

Non-positional Teacher Leadership in the Post-Socialist Context

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This article provides an account of a range of research and development endeavours in the Western Balkans and in Kyrgystan in which the non-positional approach to teacher leadership has been deployed in various ways. The article illuminates how, in the case of the Balkan countries, the support for teacher leadership has been successfully linked to wider reform efforts. The article argues that empowering teachers in the ways discussed here can revitalise institutions and societies through deeper democratic participation. Evidence presented here shows how teachers can become agents of change who promote inter-cultural understanding and democratic values.

Keywords: Extended professionalism, teacher leadership, professional learning communities, conflict

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the breakup of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s led to the formation of independent states in the Baltic, the Western Balkans and Central Asia (Ilyin, Meleshkina & Stukal, 2012). This article focuses on the education systems of just four of those: Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), Kyrgystan, Serbia and the Republic of North Macedonia. We draw upon a number of research and development endeavours in these countries to explore how teachers can play a more prominent role in transforming educational practice by initiating and leading their own initiatives. We begin by describing the context and identifying common features of the policy landscape.

The Policy Background

In the post-socialist era education systems experienced many reforms including those which impacted on the teaching profession. Studies have shown that teachers are the key factor determining the quality of the educational process and the level of academic achievement (OECD, 2005; Sanders & Rivers, 1996), but a great deal remains unclear in these particular contexts. Specifically, this includes the variation in effectiveness between teachers and what is needed to enable them to improve practice and help them cope with the challenges of their demanding profession (Vranješević & Trikić, 2013).

In the four countries we saw many reforms as these newly independent countries struggled to develop their national identities, modernise their systems, and improve their economies. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, laws passed at the state-level aimed to improve education in order to enhance socio-economic development and optimise integration into the European education area (Čelebičić, Rangelov Jusović, & Heinen, 2014). In Kyrgyzstan, reforms addressed issues of teacher retention and teacher shortage with strategies to attract new teachers (Steiner-Khamsi, Kumenova & Taliev, 2008; Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2009). In Macedonia, reforms were aimed at creating an education system that would be comprehensive, inclusive and pupil-centred (MoES, 2016; 2018). Young people were to be well prepared for the labour-market and inducted in the values of democracy and multiculturalism. In Serbia, the key aim of educational reforms since 2000 has been to create an education system that is inclusive, de-centralised, efficient and transparent. Essential to this would be well-educated, reflective and motivated professionals (MoES, 2004).

Unfortunately, reform efforts have tended to be piecemeal, opportunistic, and often poorly implemented. In Macedonia for example, despite a decentralisation initiative in 2004, the education system still remains highly centralised. The goal of standardisation has had a negative effect on teachers, restricting their autonomy and involvement in policy (Lyon, 2011; Joshevsk, 2012; 2017). Similarly, in Serbia the education system is still predominantly centralised, limiting the role of teachers in the educational process and making them less visible (Pantić et al., 2010). In highly centralised education systems, the role of teachers is characteristically reduced to being mere implementers of educational policies rather than reflective practitioners continuously seeking to improve their practice (Vranješević & Čelebičić, 2014).

Another symptom of the global education reform movement is test-based accountability policies (Sahlberg, 2016). A recent appraisal of the Kyrgyzstan's education strategy noted that the Education Development Strategy of Kyrgyzstan (EDSoK) for 2012-2020 does not address the teaching profession as a whole, nor present any ideas on how teachers could be inspired and mobilised as a professional force (UNICEF, 2013). Teachers in Kyrgyzstan are required to implement the newly introduced compulsory testing of pupils in the 4th, 9th and 11th grades of secondary school (GoK, 2012). This is a superficial response to Kyrgyzstan pupils' poor performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2006 and 2009 (OECD, 2006, 2009). In EDSoK's action plan (2012-2014) there is a direct link between the compulsory testing of pupils and the performance appraisal of teachers. The assessment of teachers and teacher development strategies are based primarily on pupils' performance in compulsory tests (GoK, 2012). Similarly, in Macedonia in 2013, the government imposed external testing as a way of checking teachers' own assessments which resulted in punishments for teachers where discrepancies were found. Such initiatives resonate with the neo-liberal, managerialist education reforms underway in the US and the UK (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012), in which it is assumed that all problems have managerial solutions (Sachs, 2001).

