

Developing Teacher Leadership in Kazakhstan

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This article discusses a series of initiatives to develop non-positional teacher leadership in Kazakhstan. The authors adopt a narrative style in the presentation of an analysis of the process of creating the necessary conditions, and providing appropriate support for teacher leadership. At the centre of the account is a doctoral study undertaken by one of the authors, Gulmira Qanay, using a participatory action research approach. The account is further enriched by reflections from the other authors on their experience of collaboration with Gulmira as school-based practitioners in Kazakhstan and representatives of the HertsCam Network. Key challenges to sustaining teacher leadership in the forthcoming extension of this work are considered.

Keywords: teacher leadership, teacher-led development work, education reform

Introduction

This article presents the story of the introduction of an ambitious teacher leadership initiative within a challenging context. The educational context in Kazakhstan is introduced in order to clarify the environment for reform and development. Teacher leadership is conceptualised, with particular attention to the notion of non-positional leadership as advocated by the HertsCam Network. Next, the outline of a programme of support for teacher leadership is presented, and consideration given to the ways in which the approach was adapted to suit the context. The discussion moves on to outlining lessons learned from introducing the initiative and the challenges of scaling up the initiative in future. First, the authors of the article are introduced.

The authors of this article write from quite different perspectives. The initiative described was part of Gulmira Qanay's doctoral study (Kanayeva, 2019). She was one of the beneficiaries of the Bolashaq and the Talap scholarship schemes which enabled young people to study abroad in search of ideas and strategies that would contribute to social and economic transformation in a post-independence, ex-Soviet Central Asian republic, Kazakhstan. Over the course of her study, at the University of Cambridge, Gulmira came into contact with the HertsCam Network. Teachers and network members Sheila Ball, Emma Anderson-Payne and Paul Barnett have experience of facilitating teacher leadership programmes in the UK and supporting the development of similar programmes in many other countries. Gulmira subsequently visited schools in Kazakhstan to build partnerships with practitioners there. As a result, Kunsulu Kurmankulova, Venera Mussarova, Gulnara Kenzhetaeva and Ardak Tanayeva became her collaborators. They supported her initiative and helped to design and introduce the *Teacher Leadership for Learning and Collaboration* (TLLC) programme which ran in four schools in Taraz, Kazakhstan in the 2016-17 academic year.

The Context for Development

Kazakhstan, the ninth largest country in world, is located in Central Asia. It borders Russia in the north, China in the east, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan in the south, Turkmenistan and other Caspian Sea countries in the west. Kazakhstan obtained its independence after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. The educational system in Kazakhstan is centralised with the bulk of the schools (95.5%) overseen by the Ministry of Education and Science (OECD, 2014a). Since 2011, the educational system in Kazakhstan has been undergoing rapid reform following the country's aspiration to join the 30 developed economies in the world by 2050 (OECD, 2014a). One of the key targets of educational reform is the improvement of the quality of teaching in schools.

The educational system in Kazakhstan is highly centralized, and schools as organisations tend to be hierarchical (Yakavets, 2016). However, the government's internationalisation policy (Bridges et al., 2014) and the need to innovate have begun to impact on these organisational norms. These changes have highlighted the importance of developing leadership capacity within schools in Kazakhstan (OECD, 2014b). Developing leadership may require longer commitment and planned actions in systems where hierarchical cultures and structures are still strong. In order to enable such a shift, there is a need for strategies that would facilitate teacher participation in education reform (Elmore, 2004; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Gulmira's background was rooted in the teaching profession and this, coupled with the government's call for educational reform, shaped her commitment to the kind of research that would make a tangible and immediate difference to teachers and schools in Kazakhstan. In her doctoral thesis, she expressed her concern as follows:

How can I facilitate teacher leadership using an approach that enables teachers to exercise leadership for the purposes of enabling the sustainable improvement of practice and enhancing the teacher's role in educational reform in Kazakhstan? (Kanayeva, 2019, p. 2)

In contrast to traditional research approaches, Gulmira aimed to engage with practitioners to improve existing practices. Kemmis (2008) refers to such an approach as a *critical participatory action research*, a collective action that can be undertaken with the purpose of investigating shared reality in order to transform it. Support for Gulmira's study was provided by David Frost, founding trustee of the HertsCam Network, who became her supervisor because of his experience and expertise in the development of support for teacher leadership.

