



## **Mahatma Gandhi's Concept of Educational Leadership**

**Philip Joseph**

*Department of Educational Foundations*

*University of Goroka*

*Papua New Guinea*

*Email: josephphilip53@hotmail.com*

### **Abstract**

The author endeavors to track the origin and evolution of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of education with focus on management and leadership style through his successive experimental schools in South Africa and India. He further explores the transformational thrust of Gandhi's leadership. He argues Gandhi was a unique and charismatic leader who inspired his followers to commit themselves into real action, empowering them as leaders and making them agents of normative social change. Gandhi's transformational leadership brought about unprecedented positive differences among the members of his ashram schools. He took them to levels of thinking, feeling and action they never thought they could ever attain.

**Keywords:** Conversational metaphor, empowerment, inspirational leadership, production theory approach, transformational leadership

### **1. Introduction**

Neither a teacher by profession nor an armchair educational philosopher, all his life Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) had been a teacher of men, irrespective of class or creed, caste or colour, gender or race. Gandhi's achievements in the domain of politics and social reforms have been so spectacular that his magnificent contribution to the theory and practice of education does not generally receive as much attention as it deserves. What impelled him to place his theory on a national scale was an abhorrence of the British system as impractical and destructive of Indian imagination. Gandhi called it an "unmitigated evil". He thought it ignored everything India had developed in its historic educational experience, such as children integrated with environment, strong pupil-teacher relationships, identity with the people and appreciation of Indian culture. The purpose of Gandhian education is to raise man to a higher moral and spiritual order through the full development of the individual and the evolution of a new man. *Truth* and *non-violence* are the two basic principles permeating every aspect of his thought and activity. Character building was the fundamental enterprise in the schools he envisioned.

### **2. The Genesis of Gandhi's Educational Leadership**

Gandhi's educational theory had a clear social orientation. He envisaged the education of the whole man through craft. Gandhi considered the introduction of craft his unique contribution to education for he believed that it would at once transform education, society in general and the personality of youth. Gandhi has laid a sound educational theory which aims at character building, is craft-centered and self supporting. He did not give an explicit, integrated and comprehensive theory about how his educational institutions were to be managed. However, Gandhi managed his educational institutions very successfully with sound and inspiring academic leadership. He has meticulously documented all the details pertaining to the founding and management of his ashrams which were residential institutions where, as we will presently see, learning and living were designed to be concurrent and integrative processes.

The scope of this paper is restricted to an interpretation of Gandhi's approach to educational leadership, management of education and to showing that his managerial and leadership skills are sound in practice, based upon a sound theory, though this theory may not have been formulated by him in an explicit academic fashion. His approach to managing educational institutions has been articulated in Joseph (2011). This paper will dwell on Gandhi's transformational leadership. It will also compare and contrast the concept of transformational leadership as it has originated and has been received in the West with that of Gandhi and identify any elements unique to Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi conceived, built and successfully managed his educational institutions through four successive 'ashram models' - *Phoenix* and *Tolstoy* ashrams in South Africa, and *Sabarmati* and *Sevagram* ashrams in India. All four were pioneering experiments in his respective historical contexts that progressively wove learning and living into a concurrent process. The unique moral genius of Mahatma Gandhi designed a scheme of education in which learning and living were reciprocally transformational processes. His philosophy of non-violence became an increasingly central and dominant motif in each of the successive models. Gandhi's outstanding contribution to educational theory and practice is the fact that he restored the human hand to its legitimate place in his scheme of education.

### **3. Gandhi and Transformational Leadership**

*Prima facie* Gandhi was a paradigm case of transformational leadership. Gandhi as a transformational leader recognized and harnessed the needs and demands of followers to higher purposes. Gandhi did this through a vital teaching role which shaped, altered and elevated the values and goals of his ashram inmates to a higher level through empowerment and inspiration. He wanted to bring about a social change that satisfied his followers' authentic needs i.e., service to the motherland (Thomson, 1993). In all the four ashrams, Gandhi lived with his trusted and disciplined followers and developed transformative goals through open discussions and dialogues with them. Thus Gandhi was able to unearth the needs of others and understood the nature of the followers' reality.

