

SCHOOLING AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN KAZAKHSTAN: SUGGESTIONS FOR INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

Anar Mukhtarova

Turar Ryskulov Kazakh Economic University, Kazakhstan

E-mail: mukhtarova_a@kazeu.kz

Tunc Medeni

Yıldırım Beyazıt University, METU and Turksat, Turkey

E-mail: medeni@ybusm.info

—Abstract —

A growing number of worldwide research on school leadership proves that it is an important issue; even leadership may affect learning outcomes of pupils. School headteachers' position in Kazakhstan is demanding as elsewhere. The aim of this article is to highlight the schooling system in Kazakhstan and review critically school leadership, contrast local practices with late research outcomes in school leadership abroad. Finally, authors suggest some recommendations for current Kazakhstani practitioners in schooling leadership.

Key Words: school, leadership, innovation, Kazakhstan

JEL Classification: I200

1. INTRODUCTION

There might be nothing more important for parents than the well-being and education of their child. Schools are the most important places in educating future generations; moreover, the formation of future identity begins in a school. Thus, investing in education is the strategic direction for caring about the future of the country and its competitiveness in a global arena. Additionally, modern tendencies demand rethinking of educational leaders' activities on all levels. This article aims to review critically the current situation of schooling and school leadership in general and propose some innovative practices for further enhancement.

Kazakhstan is a secular country and does not allow religious education in public schools. The main types of educational establishments in Kazakhstan that offer primary, basic secondary and high secondary education are comprehensive schools, gymnasiums (linguistic and technical), lyceums and profession-oriented schools. However, the majority of the Kazakhstani schools are comprehensive. According to the Agency of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2011) there are 7755 general comprehensive schools with more than 2.5 million pupils. Children normally begin schooling at the age of 6-7 and continue until 17-18. The fact that comprehensive school combines all departments (primary, basic, secondary) may be considered as a potential challenge for any headteacher since each department has unique peculiarities.

The effective organization of school education is difficult due to low population density, geographic isolation and a large number of small schools. More than 55% of schools in Kazakhstan are considered to be small with no more than 50 pupils, mainly located in rural areas (Access to a high quality education: opportunities and limitations of rural school children, 2008). Thus access to quality education to some extent depends on the children's domicile. Unfortunately, rural children have fewer opportunities to access additional educational services and information compared with their urban peers (National Report Education for All Mid-Decade Assessment: Reaching the Un-Reached, 2008).

Despite such schooling challenges, schoolchildren are taught on different native languages. Apart from Kazakh and Russian there are Uigur, German, Uzbek, Tajik and other minority language schools (the Agency of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011). Therefore, there is an increase of schools instructing in Kazakh, Russian and English due to the government's trilingual

policy. Moreover, during the last decade, the Kazakhstani schoolchildren have been actively and successfully participating in different international contests and Olympiads (Nurmagambetov, & Kussainov, 2006). The most distinguishable achievement is in mathematics. High-school children of Kazakhstan were on the 5th place after China, Russia, USA and South Korea in the International Mathematical Olympiad 2010 held in Astana, Kazakhstan (details at www.imo-official.org). These are two facets of schooling in Kazakhstan with high achievements on one side and deprivation, poverty and the related problems on the other side.

2. Literature review on school leadership in Kazakhstan

The research and published material on the Kazakhstani schools and school leadership in English is limited, almost absent. Especially, school leadership is a relatively new concept as compared with school management. The approaches regarding the revision and rethinking of the concept of school leadership have been discussed at the level of the Ministry of Education and Science. Tursynbek Baimoldayev, a former Director of Republican Institute for Professional Development of Leading and Scientific Pedagogical Cadre argues that

‘If [we want] to develop schools it is necessary to have new concepts, new models, new methods then it is imperative to have new perspectives on school leadership’ (Baimoldayev, 2009).

Furthermore, the relevance of this issue has been raised by different authors. Bekbayeva attempts to explore organizational, social and economic aspects of the school leadership by understanding the importance, meaning and practices of school leadership (Bekbayeva, 2009). This implies that current headteachers are aware of their potentials and weaknesses. Another experienced school headteacher Kozybak shares some strategies of leadership and monitoring within the school (Kozybak, 2009). He distinguishes such types of monitoring as classroom, general, thematic and individual ones. In terms of how to accomplish these activities, he suggests to work collaboratively with deputies and teacher leaders of methodological unions of different subjects.