Conceptualising Teacher Leadership

Over the last three decades an increasing number of studies have highlighted the centrality of the teacher's roles for the success of any reform (Fullan, 2016; OECD, 2009; 2010; 2014b). An emerging proposition from these studies is that teachers cannot remain merely the technicians of the system as governments pursue educational improvement. Whilst some have viewed teacher leadership as a means to extend professionalism through creating certain leadership roles (Lieberman et al., 1988; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 1996), others have called for enabling all teachers to enact extended professionalism by actively participating in educational improvement (Frost, 2014; MacBeath et al., 2018).

Enhancing teachers' professionalism and activism remains an important challenge in post-Soviet Central Asian contexts (Bridges et al., 2014). In Kazakhstan teachers have to translate government-initiated reforms at the classroom and school level, but the top-down orientation leaves little space for agency and ownership of change locally (Yakavets et al., 2017). Therefore, developing teacher leadership within schools was seen as necessary to ensure the development of practice in a sustainable way by enhancing teachers' roles and enabling them to play a fuller part in educational reform in Kazakhstan. This resonates with arguments that the success of large-scale educational reform depends on being able to mobilise leadership at all levels in an education system (Mourshed et al., 2010; Schleicher, 2012).

The non-positional approach to teacher leadership. The HertsCam network conceptualises teacher leadership as non-positional and regards leadership as an entitlement for all practitioners regardless of roles or formal positions (Lambert, 1998; Bangs & Frost, 2016). In contrast to the idea of teacher leadership as a role-based practice (Crowther et al., 2009; Fink & Markholt, 2011), the non-positional approach assumes that, with the right kind of support, teachers can influence practice regardless of their roles in schools or positions in the organisational structure (Frost, 2011). The non-positional approach assumes that leadership can be developed and learned. It draws on teachers' moral purpose and capacity for agency which enables them to take the initiative and improve practice in classrooms, schools and wider professional communities (Frost, 2018). This is not to suggest that any teacher can simply exercise leadership, rather it is assumed that leadership capacity has to be nurtured and

facilitated. Leadership capacity is best cultivated by enabling teachers to plan their own interventions and learn from the experience through professional dialogue, collaboration and networking. The work of the HertsCam Network demonstrates that these experiences are more likely to thrive in schools where the professional culture and organisational structures are conducive (Frost, 2011).

School conditions. Developing teacher leadership is contingent on the prevailing school conditions as teachers' actions are inevitably shaped by institutional practices (Elmore, 2004; Dimmock, 2011). Schools can either elevate teachers' roles by enabling them to take the initiative and lead improvement or they can diminish teachers' capacity by weighing them down with bureaucracy, transforming them into technicians of the system. It is difficult to expect system-wide improvement when there is no space for nurturing and growing teachers' capacity at the school level. The empowerment of teachers is more likely to occur when the school operates more like a community than an organisation (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). The non-positional approach to teacher leadership succeeds when senior leadership teams provide structural and cultural support to create the necessary conditions (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012).

Adopting the Teacher-Led Development Work Strategy

The *teacher-led development work* (TLDW) strategy is a particular way of supporting teacher leadership. It requires facilitation rather than instruction or training, so a wide variety of tools such as facsimiles and structures for reflection, are used within school-based workshops to enable participants to engage in intense reflection, dialogue and debate. It focuses on enabling teachers to clarify their professional values and professional concerns, set out a vision, consult colleagues to agree a plan of action and then act to bring about change in their classrooms, schools and communities. The TLDW strategy enables teachers to lead development work (Hill, 2014). The process of planning extends over many weeks because the design element is essential to ensure a planned approach which has been the subject of consultation. Throughout one academic year, teachers lead development projects and collect evidence of their work in the form of a portfolio. They share narratives within the wider professional community, thereby enabling the building of professional knowledge.

The HertsCam Network has been scaffolding teacher leadership in schools in UK for almost twenty years (Frost, 2018). The approach to support for teacher leadership used in the network seemed, to Gulmira, to have the potential to contribute to transformation in Kazakhstan, although her initial explorations highlighted the differences between the two contexts. The literature on 'policy-borrowing' (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008) suggests that taking an apparently successful strategy from a country such as the UK and expecting it to flourish in a quite different cultural environment is very problematic. However, the TLDW strategy has been successfully tested in 17 different contexts beyond UK, including countries in the Balkans, Turkey and Middle East (Frost, 2011; Ramahi and Eltemamy, 2014).