However, they fail to improve the quality of education but instead result in teachers teaching to the test (Stotesbury & Dorling, 2015). Policies that envisage managerial solutions in the form of a ‘standards-and-accountability’ strategy (Verger, Altinyelken & de Koning, 2013) hold teachers solely responsible for many educational problems, including pupils’ poor performance.

Teachers in the four countries are required to take part in professional development programmes, although the nature and content of such programmes is left to local education authorities. Pedagogical institutes and ministries of education provide funding only for obligatory programmes and schools have little or no funds for supporting teachers’ professional development. That is why school-based professional development programmes, reflective practice activities or professional learning communities are limited or do not exist at all. The effects of such centralisation are two-fold: on the one hand teachers’ roles are limited in scope and on the other hand they are not able to develop the competences needed for taking more active roles in the profession. The results of the Teachers’ Discussions About Teachers (TCAT) project in Serbia, for example, show that, when asked about the competences they see as crucial for their professional role, the majority of teachers only mentioned those related to teaching and instruction. They do not see themselves as having decision-making power within the system (Pantić & Čekić Marković, 2012). In Kyrgyzstan, the government’s Education Strategy refers to what must be done with teachers rather than seeing them as a resource for educational reform (GoK, 2012). These problems are reinforced by rigid school curricula with teacher-centred methodologies that restrain teachers from innovating (Kovač-Cerović, 2006).

The situation described above has contributed to a construction of teacher identity which Hoyle labelled ‘restricted professional’ (Hoyle, 1974; 2008) in which classroom practice and subject matter mastery are dominant. Furthermore, even though findings of international studies emphasise the role of the teacher as a determinant of educational success (Hattie, 2002; OECD 2005; TALIS, 2009), policies have failed to address teacher professionalism. Arguably, strategies which expand teachers’ roles enable them to collaborate and nurture self-efficacy which will create professional cultures that promote change and improvement. They will also ensure that collaborative, inclusive and democratic practices are embedded in schools (Frost, 2011; Frost, 2012; Frost, 2014; Sachs, 2003). Current strategic objectives in the four countries cannot be achieved without enabling the professional growth of teachers, so policies need to allow teachers to have more control over the nature and regulation of their practice.

The International Teacher Leadership Initiative (ITL)

A common feature of our research and development endeavours in the four countries in recent years is the concept of non-positional teacher leadership developed and promoted by the International Teacher Leadership (ITL) initiative (Frost, 2011). This began in Cambridge, UK and was significantly expanded, when the Open Society Institute helped countries in the Western Balkans in 2009, including B&H, Macedonia and Serbia which resulted in collaboration with the UK-based HertsCam Network to develop programmes of support for teacher leadership (Miljevic, Herbert & Ball, 2014). A large-scale action research project was launched to enable partners in 14 countries to develop their programmes and create knowledge about how such support can be operationalised and refined.

Non-positional teacher leadership implies that any educational professional, whether or not they have a formal position of responsibility or role in the organisation of the school, can be enabled to exercise leadership in order to develop practice. The initiative was not introduced into Kyrgystan at that time, but it was nevertheless used to inform a doctoral research project (Teleshaliyev, 2015). The concept of non-positional teacher leadership offers an alternative engagement for teachers in education reform:

[Non-positional teacher leadership] ... whereby teachers can clarify their values, develop personal visions of improved practice and then act strategically to set in motion processes where colleagues are drawn into activities such as self-evaluation and innovation. This approach rests on the assumption that the enhancement of human agency within a culture of shared responsibility for reform and the outcomes for all students is essential for learning for all members of learning communities. (Frost, 2011, p. 10)

In the ITL initiative, the approach to teacher leadership is configured as *teacher-led development work* in which teachers design their own projects, each of which is focused on a specific pedagogic challenge. Projects typically involve collaboration, evaluation, professional learning, joint planning and classroom innovation. It is a methodology for developing practice and creating professional knowledge. Programmes established within the ITL initiative enabled teachers to become agents of change, creators of innovative practices and autonomous professionals.