Some other concerns discussed in the literature are the critical role of a headteacher’s activity in raising the quality of education (Valieva, 2010; Milovanova, 2010; Taurbekova, 2011) leading successfully without stress (Kondrashkin, 2010), effective organization of school management, distribution

of functional responsibilities, correlation of leadership and gained achievements (Dozortseva, 2011), and leader's spiritual-practical activities in nurturing staff (Dorozhkina, 2011). Apart from that the leader's personal qualities and professional competencies are also taken into account. Thus, Zhaksylykova (2010:13) claims that the art of leadership can be attained by experience and success; high-performance of a leader depends on his/her moral-ethical values. Importantly, Zhaksylykova suggests that it is conditional for the leaders to be able to build trust, be creative, be able to accept and respect different views, be analytical, come to straightforward but correct decisions and be able to act strategically (ibid:16).

However, all these papers are of reflective and of theoretical character. It is noticeable that data collection by qualitative/quantitative techniques is not widely spread among practicing school headteachers in Kazakhstan. Hence, this may suggest some drawbacks such as lack of research culture in schools. An overview of recent published papers stresses the difficulties of drawing a comprehensive picture on school leadership research. It is likely that many issues have been discussed at some level other than through empirical research. Hence, individuals have different perspectives and their recommendations may not be applicable.

Apart from these problems, the Kazakhstani authors often seem to avoid discussing transformational issues within their organizations. Yet, Oldroyd, an English educational consultant gives an example of a transformational school leader in Shymkent city, Southern Kazakhstan (Oldroyd, 2005:204-205). It appears that the approaches to educational research in Kazakhstan remain to some extent the same as in the late Soviet period. Significantly, the differences in perception and terminology use can also be highlighted. This situation could be explained by several reasons. According to BISAM Central Asia research organization the average age of PhD researchers in Kazakhstan is about 56 years (BISAM, 2010). Therefore, the majority of papers are published by that generation who received basic research knowledge and skills-training in Soviet-era Kazakhstan. Among 701 respondent researchers only about 10% claim that they are in command of different foreign languages. Thus, accessing worldwide research findings and discussions is quite difficult despite the government's ambition to integrate into the global educational and research community.

From this perspective what this paper tries to argue is that any research attempts and studies from the younger generation will likely make a contribution towards filling the gap between two research generations. This may help to build a unique Kazakhstani way of school leadership development. Commonly, the Kazakhstani school head is called school director. The title and meaning given to the word is somewhat different from the Western-type school headteacher and leader. Thus, it directly affects the functions and competencies of a headteacher. During Soviet times, school directors used to perform as directed by and were accountable to centralised hierarchy and still it remains nearly the same. Thus, selection and appointment of headteachers has not been changed much since independence.

Normally, the applicant who is applying for the position of school headship must have higher pedagogical education and pedagogical experience of no less than five years in an educational institution. The aspiring headteacher must know all state laws and regulations specifically regarding the education, children's rights and languages. The appointment and dismissal of the director is accomplished with the consent of district educational authorities and, importantly, district mayor's approval (Kuzembayeva, 2006; Yessimbekova & Aitbayev, 2010). As a rule, when the potential headteacher is applying for the position he/she is put onto the reserve list in case there is no open position at that time. Thus, they should wait until the position is offered to them. However, beginning headteachers are not provided with prior appointment leadership preparation. This implies that still the government does not have a systematic approach for the school leadership preparation in education.

The school headteacher in Kazakhstan is the person who is responsible for the realization of the state educational standards and policy. The headteacher's main responsibilities are to organize and coordinate the educational (teaching, curriculum and discipline) activities of the school by creating favourable working conditions for school personnel and pupils. The headteacher has the power and authority to represent the school, operate on behalf of the school, and sign contracts with individuals and organizations. Therefore, the headteacher recruits, hires and dismisses specialists and is responsible for health and safety issues, building maintenance and other minor duties. One of the new responsibilities of the headteachers is to manage the school's financial activities and make necessary purchases (usually called 'state purchases') for their schools (Yessimbekova & Aitbayev, 2010; Principal's Duty regulations, 2010).