As a part of the moral issues in all his ashram schools, Gandhi gave first priority to develop the culture of the heart as the foundation for building the character of the pupils. For this he trained his followers to be disciplined themselves by practising and observing vows such as Truth, Love, Chastity, Control of the Palate, Non-stealing, Non-possession of property, Physical Labour, Swadeshi Outlook, Fearlessness, Removal of Untouchability and Tolerance (Gandhi, 1955). Gandhi was concerned with moral issues and this helped to raise his followers' level of consciousness on dimensions like self sufficiency and community upliftment. Thus he proved to be a transformational leader. Although Gandhi's scheme of education was based on the principles of self-support and economic self-sufficiency, the managerial effectiveness of his ashrams was assessed not merely in terms of economic profit (Thomson, 1993).

As the leader of the ashrams, Gandhi succeeded in generating a vision among the residents and communicating it to all successfully. Communicating a vision to followers is the most important act of the transformational leader (Nanus, 1992). Gandhi had the ability to maintain the ashrams even in difficult financial situations. He overcame these difficulties with generous help received from the trusted friends. Gandhi harnessed his followers' abilities through upholding the dignity of manual labour. Gandhi realized that individual achievement and success is the basis for team achievement and success. From time to time Gandhi evaluated the ashrams' objectives through open discussions (Thomson, 1993). As a transformational leader, Gandhi was passionately committed to his works. He loved his job and had a great deal of affection for the residents with whom he worked. This passion and personal enthusiasm motivated his followers to perform to their highest levels as well. Gandhi's passion was a reflection of his ashrams and their inhabitants.

Gandhi demonstrated the characteristics of a transformational leader which helped his followers transform themselves and their ashrams. He encouraged creativity, fostered open communication, demonstrated forward thinking, shared responsibilities and exhibited commitments which helped ashram residents to meet the challenges of the future. Gandhi's compelling visions provided his followers with a sense of purpose and encouraged commitments. Further, his followers gradually achieved more, made ethical decisions and pursued a worthy goal. Gandhi constructed a realistic vision and inspired his followers in his ashrams to put forth greater effort to achieve the goals which attracted more commitments and energized his followers. His visions created a real meaning for his followers in establishing a standard of excellence. Gandhi's effective vision helped to bridge the present and the future, developing a high level of morale among his supporters.

As a transformational leader, Gandhi empowered his followers and, yes, whoever came into close contact with him. Even an extraordinary leader cannot accomplish a great deal without capable followers (Capodagli and Jackson, 1999). Gandhi always encouraged participation and involvement realizing that his followers' achievements and success were the basis for team achievements and success. Gandhi knew how to give power away and how to make others feel powerful. He gave his followers access to the funds, materials and authority and information needed to execute the tasks on hand and developed new ideas. Such autonomy encouraged his followers to take ownership of their work (Varkey, 1939). Gandhi allowed his followers to make decisions rather than insisting on making all the decisions himself. Such autonomy encouraged his subordinates to take ownership of their work in the ashrams. His subordinates treated every visitor like a guest in his ashrams. Gandhi's followers had unconditional trust in his ashram life with competency, openness and honesty, concern for the subordinates, reliability between co-workers and proper identification sharing common goals, norms, values and beliefs with those associated with ashrams culture. Leaders act as "servants" to their followers (DePree, 1989). Gandhi served his followers by providing necessary resources and encouragement, empowering his followers to complete tasks in the most productive manner within the parameters of truth and non-violence. Thus Gandhi was an example of how empowerment and servant leadership can contribute to outstanding customer service.

Gandhi never acted as a boss, but as a mentor. He was compassionate enough to understand the needs of others. He had concerns and feelings of caring, empathy and tolerance. He even admitted and accommodated a leprosy-stricken follower, Parchureji Shastri, in the Sevagram Ashram. As a moral challenge and demonstration, he admitted Harijans also in his ashrams thus breaking the traditional social barriers. Gandhi inspired the members of his ashrams by the use of the management technique "management by walking around" (MBWA) and interacting with them. Gandhi communicated successfully and he was aware of the needs and motivation of his followers. By encouraging more open communication, Gandhi allowed his followers to share their ideas and insights which helped to foster more followers' participation. He encouraged participation, involvement and passionate commitment to their roles. Transformational leaders know how to give power away and make others feel powerful (Bryman, 1992). Thus Gandhi's followers found ways to do things better. Whenever there were problems and conflicts, he personally intervened. He thus proved that extraordinary leadership is a product of extraordinary interaction and communication. Furthermore, *thanks to* his extraordinary, creative, visionary, empowering and inspiring leadership skills, Mahatma Gandhi transformed his followers into leaders (Thomson, 1993).