Nevertheless, Gulmira feared that the TLDW strategy might not fit the professional and organisational cultures of Kazakhstan. She conducted a reconnaissance (Kemmis et al., 2014) to develop initial understanding about the teachers' and schools' practices, and to build collaborative partnerships with potential allies in schools. With clearance from the regional education authorities in her home town, Taraz, Gulmira approached many schools, presented outlines of the proposed approach, and explored the possibility of collaboration. Responses varied but they enabled Gulmira to judge which schools had sufficient capacity to participate. For example, some had experience of international programmes based on a constructivist pedagogy. Eventually she was able to come to agreement with four schools. She began by creating a project team to plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate a programme. The team would comprise school principals, vice-principals, and others who might take the role of facilitator. They agreed to label the initiative the *Teacher Leadership for Learning and Collaboration* (TLLC) programme. Participants included teachers of different subjects and school administrators, with work experience ranging from 2 months to 35 years.

Each school identified one facilitator whose role was to co-lead the programme. Gulmira was able to collaborate with Kunsulu, Venera, Gulnara, and Ardak who had volunteered to take up the facilitator role. They were all experienced teachers who understood the inner workings of their schools. They also had some knowledge about teacher leadership and networking through their previous participation in the large-scale, government sponsored Centres of Excellence programme (Wilson, 2017). Gulmira was then able to work with her four collaborators to plan the programme's main events which included six school-based workshop sessions of about two hours duration, two network events at suitable intervals, and a final conference. The programme would also be punctuated by periodic reviews, whereby project team members met to discuss the main challenges and refine their strategies.

Key Episodes in the Initiative

In Gulmira's critical narrative account of the TLLC programme as it unfolded, there were four episodes: *creating the conditions*, *re-orientating*, *enacting* and *reflecting*.

Creating the conditions. The first episode portrayed the preparatory activities which included establishing collaborative relationships and analysing the context, already mentioned above. Also important were the induction work with the team of facilitators and the careful selection of participants. This groundwork was very challenging because of the cultural background referred to above, characterised as being centralised and hierarchical. These norms affected the professional identities of teachers and school administrators with the result that it was commonly assumed that the teachers needed to be instructed rather than facilitated.

Re-orientating. The second episode featured the early group sessions, one-to-one tutorials and the first of two network events. It became clear that the challenge was largely one of re-orientation. Gulmira experienced the tension between the constructivist assumptions of the TLLC programme and pre-existing cultural norms. The idea that knowledge can be constructed individually and socially (Dewey, 1916) was not yet prominent in the Kazakh tradition and Gulmira and her collaborators were asking participants to step into the uncertain world of reflective practice and a process of leadership, the outcomes of which could not accurately be predicted. A great deal of effort was needed to build sufficient trust and create safe spaces for

authentic reflection. These early stages revealed the depth of the challenge and Gulmira had to work hard to build positivity out of anxiety and dissonance.

Enacting. The term, enacting, was used because it was in this phase of the programme that participants made the transition to a more proactive stance in which they could begin to engage in deliberate, self-conscious action to bring about improvements in practice. Participants' concerns had begun to be translated into more concrete plans. This comment recorded in Gulmira's research journal illustrates this:

.. I think that we do not have a platform to promote Kazakh language and literature in our school.... I would like to create a club, where students will have a space to develop their creativity. For example, there are students who can write articles and poems, but they do not have additional support to develop their talents. Therefore, I would like to establish such club, but I do not have a clear plan on how to do it

(Participant 1)

Ideas such as this one were being worked through in the shape of detailed actions plans to enable participants to lead processes that would result in their visions being realised in practice.

Reflecting. This episode featured the final stage of the programme, and the final conference which was an effective showcase for participants' achievements. The label, *reflecting*, was used because the conference was just one of the ways in which everyone involved in the TLLC programme was engaged in taking stock of what had been achieved. The group sessions included discussions about the impact of everyone's projects with tools adapted from the HertsCam collection being used to help participants evaluate and then, in the remaining weeks of the academic year, widen the impact. A significant event at this time was a meeting for which Gulmira had asked programme participants to make presentations to the school principals and other senior leaders. This was a welcome opportunity for teachers to participate in dialogue with senior leaders and some principals engaged in the process with enthusiasm, one of them even suggesting that all teachers in their school should be able to lead such projects.