The school director's role and competencies seem to be more managerial as compared with European and North American counterparts. Goddard describes headteacher's managerial role as focused 'on the maintenance of a system ... he or she puts great effort into planning and organizing the day-to-day operations of school' which to some extent reflects the Kazakhstani school director's role (Goddard, 2003:14).

However, the impulse and tendency of modernizing school leadership can be observed in some city schools. Despite the fact that the regulations on the division of school staff do not include separate positions for managers, some city schools additionally hire administrative managers. This is becoming a common practice for gymnasiums and innovative schools. Managers are delegated by headteachers and deal with all issues upon their absence. This practice shows a gradual change of the headteacher's role and responsibilities.

The focus on the school leadership of present day Kazakhstan shows that the leadership concept demands further in-depth research in order to establish a modern theoretical framework. Importantly, the Kazakhstani published papers attempt to integrate and characterize current specifications of school leadership issues. However, they do not give a constructive overview of the situation. Overall, it could be argued that the Kazakhstani school headteachers are discovering new practices and strategies of leading schools in a period of continuous changes happening in the education system. Thus, the little steps towards the development of a Western-style culture of school leadership are being taken.

3. International perspectives on leadership and successful leadership practices

Scenarios of a school leadership development in Kazakhstan may have different ways in the future. However, research findings from a number of different countries such as UK, USA, Africa, Australia, China, Denmark, Norway and Sweden show that 'almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices' (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, Hopkins, 2006:6). It means that exploring practices of principals and defining best practices of them may enable aspiring principals to enhance their leadership practices, strategies and probably help to avoid some failures and mistakes. But, none of the practice is a prescription or rule. Principals differ, and success of the

same practice may depend on human factors as well as the context. Specifically, authors (Leithwood et al., 2006) suggest that the application of practices should be a response to a situation in a particular context. Hence, a successful leader is aware of and sensitive to contextual matters.

Day et al (2011) presented ten strong claims of successful leaders' practices based on evidence from three year project IMPACT (the Impact of Leadership on Pupil Outcomes). The project findings complemented previously reported seven strong claims established by Leithwood et al (2006). According to the authors (Day et al, 2011: from Foreword)

‘the results demonstrated that heads in more effective schools are successful in improving pupil outcomes through who they are – their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences – the strategies they use, and the specific combination and timely implementation and management of these strategies in response to the unique contexts in which they work’

Successful leaders differ from others with regard to such practices as setting directions of the school, developing people, refining and aligning their organizations and improving the teaching and learning in their schools (Leithwood et al, 2006; Day et al, 2011). Importantly, all these practices are closely interconnected; a poor performance in one practice may lead to ineffectiveness of others.

Gronn (2003:72) states that ‘leading and managing have always been experienced as intensely demanding forms of work’. To some extent success or the failure of the school is a burden and responsibility of a principal. The exemplification of such responsibility is significantly felt in OFSTED inspections or league tables in the UK. Furthermore, Shields (2004:109) describes the work of the leaders as follows:

‘Educational leadership is widely recognised as complex and challenging. Educational leaders are expected to develop learning communities, build the professional capacity of teachers, take advice from parents, engage in collaborative and consultative discussion making, resolve conflicts, engage in educative instructional leadership, and attend respectfully,

immediately, and appropriately to the needs and requests of families with diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Increasingly, educational leaders are faced with tremendous pressure to demonstrate that every child for whom they are responsible is achieving success'

To deal effectively with such issues makes the leader's role more demanding than ever before; their responsibilities have expanded significantly (Bush, 2009; Bush et al, 2011). What becomes evident is that, nowadays, principals in many developed countries are expected to play important roles in creating learning communities, leading learning or changing and transforming their organizations. The hardest challenge for principals seems to be successfully combining their qualities, skills and abilities into well-planned and workable strategies, to be able to meet the expectations of all involved parties in a timely manner.