Gandhi always managed his ashrams with clear objectives with craft as the centre of pupil's activities which made them self-supporting. He shared common goals, norms, values and beliefs with those associated with the ashrams' culture. In all his ashrams, the main aims were for the development of the individual and the establishment of a non-violent cooperative social order. He motivated the pupils to get such results through mutual love between the teachers and pupils. Communicating a vision to his followers may well be the most important act of the transformational leader (Bryman, 1992). Gandhi communicated his vision to his followers with a sense of purpose and he encouraged commitment. His followers achieved more and made more ethical decisions to pursue a worthy desirable and attainable goal. Gandhi as a transformational leader spent a good deal of time talking with his followers in his ashrams before developing a vision for his ashrams. His effective vision attracted commitment and energized his followers who were motivated to meet challenges that made goals brighter. This helped Gandhi's followers to find a real meaning in their ashram life and to provide services with a team spirit.

The major objective of all his ashrams established by Gandhi was giving importance to the culture of the heart or the building of character among the pupils and establishing an effective vision with a quest for a standard of excellence. In order to achieve this objective, Gandhi considered, as we have seen above, it was essential to observe certain vows by the ashram members. In order to fulfill these observances the following activities were organized in the ashrams. They were worship, sanitary services, sacrificial spinning, agriculture, dairy, tannery and national education (Patel, 1953). This standard of excellence helped Gandhi's followers by providing a model for the distinctive competence nurtured in his ashrams. Further Gandhi's effective vision bridged the present and the future with a model of a desirable and idealistic program transcending the status quo.

All the ashrams founded by Gandhi were experimental organizations. Gandhi always discussed plans with his co-workers and trusted friends. There were open discussions and evaluations between Gandhi and the inmates, and among the inmates themselves regarding the attainment of the objectives of the

ashrams (Patel, 1953). These discussions reviewed the strengths, weaknesses and threats vis-à-vis the goals of the ashram. Differences of opinion among the members were reconciled through a consensus method. There were the chances of confrontation because the visible objects of his ashrams were purity of mind and body as well as economic equality. Gandhi moulded the objectives of his ashrams on a spiritual and religious basis (Gandhi, 1955). Information was circulated in his ashrams through upward and downward communications.

There are certain similarities of Gandhi's educational leadership to the Human Relations Approach. Gandhi's idea of small, self-contained communities is very conducive to social harmony. He believed in economic and social democracy and promoted reduction of inequality. Violence had no place in the Gandhian world view. He believed in a social order based upon justice, equality and freedom. He never approved the then prevailing system of education which was not suitable to Indians. Gandhi urged mutual love between the teachers and pupils (Avinashilingam, 1960).

Transformational leaders recognize that creativity is an integral part of leadership (Burns, 1978). Gandhi's educational leadership clearly reflects a 'production theory' dimension. He brought the idea that a suitable handicraft should form the core and basis of all education. Gandhi believed that the handicraft should, besides developing the personality of the child, make education economically self-supporting. The craft chosen should be so learnt that its produce should have an economic value (Thomson, 1993).

This has internal and external dimensions. Internally Gandhi sought to make the school economically self-sufficient and productive. He wanted the teachers to be paid and the school to be run out of the money earned by the produce of the pupils. Gandhi wanted the craft taught in the school to make the student economically self-supporting in their later life. The craft would be an insurance against unemployment (Thomson, 1993.).

#### **4. Gandhi and Metaphors of Educational Management**

Human thought is essentially metaphorical in character, (Belth, 1977). Knowledge consists of metaphors which link experiences together and interpret the relationships between ideas and the experiences on which they are based. The central concepts in the field of educational management can be understood by examining the fundamental metaphors on which they are based (Sergiovanni, 1967). Four basic metaphors have been identified to distinguish heuristically four based approaches to management -especially in the context of educational institutions- they are (a) a machine, (b) an organism, (c) a market place and (d) a conversation (Maddock, 1991).