The submission of portfolios included reflective accounts from participants: a rich source of evidence not only of what had been achieved through the development projects but also of how participants' thinking had developed during the year. One of the facilitators noted:

They used to be invisible among their colleagues.... the programme increased their self-confidence. They started participating in school discussions, became more active in seeking professional learning opportunities, sharing their knowledge with colleagues, taking responsibility and achieving results.

(Facilitator)

The final conference was a more substantial event than the previous two network events; attendees included visitors from others schools in the region and representatives from the HertsCam Network in the UK. The presence of international visitors triggered the Kazakh tradition of honouring guests, which helped to lift the profile of the event. It was also helpful to have these external perspectives, especially from those with experience of teacher leadership elsewhere. For example, they observed teachers talking about leadership, albeit with an emphasis

on outcomes rather than process. However, there was clear evidence at this conference that teachers without positional power or authority had, in fact, led change in schools in which the idea of distributed leadership has not yet taken root. One of the senior leaders present noted:

As a member of the school leadership team, I can claim that the development projects had a positive impact on the school's practices. We learned that school improvement can take place without confining teachers with orders but enabling them to take initiatives.

(Vice Principal)

Feedback from participants suggests that they found the experience very affirming. This significant achievement was reinforced when certificates, endorsed by the HertsCam Network, were awarded to each participant in a celebratory mode. Sergiovanni (2007) noted that 'the secret of motivating extraordinary commitment and performance over time can only be found in the work itself' (p. 130). This was echoed by one of the teachers who described her engagement with the programme's principles:

You experience a wonderful feeling of self-worth when you have an opportunity to identify your own problem that has been bothering you for a long time.

(Participant 2)

Towards the end of the programme participants had various opportunities to share their leadership stories at regional and national levels. Some participated in local and international practitioner conferences where they explained the impact of their initiatives on students' learning and school practices. Others published their stories in practitioner journals. We encouraged participants to see such publications as opportunities to advocate for teacher leadership; by publishing stories of their pioneering work they would be catalysts for teacher leadership in other parts of the country.

Scaling up the Teacher Leadership Initiative

In the next academic year, HertsCam was asked to assist in launching a teacher leadership programme in Kókshetau, a city located in the northern part of Kazakhstan. This was a challenge. In the UK the HertsCam Network has grown in an organic way largely through close proximity of the schools in an environment with a high population density, but Kazakhstan is a very large country with a relatively small population. The distance between Kókshetau and Taraz, and the costs of travel, meant that it was not possible for teachers or school principals to simply visit each other's schools in order to find out about the teacher leadership programme.

Colleagues from a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Kókshetau visited Cambridge to meet with colleagues in HertsCam and learn about non-positional teacher leadership. Gulmira's experience in Taraz was invaluable in the discussions. Another key resource, thanks to the Soros Foundation in Almaty, was the Russian translation of the book, *Transforming education through teacher leadership* edited by David Frost (2014). Several experienced facilitators in HertsCam joined the meeting to share their experience and the visitors were taken to schools to meet teachers who had previously participated in the TLDW programme and headteachers who could testify to its value in their schools. Most importantly the group were able to draw upon the lessons from Taraz; including evidence from Gulmira's study and

that gathered by the HertsCam team who had attended the final conference in Taraz where they observed and interviewed participants and facilitators.

Highlights from this evidence include the affirmation that teachers in Kazakhstan really can exercise leadership and have a significant impact on students' learning. It was also clear that it is possible to build the necessary conditions for teacher leadership in schools, even if external pressures might seem to be obstacles. The fact that the TLDW tools can be adapted for use in quite different contexts was evident, although there is a significant challenge regarding access to literature about pedagogy and leadership as we have found elsewhere (Bolat, 2013; Eltemamy, 2017). Trust building was seen to be a very significant factor, and it was clear that a facilitative mode of operation and one-to-one tutorial support were key to this.