In three Balkan countries, the ITL approach was introduced in a few schools and programmes were subsequently expanded with the help of the funded projects in these countries. In Macedonia, the initial programme was introduced during 2009-2011 and involved 90 teachers in 8 schools. This served as a pilot for the current programme of teacher leadership-based learning communities which is part of the USAID funded 'Readers are Leaders' project. This has supported the work of 422 teachers in 60 primary schools. The goal of the initiative was to establish new support groups and strengthen existing ones thus creating a platform for sharing knowledge, teacher collaboration and practice development. The programme aimed to improve the learning cultures in schools.

Education plays a central role in reconciliation after painful ethnic conflicts and this is often in the form of 'peace education' (Clarke-Habibi, 2018). The ITL approach was more indirect, however. It helped to build capacity and promote intercultural sensitivity through activities featured in the Advancing Participation and Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Education (APREME) project in Serbia (Frost et al., 2010) and the Education Without Prejudice (EWP) project in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The emphasis in APREME was on empowering teachers to take action to advance the participation and representation of ethnic minorities in the life of the school. Groups of teachers in five Serbian schools were invited to identify foci for their individual projects and then negotiate agendas for change and devise action plans. They were thus able to act strategically and collaborate with colleagues to develop practice. In Serbia, a total of 23 projects were designed and led by teachers; all of them involved parents in partnerships to develop the school curriculum. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EWP project supported 40 teachers in four schools. It created a network of teachers who developed leadership skills and acted strategically to improve practice aimed at promoting equal rights for all children, regardless of their ethnic affiliation and in accordance with their educational needs.

The ITL approach was relevant in the Kyrgyzstan context in a quite different way. It was not introduced in a form of the programme for teachers, but it was deployed as a lens through which to explore how teachers exercise leadership and the contextual factors that affect their capacity for leadership and collaboration. In the context of a doctoral study, teachers in four schools were asked to write about any projects they might have led or actions they might have initiated.

Insights from Analysis across Four Sites

Data generated from ITL related action research in the three Balkan countries, and from a doctoral study in Kyrgyzstan (Teleshaliyev, 2015), were subject to post-hoc analysis in order to identify insights that could underpin recommendations for policy in post-socialist contexts. These are now discussed under the headings of: extended professionalism, professional learning communities and teacher autonomy.

Extended professionalism. According to the teachers in our studies, the process of exercising leadership was transformative. Initially they doubted their own competence to lead and were intimidated by the assumption that leadership necessarily entails major change in the education system but gradually they came to understand the value of small-scale project work as illustrated by the comments below:

Now I realise that I can make changes on a small scale that would still be valuable and appreciated.

(Elementary School Teacher, Serbia)

I learned that we should appreciate ourselves and our work more, because every change, no matter how small, is very important and big.

(Elementary School Teacher, B&H)

Exercising leadership revived a sense of vocation, referred to in Kyrgyzstan as *prizvanie* (Sukhomlinsky, 1984). Teachers became more confident with a stronger sense of ownership and personal agency:

After a long time, I am proud again to be a teacher.

(Teacher, Serbia)

I remembered why I started doing this job in the first place.

(Teacher, Macedonia)

I am a happy person because of my profession. When I see pupils in a classroom, I forget about everything. I forget about problems, adversity and my illness.

(Teacher, Kyrgyzstan)

Teachers started to believe in their potential as leaders of change:

It is easy and difficult at the same time: difficult because you are trying to change some things that are not easy to change, and easy, because I realised that I already had skills and knowledge to do that.

(Teacher, Serbia)

Thus, exercising leadership leads to renewal of professional values. Evidence from Kyrgyzstan shows the importance of *prizvanie* as a core professional value which preserves commitment to teaching in times of adversity (Teleshaliyev, 2015).