While the Kazakhstani principals seem to act more in the role of managers, principals in European and North American and other English speaking countries are combining the roles of leaders and sometimes managers. The role as a leader presumes to be a motivator, communicator, organization developer, vision and climate builder, planner and even sometimes researcher (Newberry, 2005). As a manager the principal may perform more interpersonal, informational and decisional roles (Straub, 2000). Interestingly, Senge (1990:293) explains the leader's role figuratively by saying

'the neglected leadership role is the *designer* of the ship. ...
It's fruitless to be the leader in an organization that is poorly designed'

The design of an internal environment should go hand in hand with an external environment such as a local community. Importantly, the ability to take into account needs of the community may hint the strength of the principal. According to Starratt (2002:321) 'school leaders should embrace community as an explicit, intentional, and programmatic component of the school curriculum'. This perspective leads to the conclusion that the role that leaders play is likely to be always in the public eye.

All in all, the principal's role is not solely a function or formal position to be taken. As Leithwood (2007:42) aptly describes, it is 'about leaders' values,

beliefs, skills or knowledge that someone thinks leaders need in order to act in an effective manner'. Following this, Bottery (1990:8) perceptively notes that everyone to some extent has 'certain basic beliefs about education' and the perception of the school leadership role by a principal may be underpinned considerably by his/her values of knowledge, education or schooling. The strength of the leader's role is to engage the followers effectively despite their different educational experience, skills and belief backgrounds, to build one team to achieve targeted goals and shared vision.

However, the above discussed meanings of the principal's role are more applicable in western or Anglo-American mentality. It should be stressed that the role that the principal plays depends on the situation and 'a different meaning that might be given to the role in developed and developing countries' (Oplatka, 2004:433). After reviewing twenty-seven papers Oplatka (2004:441) concluded that

'when role expectations and position are compared, the two groups of nations [developed and developing] vary substantially in terms of the image of principalship, its position and status, principal's autonomy, attitudes towards change initiation and parental involvement in school life'.

Thus, different meaning assigned to the role defines the principal's functions and all other aspects attached to the role. What could be emphasized is that politics, history, traditions, culture, and other factors determine the principal's role and responsibilities.

4. Conclusion

The present school principals in Kazakhstan have changed much in twenty years of independence. It seems they are experiencing a time of transition in rethinking and rebuilding the school management by expanding the role responsibilities and its meaning. The suggestions being proposed are only attempts to contribute school leaders' practice development.

For being successful in a Kazakhstani context today seems to be more innovative in everyday practices. The majority of schools leaders operate as they used to do except new Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools who are considered to be innovative flagmen of a current society. Successful practices mentioned above may not be

applicable since education system is experiencing a continuous chain of changes. However, there some points where the leader can become an initiator of change and improvement. It might be appropriate to suggest firstly, enhance communicative skills and become a key learner of an organisation. Unfortunately, not all trainings organised in educational departments on district levels offer such course as compared to business sector. Thus, some business trainings, seminars and workshops may renew practices of leaders and bring innovative decisions. To exemplify, some higher educational establishments offer business courses. Particularly, current schools and universities in Kazakhstan have poor connections apart from pedagogical institutions.

Further, creativeness is a key point of innovative practices. Moreover, it is not enough to be creative for the head only; instead he/she should engrain and inspire creativity among the staff. In its turn leader is expected to create warm, supportive and friendly environment where everyone is willing to contribute to the development and success of a school; school becomes a common place of self-realisation where the “we” is higher than individual preferences.

We have experienced primary/secondary school representatives’ visiting higher education institutions to develop collaborative projects. As far as we are concerned, in general “iki yıldız (two stars)” events where one student and one teacher perform a stage art performance are good practices that can be implemented in other schools, as well.

Being passionate and enthusiastic about their own practices can also drive the followers and sustain leader’s position within the organisation. To build and promote cooperation current heads may organise “School of Heads” or “Leadership School” where they can share opinions and promote best practices taken from their practices. Further it could be suggested for leaders to be more inquiry oriented, to be critical in process within and outside the school, ask questions and see the situation from the helicopter’s position. Overall, leaders’ main task is to contribute to the development and sustainability of a community.

Another point to consider is the leader’s ability to manage talented staff members, to grow up followers and future leaders. It is highly important to bring out best in the staff and be able to create sustainability in leadership; only strong leadership is likely to give birth to next generation of leadership. Thus, HR skills in talent management is also an angle of today’s Kazakhstani schools since teaching or working in schools is not as prestigious as it was in the Soviet times.

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