

Leadership for Change: Promoting Inclusive Values and Cultures

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Cultural values are the foundation of inclusion, and this is the reason why Ainscow and Booth (2002) in their Index for Inclusion put this dimension at the base of their inverted triangle with the other two sides being policies and practices. The authors of the index argue that developing inclusive cultures can bring about a change in procedures (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). This is why it is critical that all the policy participants are made aware of the cultural values and ideas before trying to implement the inclusion policies. This study focuses on the cultural aspects of implementing inclusive education at schools, and attempts to answer who should take the leadership role in order to undertake positive practical steps in promoting inclusive values and cultures in the mainstream schools in Kazakhstan; and discusses which leadership models would best suit in the context of inclusive schools.

Keywords: inclusion, mainstream schools, culture, purpose, models of leadership.

It is not only the government and educators who are involved in the inclusive education reforms; all members of the society play a role in forming attitudes towards inclusive education, and can influence the outcomes of any government initiative. This is why it is crucial that all participants are aware of the cultural values and ideas before trying to perform inclusive education practices. If the goal is to build supportive communities for all, the traditional top-down managerial approach of passing down legislation and legal framework by itself, is not going to be effective unless everyone has a clear understanding of the purpose behind the concept of inclusion (Bush, 2011). What are the most crucial implications of moving towards inclusive education for school leaders and different stakeholders in Kazakhstan? This work aims at attempting to answer who should take the leadership role in order to undertake positive practical steps in promoting inclusive values and cultures in the context of Kazakhstani mainstream schools and communities. The paper focuses on the cultural aspects of implementing inclusion as one of the most important dimensions described by Booth and Ainscow (2002) in their Index for Inclusion.

Cultural values are the basis of inclusion, and this is the reason why Ainscow and Booth (2002) in their Index for Inclusion put this dimension at the core of their inverted triangle with the other two sides being policies and practices. Specifically, the authors of the this index argue that developing inclusive cultures can bring about a change in the procedures and approaches, as well as help to sustain this progression through the constant encouragement of those values by staff and pupils (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Consequently, this helps to understand that in order to change the cultural attitudes of the communities, firstly, it is important being aware of the challenges of the environment in schools. Historically, Kazakhstan has inherited a post-Soviet educational system, which had a long tradition of excluding people with disabilities by separating them into special correctional schools (Bridges, 2014). Not only did it separate children from their peers, but it separated specialist teachers trained in working with children with special needs from their colleagues in the mainstream schools resulting in no sharing of the professional experience (Bridges, 2014). Contemporary thinking and attitudes in society towards differences and disabilities stem from that segregation practice. People are often wary or afraid of things they do not understand, or are unfamiliar with. Therefore, it is important to focus on raising people's awareness of inclusive education as being a crucial part of a truly democratic society, where human rights and social justice for all are valued (Capper & Young, 2014).

Furthermore, another challenge of the current system is the top-down approach to reforms in Kazakhstan, and the fact that the educational system is highly centralized (Bardach, 2012; Bridges, 2014). The government communicates information about reforms through the educational programmes and a set of different official documents to the regional departments that instruct city departments, which, in their turn, instruct schools. There is a lot of accountability, but there is a few initiative from the bottom-up. If there is a lack of understanding of the social and economic benefits of inclusions at the lower levels, then a directive from the top is more likely to be met with resistance. For instance, according to Bridges (2014), the Sandzh Centre survey revealed that two-thirds of interviewed teachers, civil servants and school administrators opposed the idea of inclusive education; which indicates a lack of capacity of the lower level of the system to understanding the social and economic benefits of inclusive practices. This helps to understand that for the successful implementation of the inclusive educational reform, much effort must be made towards changing the mindsets; and that increasing schools' capacities to accommodating pupils with various additional needs is insufficient alone. Another aspect worth noting is that the work of school administration in Kazakhstani schools is assessed based on pupils' achievement indicators in a national test; regional and nationwide teachers' and pupils' participation in the academic competitions; teachers'

and school senior leadership team's participation in the conferences; school facilities management; and publication in different educational journals (Bridges, 2014). Hence, it appears that actions like creating friendly and open; collaborative and inclusive communities are not usually criteria for evaluating the school administration's performance. The assumption is that if one of the school assessment items (Bridges, 2014) includes the provision of the evidence for creating inclusive cultures, and inclusive school communities; school directors and school leadership teams would be more motivated to work in promoting appropriate inclusive policies and practices.