The shift from teacher-centred to pupil-centred education, has changed the way teachers define their roles in society. In the socialist era the combination of ‘teaching and upbringing’ emphasised teachers’ caring role and teachers continue to value cooperation with families and the community to address pupils’ needs.

When I meet with parents I try to explore relationships with their children. When parents tell their stories about their children, I discover a new side of my pupils, and vice versa; parents ask me about their children and learn something new from me about them. It brings me so much joy when they start discovering and learning about each other. It becomes apparent when they find a common language. For example, either a mother comes to me saying that she and her child started to understand each other, or a pupil tells me that his mother appreciated him.

(Teacher, Kyrgyzstan)

Teachers reported increased levels of parent participation in school life. In Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, parents of minority groups valued being informed about opportunities for involvement and their enthusiasm encouraged other parents to become involved. What was appreciated the most was teachers’ positive attitudes towards partnership with parents:

I learned how to do things with parents, not on behalf of them.

(Elementary School Teacher, Serbia)

What was especially important was the fact that parents of minority groups in Serbia and B&H were involved in curricular activities which was rare in the schools. They were involved in teaching, reflecting genuine partnership rather than mere tokenism. Children had a chance to learn about other cultures and those from minority and marginalised groups experienced the visibility of their culture and the inclusion of its perspective in the school curriculum (Vranješević & Čelebičić, 2014). Teachers and parents started to see themselves as collaborators.

Professional learning communities. In highly politicised contexts, participation in learning communities provides common ground for teachers to discuss strictly professional matters and not only societal factors that constrict their identity, thus providing a safe space to explore, discuss, make mistakes and constructively criticise all for the purpose of learning. Therefore, the teacher-led learning community projects acted as connective tissue between teachers (Joshevska, 2012).

Collaboration with other teachers was highly valued. Teachers appreciated time and space for reflection and sharing ideas with their colleagues, both from the same school and from the other schools:

Members of the group always took part in giving ideas for someone's problem. We were a real team... I especially liked the exchange of problems and difficulties we have in our work with the colleagues from other school.

(Teacher, B&H)

I really like the networking meetings...they give me a chance to bounce ideas off colleagues, to show them what I've done in my classroom and to learn. These opportunities don't come very often and I think we all benefit from them.

(Teacher, Macedonia)

Teachers became aware of the importance of collaboration, networking and building alliances with their colleagues in order to develop professionally:

Before the project, we used to use breaks between classes to talk about everyday topics that most often did not concern the school and school life. Everyone was preoccupied with their own curriculum, without thinking how it could be linked with other subjects and maybe illuminated from some other perspectives. A significant change happened in the joint meetings. We often commented on each other's development plans as well as some ideas related to them. Closure and isolation can only be disastrous for the professional life of a teacher.

(Teacher, B&H)

Working with other teachers helped the teachers to improve their practice.

Working in small groups in which teachers presented their experiences in working with children, difficulties and their ways of overcoming was challenging for me. I was able to compare their opinions and attitudes with some of my problems and that gave me ideas what to do in order to solve my issues.

(Teacher, B&H)

Collaboration became an incubator of positive change in the school and therefore more likely to be embedded in the school culture.

It was noticeable that the teachers in Kyrgyzstan, where facilitation had not been introduced were constrained by education authorities when they tried to initiate collaboration.

It was not false. Teachers indeed learnt from each other. But the district education department did not like the idea. I, as a teacher, received no knowledge but a certificate from the professor. And when it comes to teaching teachers, they think it is better when a professor does it rather than an ordinary teacher.

(Teacher, Kyrgyzstan)

The lack of professional interactions in Kyrgyzstan limits the potential for professional collaboration and collective professional learning (Teleshaliyev, 2015).

