

# The role of leadership in the context of school improvement in Kazakhstan

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This paper aims to describe the roles of school leadership and teacher leadership in school improvement; how teacher leadership is understood in the context of the emerging nation of Kazakhstan and abroad; how teacher leadership is operating within Kazakhstani mainstream schools; and what can be learnt about similarities and differences in teacher leadership practices and perspectives on leadership and successful leadership practices between Kazakhstan and the West.

Keywords: school leadership, teacher leadership, mainstream schools in Kazakhstan

## Introduction

The education system in Kazakhstan has one single centralized authority at the level of the Ministry of Education (national government). This has a top-down approach, which leaves no space for local education authorities (GorONOs and OblONOs or Education Departments of cities and oblasts) to make autonomous decisions towards their individual aims and initiatives (OECD, 2014; World Bank, 2015). The main goals of Kazakhstan's educational policy regarding the enhancement of the quality of leadership at mainstream schools in the country and head teachers' expansion in autonomy are outlined in the Republic of Kazakhstan's State Education Development Program (SPED) for 2011-2020 (MoES, 2010) and have a direct impact on the country's school leadership practice (Yakavetz, 2016). This is, in turn, mirrored in the red tape, rigorous planning system, and weak school management, which are focused mainly on maintaining the status quo. In other words, "velocity" rather than leadership, which is about making a difference and improving performance, or "acceleration". As the OECD report (2014) highlights "... policies in support of school principals are considerably more limited, despite an anticipated increase in responsibilities for principals in connection with the education reform" (p.20).

Notably, schools in Kazakhstan focus more attention on school effectiveness than school improvement. School improvement is the implementation strategy of providing appropriate conditions for better professional learning, whereas school effectiveness relates to inputs and outputs (Day & Sammons, 2013). The government, communities, and parents are more focused on school effectiveness, that is, on student academic achievement. Little attention is given to the process of getting results, how to achieve certain standards, and what is needed to attain the set education standards. Besides, one can imply the latter to quantitative and the former to qualitative. The two terms are certainly interconnected with each other, although school improvement is the most essential as it is a process-driven action. Therefore, the country needs an effective leadership system whereby school improvement and school effectiveness could adequately fund both teacher and school leadership programs. School principals, meanwhile, can provide teachers with distributed leadership roles which propel teachers to pursue innovations and initiatives.

Thus, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education and Science is standing at a crossroads of considering and reviewing school leadership in order to improve it, substantiating that "If [we want] to develop schools, it is necessary to have new concepts, new models and new methods, so it is imperative to have new perspectives on school leadership" (Baimoldayev, 2009, p.8).

School leadership plays an important role in enhancing effective and successful student learning (Mukhtarova, 2013), and all current school reforms tend to improve teaching and learning. However, they are all determined by school leadership in terms of their success on incentives and abilities. The chance of any reform ameliorating student learning is unlikely to occur unless district and school leaders consent to its purposes and estimate the requirements that would make it work. School leaders should also be able to help their colleagues understand how new initiatives might be combined with school improvement efforts in order to reflect the values and priorities of parents and local communities. Consequently, effective and successful leadership is crucial to school reform. As Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins (2006) claim, "school leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning" (p. 3).

The second aspect relating to school leadership is a widely shared sense of community among all the school's stakeholders, which affects the collaborative leadership and its impact on student learning. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, Anderson (2010) suggest that "collective leadership has a stronger influence on student learning than any individual source of leadership" (p.8). Such forms of collaboration vary from parents' involvement in the teaching of their own children to direct participation in school decision-making. They are of great significance for several reasons. Firstly, creating these partnerships between students and teachers with a sense of community is essential in motivating students to learn more effectively. Secondly, effective leadership enhances both teacher inspiration and student learning. The study goes on to say that all stakeholders in the educational process in high-achieving schools contributed to and were involved in decision-making processes a great deal more than in lower-achieving schools. Perhaps this is a case where two heads function better than one. The study concludes that the high performance of such schools can be advocated by their access to collective knowledge where, unlike individual learners, the community of the school may engage and create knowledge together. An expansive and longstanding culture in leadership holds that leaders from diverse backgrounds and in different types of associations need to rely upon others to perform group initiatives (Louis et al., 2010). Schools are no different. An effective leader will enable teachers to learn from each other. According to the Wallace Foundation (2012), "a central part of being a great leader is cultivating leadership in others" (p.11).