Although schools had relatively little use for the conversational metaphor, Gandhi's approaches to management of education had close similarities to this metaphor. Transformational leaders are masterful communicators, able to articulate and define ideas and concepts that escape others (Richardson and Thayer, 1993). Transformational leaders transmit their ideas through images, metaphors, and models that organize meanings to followers. Management from the conversational perspective rests fundamentally on the development of inspirational leadership (Terrance, 1966). Gandhi possessed visionary leadership and asked his followers to discipline themselves by adhering to the principles of truth and non-violence in all their dealings for the common goal that is the service of the country (Thomson, 1993).

Conversations are possible only when the participants have a fund of shared meanings embodied in a common language and establishing an effective bond between the followers (Maddock, 1991). Gandhi gave membership in all his ashrams to those followers who could endure human quests for truth and non-violence (Thomson, 1993). Gandhi considered it was essential to observe certain vows by themselves in order to qualify his followers to achieve the goal. The members of his ashrams shared a common goal embodied in a common idiom and language. The egalitarian way of community life in his ashrams developed an effective bond between the members of his ashrams which is a vital element in a conversational approach to management (Terrance, 1966).

Gandhi as the leader gave inspiration to the residents of his ashrams. He himself practiced asceticism and followed a disciplined lifestyle which inspired his followers to practice the same lifestyle (Balvantsinha, 1962). As managerial leader of the ashrams he succeeded in articulating the collective purposes and motivated the residents through love and affection. Generosity and kindness was Gandhi's notable character in establishing relationship with his followers (Thomson, 1993). By admitting Harijans to his ashrams, Gandhi was breaking down the caste and religious barriers. He was able to co-ordinate and directs the ashram life and help the residents to transcend these barriers. As a

visionary leader Gandhi never dominated his ashram followers or showed any discrimination (Balvantsinha, 1962).

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper has sought to trace the genesis and progress of Gandhi in relation to the management and leadership styles adopted in his own experimental schools established in South Africa and India. If we take a bird's eye view of educational management in various countries of the world we shall find that the organization and management of education is shared by a central agency or a local agency everywhere. It is clearly evident that the schools established by Gandhi were managed without any external control. Gandhi was of the opinion that the school should be organized as a small community where the students and teachers have a feeling of living together as a well-knit group with love and affection for each other. He wanted the students to participate in all the activities of the community such as cooking, serving, cleaning and so on.

Gandhi firmly believed in democracy and did his best toward establishing a real democratic society in India. He had deep faith in democracy and wanted to have an education that would build up democratic values. It is very rare that we find people like Gandhi. India was extremely fortunate in having a noble and farsighted educationist like Gandhi who lived and contributed for the restructuring of the educational system that prevailed during his era in India. The ideas he put forward are not for a class or a group, but for the welfare of every community in all countries of the world. Many of Gandhi's ideas can be extended universally.

## **References**

- Avinashilingam, T. S. (1960). *Gandhi's Experiments in Education*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, Government of India.
- Balvantsinha (1962). *Under the Shelter of Bapu*. Ahmedabad, Navajivan, Publishing House.
- Belth, M. (1977). *The Process of Thinking*. New York, David McKay Co. Inc.
- Bryman, A. (1992). *Charisma and Leadership in Organizations*. London, Sage Publishers.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York, Harper & Row.
- Capodagli, B., & Jackson, L. (1999). *The Disney Way*. New York, McGraw-Hill.
- DePree, M. (1989). *Leadership is an Art*. New York, Doubleday.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1955). *Ashram Observances in Action*. Ahmedabad; Navajivan Publishing House.
- Joseph, P. (2011). *Management of Education: John Dewey and Mahatma Gandhi*. Saarbrücken: VDM International Publishing House, Germany.
- Maddock, T (1991). The Role of Authority and Reason in Education and Educational Administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 27(1), pp. 90-102.
- Nanus, B. (1992). *Visionary Leadership*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Patel, M, S. (1953). *The Educational Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*. Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House.
- Richardson, R. J. & Thayer, S. K. (1993). *The Charisma Factor*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.
- Sergiovanni, T. (1967). Factors Which Affect Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction of Teachers. *The Journal of Educational Administration*, 5(1), pp. 66-82
- Terrance, E. D. (1966). New Images of Organizations and Leadership. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 63(3), pp. 1-8.
- Thomson, M. (1993). *Gandhi and His Ashrams*. Bombay, Popular Prakashan.
- Varkey, C. J. (1939). *The Wardha Scheme of Education*. London, Oxford University Press.