At the conclusion of the meeting in Cambridge an agreement was drawn up. HertsCam would work with the NGO in Kókshetau to support a team of facilitators in a group of schools there. The updated TLDW tools would be translated into Russian and Kazakh, and the programme would begin with an event at one of the schools in Kókshetau at which a team from HertsCam would help to induct facilitators and potential participants. A remarkable level of commitment on the part of the teachers was evident and visitors from HertsCam noted signs of ample moral purpose of the kind referred to in the literature (Fullan, 1993) and seen among teachers in HertsCam schools.

Following the launch event, HertsCam worked with the coordinator from the NGO in Kókshetau to try to maintain momentum with the programme and address problems as they arose. This would be largely through a dialogue between the coordinator of the Kókshetau programme and Sheila Ball who leads the HertsCam TLDW programme in the UK. This link was less successful than the one maintained throughout the Taraz initiative. Practical difficulties such as the difference in time zones may account for this to some extent, but in Taraz, the main link had been through the academic supervision provided by David Frost. This raises a critical issue about taking innovation to scale—what is required in order to transfer a practice from one context to another. It is known, in the fields of innovation and knowledge management, that professional knowledge is notoriously 'sticky' (von Hippel, 1994) and there is a limit to what can be achieved through the passing on of a technical manual. In a programme which rests on particular values and skills, collaborative relationships and ongoing coaching become very important.

A return visit of the HertsCam team, together with Gulmira, to Kókshetau nine months after the programme had begun revealed that, in spite of our misgivings about the level of coordination, the teachers had been able to lead development projects that were comparable with those that has taken place in all of the other sites in which non-positional teacher leadership had flourished under the banner of the International Teacher Leadership initiative (Frost, 2011). It was very affirming for the HertsCam team to witness presentations from teachers in Kókshetau about the projects they had led successfully. They learned for example about a project in a primary school where the teacher was concerned at the level of bad behavior and conflict in the playground during the breaktime. She had devised a programme of creative activities which kept children in the learning mode and reduced the level of behavioural difficulty. Another project they heard about, also in a primary school, concerned children's lack of capacity for self-directed learning which led to poor quality homework. The teacher leading the project had drawn parents into a collaboration in which they used strategies devised to build skills for self-directed learning.

The Future of Teacher Leadership in Kazakhstan

In August 2019, HertsCam will collaborate with partners in Kazakhstan to launch The Teacher Leadership in Kazakhstan (TLK) initiative which will extend non-positional teacher leadership to the country as a whole. Such a radical extension of what has happened so far will be challenging. Some may argue that to achieve coverage on a national scale, you need a training programme based on the cascade model – the so called training the trainers approach – which was used when the University of Cambridge worked with the Kazakhstan government to create the Centres of Excellence programme (Wilson, 2017). However, others would say that there are a number of alternative approaches to be considered, including ‘social venture franchising’ (Tracey & Jarvis, 2007) and networking to grow a social enterprise (Lyons & Fernandes, 2012). In the case of the TLK initiative it is envisaged that local coordinators will be identified first in two more regions and then perhaps four more regions and, in the third year several more regions of the country until we can say that we have a network of teacher leadership programmes in every region of the country.

In general, developing teacher leadership in Kazakhstan has the potential to elevate teachers’ roles in educational reform. The experience gained in Taraz and Kókshetau suggests that enhancing teachers’ roles in reform can, and should, begin within schools. This requires systematic strategies to enable teachers to influence their environment by taking the initiative and enacting change in their classrooms and schools (Fullan, 2016). We have learned that teachers can reflect on their professional values and practice, interact with colleagues, and engage with senior leadership teams. The nature of school-based support has major implications for the enhancement of teachers’ professionalism (Hoyle, 1982). When teachers are enabled to systematically improve their students’ learning and raise issues at the school level, they can build professional knowledge and share it at the national level. Such internal capacity-building can foster teachers’ responsibility for educational improvement and mobilise their inherent sense of moral purpose.

As we said earlier in this article, policy borrowing can be hazardous and there is no doubt that the initiative described faced serious obstacles that can be attributed to the difference between the cultural traditions and norms in Kazakhstan and those that prevail in the UK context in which the teacher-led development work approach had been devised. Nevertheless, we found that it is possible to both to disrupt and change established norms and adapt tools and techniques to accommodate particular features of the context. This requires a great deal of support in the initial stages, but we are confident that we can induct many more facilitators and build the capacity for non-positional teacher leadership in Kazakhstan.

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