### **Teacher leadership**

From international studies and literature, it has become apparent that there are overlapping and opposing meanings of the term 'teacher leadership'. Its definition varies across the world, and the fact that there exists some theoretical disarray over the degree of importance teacher leadership takes makes it more difficult to understand the function of leadership. For instance, according to Wasley (1991), teacher leadership is "the ability to encourage colleagues to change, to do things they would not ordinarily consider without the influence of the leader", whereas Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) define teacher leaders as "teachers, who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice" (as cited in Harris, 2003). Moreover, for some researchers, such as Pont, Nusche & Moorman (2008), this means delegating the responsibilities and special roles to teachers, thus implying the meaning of distributed leadership (as cited in Frost, 2006). However, according to Frost (2006), this type of definition can lead to the sharing of the workload of administration without even building any capacity for teacher leadership. As a result, Frost, together with the Hertfordshire and Cambridge Network in the UK, presented an opposing definition of teacher leadership. Specifically, it is a two-year-part time MEd course for teachers provided by the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and the Hertfordshire Local Education Authority. Teacher leadership is pursued through the "teacher-led development work" (TLDW) model, which trains teachers to be researchers. According to them, teacher leadership means that teachers, either with or without positions of responsibility, show the initiative to enhance student learning, collaborate with colleagues in order to make changes, collect evidence, and employ such evidence in the process of creating and disseminating the resulting knowledge.

Tasks carried out by Kazakhstani mainstream schoolteachers include observing efforts to promote change, choosing their school's curriculum, and taking part in administrative meetings. In addition to these, they are often invited to partake in peer coaching, communicate with parents, participate within the community, and review action research or "lesson studies" in their time away from the classroom. Thus, they endeavor to work with colleagues to encourage this ongoing systematic collaboration with families, community members, and other stakeholders to advance the educational system and extend opportunities for student learning. They are also frequently invited to promote programs and activities that encourage and support efforts made by the community. As Fullan (2014) suggests, "these leaders have an eye on the end game, which in our case is improving the learning of all students" (p.129). Regularly, these change agents are teachers who have significant teaching experience, are known to be outstanding educators, and are respected by their colleagues. They are learning- and achievement-oriented, as well as "willing to take risks to achieve results, and more interested in motivating people than in following narrow rules" (Fullan, 2014, p.129). When teachers are considered to be change agents, they can be facilitators in the school and be a significant element in the advancement and change involved in school reform.

Although the same tendency exists among Kazakhstani schools, as Pont, Nusche, and Moorman (2008) mention, there is a mistaken attitude towards leadership as a whole in the management systems of mainstream schools. In spite of the fact that leadership is about making a difference and improving performance, distributing teacher leadership is taken for granted as being more akin to a managerial system, which is designed to maintain the status

quo (Baimoldayev, 2009) and involves delegating responsibilities among the school leadership team, as well as training and non-teaching staff. Hence, it is of great importance, to first understand what leadership means as a whole, and then to build capacity and move towards the stage of designating leadership roles to teachers.