What leadership models would best suit in the context of inclusive schools in Kazakhstan? This is one of the most important questions worth thinking when moving towards inclusive education by the school leaders and different stakeholders in the country. There are several models of leadership: the formal, collegial and the cultural. The formal model of leadership is not the most effective one when implementing the inclusive education policies and practices. This is, firstly, because at the heart of the concept of inclusivity is the system of inner values. Does the society appreciate diversity and individuality; does it celebrate rather than segregate differences? The school educational system focused on the command and control, and valued "conformity over entrepreneurship and independence" (Bridges, 2014, p. 325). This kind of belief cannot simply disappear by passing governmental legislation. It takes time, the collaborative effort of people with the right vision to demonstrate good practices, thus promoting inclusive values by their own example to encourage others to do the same. In this respect, this helps to understand that a collegial model of leadership (Bush, 2011) would better suit in developing inclusive education in Kazakhstan. School administration, teachers and parents can work together to raise the awareness, helping to understand the importance of a holistic approach to a pupil's learning and, thus dispel misconceptions. The collegial model implies that all staff takes an active part in making decisions. The drawback can be that lack of control and direction can lead to some chaos in the organization and that some decisions might not be implemented properly (Sykes, 2015). In order to avoid this, some form of clear communication procedures and guidelines need to be put into the place. Another model of leadership that can go along together with the collegial model is the cultural one (Bush, 2011). In the cultural model, the emphasis is put on understanding the informal rituals and values of school members; and on influencing them to bring about the necessary change. As Sykes (2015) argues if staff does not see themselves as a part of the innovation, they are bound to see any change as an inconvenience rather than an improvement. It is, therefore, important that school-based stakeholders feel that their opinions matter and their voices are heard. It is only when people involved in the education process share similar values that they can positively affect changes, and take some practical steps to implement these changes together.

Any educational system is a reflection of the society which it belongs to. The children attending school today are the adults shaping the country's tomorrow. This is why the change of the mindset should first start within the school. There is a lot that one can say about local comprehensive schools not being ready for inclusion due to the lack of trained teachers, absence of resources, special tutors and necessary facilities. For example, access to school is problematic for some because of the lack of ramps and elevators. When all the lacking components now come into the light, the task ahead seems enormous, and as it usually happens with goals too great to achieve, many people want to give up before they even start. However, it does not have to happen that way. There are several steps that can be taken in the mainstream schools that do not require any permission, directive or funding from the government. If one works with the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) as a reference document, it is easy to see certain obvious features that are lacking, or can be easily improved (see Figure 1: from the personal archive of the author). For example, some of the questions in the index are about whether the first contact of visitors to a school create in them a welcoming and friendly impression; if the information displayed is accessible to all, or if the displays in the school hall, corridors and classrooms reflect and celebrate the diversity of school members (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).



Figure 1. An example of the mainstream secondary school in Kazakhstan, Astana. The Figure illustrates the general environment in halls and corridors as seen by visitors.

It is up to the school administration and teachers to ensure that whenever anyone enters the school they are greeted with a smile, and made to feel welcome. The information displays can be translated into three languages, Kazakh, Russian and English and be in a large print. The school staff can also make sure that displays in halls and corridors reflect the life of the school as a community (see Figure 1). For example, there could be photos of pupils working together at the lessons, some photos from school trips or holidays. It would be ideal if these photos also celebrated ethnic, cultural, gender and other diversities of pupils and staff.

Moreover, it is important to start thinking of inclusion not only as a relationship to providing support to children with special educational needs. There is a broader view of inclusion, which includes meeting the needs of all children taking into account all their differences such as ethnic, gender, culture, family background, physical and mental health, and abilities (Reindal, 2016). If there is an understanding of accepting an individual as a whole with all the differences and peculiarities, then there is no need to try and classify people into groups. If the focus is put on the person first, then there will be no fragmentation and segregation. Changing the language to describe people is another thing that educators, administration, teachers, other staff in school can do to promote this idea. Trying to stay away from labels such as ‘ADHD kid’, ‘disabled person’ and use the ‘person first’ language is a small thing that can make a big difference on how people see themselves and others. In her article, *People First Language*, Snow (2007) states that changing the attitudes of educators towards children with disabilities, and seeing these children as having the potential to learn, makes a huge difference for their future. We must use this language to develop inclusion and respect for all.

Many questions on the Index of Inclusion deal with treating each other with respect, encouraging collaboration, working well together, creating partnerships among teachers, parents and local communities (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). The leaders who can work with the index to promote changes, and make schools open and welcoming communities do not have to hold high managerial positions. They can be teachers in schools, parents, pupils, administration officials, government officials, school psychologists and other members of staff. It is important for both pupils and parents to feel the ownership of the school. They should feel that their opinion on how the school can be improved matters. This can be done by gathering feedback, and showing that those comments are taken seriously and acted upon. There can be more events where parents or members of local communities are invited to participate. There can be more assemblies and conferences, where inclusion would be the main focus of discussion. All these actions can support the process of creating a better environment for teaching and learning in schools, and everyone involved in the school community can be a part of it.

All in all, when people discuss the issue of barriers to implementing inclusion in Kazakhstan, they often focus on its schools’ capacity and facilities that require major reorganization and funding. However, the main assets and resources such as people, their values and experiences are very often overlooked (Bush, 2011). By applying the practical tools for reference, like the Index for Inclusion which emphasizes the development of inclusive culture (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), school leaders can determine the priorities, and start developing their schools as an inclusive community that welcomes diversity. Adopting collegial and cultural models at school levels would help staff and parents to implement inclusive policies and practices, and take a responsibility for making a school a better and stronger community. Instead of focusing alone on the absence of conditions and resources necessary for inclusive education, people should additionally turn their attention to whatever it is in their power to promoting

inclusive values and culture at schools now, as the Chinese proverb says: “It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness”.

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