eliminating them from the system since they are the last and the weakest ring of the chain in the system.*" (Pcase3>Reference 5). Another face of the problem has been mentioned in the last item in table 4 by a respondent by pointing out to one critical issue for achieving school effectiveness which is how the management side and the managed side get together in the school with the following words: "*School principal must choose the employee he will work with.*" (Pcase5>Reference 3). Two important questions beforehand should be raised out of these inferences: What is the most effective way to manage schools; a board, a person or something else? And what is the best way to bring the management and the subordinates; choosing by school management, appointing by a central body (out of the school) or by finding another still undefined way? Governmental interventions by regulations made very often, stated in view 3, are also important factors for school leadership in all European Union countries and in the countries candidate to participate to European Union. One respondent stated the view quite well in the following quotation: "*Long term state politics should be prepared in education field. Slight changes can be tolerated in the scope of school leadership concept but the shock of radical changes concludes with loss of authority of school leaders. Governments, when they decide to make radical changes in education system, had better ensure participation of all sides to the process and p*olitical interventions must be minimized." (Pcase10>Reference 3,4).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we focused first on trying to find out weak and strong characteristics of current school leaders in order to gain an overall view of the current state. Furthermore the main focus was to estimate leadership characteristics which will be required in the forthcoming twenty five years inspiring from the last twenty five years experiences. In order to have an international view, views of school leaders working in various countries were included.

The study suggested that the current school leaders reported major weaknesses first on management knowledge and information, so to say, on theoretical background on management science.

Secondly, principals reported that their current state, expertise or education, do not allow them to feel comfortable in financial issues such as budget management, finding sponsors or creating new financial sources.

The implication of this situation is that, as school leaders reported, they cannot concentrate on instructional issue which they believe it is the main reason why they wanted to become managers. Another major finding on which the respondents state weaknesses about was balancing or managing professionally the unique school objectives and the demands from the social, economical and political environment. This implies that a school leader needs to be "a grown up" in human relations communication and moreover, the finding puts a strong notice on the term vision. This inference is harmonious with the literature suggesting that a leader needs to have a vision, which he believes in first and later he/she should be able to communicate it and finally he/she should engage the school community as well as school environment so that they will be ambitious to buy it into. It seems that future leadership is likely to depend largely on this concept. So the term vision needs two kinds of further focus both by practitioners and researchers.

The findings of strong characteristics of current school leaders reveal and consistent with what we can also presume that most of the respondents feel they are good at two way communication, human resource management by means of creating an integration between the individual and the organization. The respondents' expressions lead us to think that by motivating people, they mean to feel as a part of the organization in a way. Participative decision making can be said to depend on adopting human relations approach. So the finding is consistent with other items reporting strong characteristics. The ability to organize and direct the staff to participate team work was stated among strong characteristics again by satisfactory number of respondents.

Although it seems that there are overlapping propositions in the findings given in table 1 and table 2, there is enough evidence to claim that the findings are consistent in that: 1) much more respondents reported that financial issues are among weak characteristics of the school leaders, 2) the lack of the skills needed to deal with formal requirements, in other words bureaucratic side of a school were reported by much more respondents among the weak characteristics, 3) lack of skills in following the developments and using technological equipments again seem to be among weak characteristics of the school leaders, because, the number of the respondents reported so, were much more than those who reported among strong characteristics, 4) communication, dealing with human resources and human relations were reported more among strong characteristics, 5) taking risks when there is an achievement opportunity was reported again among strong characteristics.

As for the future leadership characteristics the respondents gives the first priority to skills about making use of technological opportunities. This result is consistent with current state that school leaders statements about not to be able to use technology adequately. According to the views of the respondents training on professional management skills takes place secondly.

Consequently, the respondents' ideas on their weaknesses draw us to think about educating those who will occupy management positions in management science. We believe in-service training is not available alone in achieving educating school leaders especially for future. This idea confronts us to think about two major questions: 1) Is it economic to choose or appoint school leaders or principals among teachers as they can be more efficient on the subject they are educated? 2) Can we appoint school leaders among these who have already been educated in the field of management? In this case, another question is likely to be raised: As researchers and practitioners believe that school management is a part of the instruction and school leaders should also be expert on pedagogy, how can we balance the two sides of the school: instruction and finance? Finally, because there is strong evidence on that financial issues require an expertise; something like a co-manager on finance is also a debate that can shed light on the future of the leadership issue.

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