### **School leadership challenges in Kazakhstan**

Moreover, Kazakhstani mainstream schoolteachers have a large amount of autonomy and control in their numerous classrooms and are expected to participate actively in learning procedures, although they do not have the same privileges as HertsCam teachers, who, for instance, are provided with staff to assist them in printing, copying, and preparing for classes. This consequently leads to a reduction in teacher workload and provides an opportunity to take part in such activities. However, outside the classroom, mainstream schoolteachers in particular have typically had little say in the decisions that influence their own profession, its development, and the improvement of student learning. Consequently, with the way schools are arranged, the way the educational system works, and the way policy makers expect teachers to hold the status quo, having “teaching as kind of delivery system and teachers as kind of functionaries” (The RSA, 2013, 17:58). With this top-down approach, there is a tendency for mainstream teachers to become critical of continuous renewal and avoid becoming familiar with or involved in the educational process. As Ken Robinson states “the more government's go into command control mode, the more they misunderstand the nature of teaching and learning, the more they misunderstand the process of education, the more alienated people become from the whole process” (The RSA, 2013, 18:00). This in turn is reflected in teachers’ commitment, which is crucial for the success of any reform. It then affects the teacher’s willingness to be actively involved in the reform. As Lukacs and Galluzzo (2014) believe, “it is unlikely that teacher change agents would persist in pursuing a goal unless they felt a personal responsibility to do so” (p.9).

Another challenge for teacher leadership is the mainstream schools’ bureaucratic methods and the structure of their organization. In most cases, schools apply formal structures and processes of giving roles and responsibilities to teachers in order to achieve set goals (Owens, 2004). Therefore, schools favor a traditional system of leadership held by complete authority and accountability for attaining any results. The most essential component of this traditional environment is teacher leadership that defines competence and authority. However, the competence and authority does not mean that teachers are solely provided with decentralized decision-making autonomy. Precisely, it is about encouraging and ensuring that the school leaders and policy makers allow equal access to educational resources and information to foster authentic and lasting change and improvement in schools. Thus, Bolman and Deal (1994) state that teachers are “almost never provided with lenses to help them understand the nature of leadership and the complex systems in which leadership is exercised” (as cited in Greenlee, 2007).

Besides, many people consider the style of teacher leadership in Kazakhstan as one that empowers teachers with decentralized decision-making authority. Rather it is about collaboration and cooperation among teachers, and it is this that creates a society where all members share and impart a solid feeling of community and collective responsibility regarding student achievement. In other words, teacher leadership is not limited to formal positions or responsibilities but distributed amongst the entire educational staff.

Apart from the above-mentioned challenges, the HertsCam TLDW program mentions the use of effective strategies and tools to mobilize teachers. According to them, mobilization of teacher leadership is the designing of specific activities and tasks to inspire and motivate them to practice teacher leadership.

Furthermore, since teachers are well informed of current conditions in their schools, they are able to share this knowledge and cooperate with colleagues to make informed decisions and take initiatives that improve the learning of all students, and to collaborate with responsible school and district bodies. In other words, as Lukas and Galluzzo (2014) point out, “they more broadly possess an inner sense of direction for identifying what might improve teaching practices and/or student achievement in their schools” (p.7). Therefore, to increase teachers’ commitment, dedication, and hence their actions, they need to be included in the decision-making process rather than only in the implementation of such decisions. Since in most mainstream schools in Kazakhstan teachers are not given such rights and responsibilities, do not participate in decision making process, and are not encouraged to pursue their own initiatives and plans, they are not motivated to change their teaching practices or their school, unlike the HertsCam model teachers.

In conclusion, in Kazakhstani mainstream schools, many would recognize that principals or senior management teams endeavor to share the leadership within their staff before making everything clear to teachers and everyone involved, that is, providing favorable conditions for teachers and improving the learning environment, training teachers to work collaboratively and solve problems, developing skillful participation, and bringing purposeful learning to their engagement without realizing that the distribution of leadership cannot happen without establishing a base of system leadership. Therefore, Kazakhstani teacher leadership needs thorough and detailed teacher leadership programs which ought to emphasize reflection, planning, and sharing of the experience. Secondly, there should be a healthy environment which encourages innovation and distributed leadership among teachers. Finally, in order to provide teachers with valid, reliable, and relevant knowledge and experience, teachers need to network beyond their own schools.

Hence, it is of prime importance to note that teachers have the necessary abilities and knowledge to strengthen school development and student learning. In order to enhance these strengths, they need to be given recognized responsibilities, authority, the time to collaborate, and support in assuming leadership roles from school administrators. Twenty-first century schools need organizational structures of collaborative and cooperative characters who contribute to problem solving, critical thinking, and the creation of a collective intelligence along with the teacher playing an active change agent role.

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