Teacher autonomy. Unlike other more directive forms of support for professional development, teachers in the four countries can be seen to improve their practice through self-initiated project work. Non-positional teacher leadership is neither directive nor prescriptive – it does not mandate what ought to be improved or changed but provides tools to empower teachers:

The crucial thing about this project is freedom. Freedom to choose the topic we would like to deal with... In this process nobody was preaching what we should learn or do. We were just given time and space to talk and think about what we would like to improve and change happened.

(Teacher, Serbia)

Through the process of exercising leadership, the teachers became capable of *naming* the issues they would like to address and obstacles they would like to overcome, of *voicing* those issues and of taking action and committing themselves to the process of building capacity for personal, professional, and institutional transformation (Vranješević & Frost, 2016). They started to perceive themselves as autonomous creators of their own practice and professional knowledge and as agents of change:

After a long time, I began to feel proud to be a teacher. Now I realise that change should start from me. I learned a very important lesson: do not wait for others to solve your problems if you can do it by yourself – and we, as teachers, can do it.

(Teacher, Serbia)

In Kyrgyzstan, experience of professional autonomy was rather mixed and often more constrained although some teachers were able to mediate top-down reforms and exercise some freedom:

I shorten all topics as much as I can by myself. There are constant changes in curriculum in our school education. I have to include more topics into half the timeframe. I have to deal with these shortened hours by myself because no one helps. Guidelines and new syllabus are not provided; a teacher is left alone to deal with this.

(Teacher, Kyrgyzstan)

The constraint experienced by teachers in Kyrgyzstan is illustrated by an account of some enthusiastic history teachers who offered to develop an alternative syllabus. They were initially encouraged by someone at the ministry of education but later became subject to intimidation. Teachers were threatened with hostile school visits by a deputy minister of education.

Policy Recommendations

Our research and development work in these four countries affirms the value of enabling teachers to exercise leadership regardless of any official position they may hold. There is clearly a need for teacher-led development work based on teachers' professional judgement. More specifically we now want to make recommendations that might lead to providing more conducive and enabling environments for teachers. Even though it is well-established that teachers can make the most difference to the quality of educational experience (Hattie, 2002; OECD, 2005; OECD 2015), they remain on the margins of decision-making processes. There is an urgent need for strategies to engage teachers in the co-construction of policy and reforms which reflect teachers' know-how and provide them with meaningful opportunities for influence.

We recommend the establishment of professional learning communities (PLCs) in all schools. As a minimum these would be spaces for sharing knowledge about classroom practice. There are already structures like these in many schools, but they tend to lack appropriate support resulting in poor levels of participation and aimlessness. The ITL approach referred to above could provide the necessary structure and guidance and can be adapted to suit the specific context. This would enable teachers not only to share practice but also to build the capacity to innovate and lead change. Education authorities need to provide support and incentives for school leaders to establish PLCs.

We also recommend establishing networks in which teachers can generate and share professional knowledge within and across schools. Networks could build a rich repository of good practices and lessons learned through teachers' projects. Teachers should strive to expand their influence in concentric circles, to be deliberate in their exchange of ideas and methods of collaboration and to develop their individual agency. This will strengthen the professional body and create capacity in the system for reform and for teacher training in collaboration with teacher education institutes.

Conclusion

The four relatively small countries focused on in this chapter are from opposite ends of the post-socialist geographic space, but the professional alienation of teachers and their enduring aspirations for a more autonomous and empowered professionalism points to a shared experience across this vast geographic space. This experience unites teachers in many countries who are struggling to make their daily work more meaningful and to reclaim and remould the teaching profession. The revitalisation of the teaching profession in these countries, through teacher leadership, reflects broader efforts to transform and revitalise institutions and societies through deeper democratic participation.

The difference between institutional compliance and professional agency is crucial: it is the difference between academic freedom and faceless subjection. This is crucial not only for a teacher's self-respect and self-efficacy, but also for democratic life and for critical, concerned citizenship. While the responsibility for transforming society and building healthy democracies should never be added to teachers' already fulsome responsibilities, non-positional teacher leadership is a way to navigate a wider world with ingenuity and integrity; this is the hidden

curriculum that is hated by dictators and loved by parents who want children to think for themselves.

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