Being an educator-leader – what does it mean? (Universities in Georgia case)

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Abstract

Due to ongoing educational reforms administration alone is no longer able to lead schools on the way to efficient teaching. Educator-leaders, both formal (the department chairs, the staff developers, the head teachers, mentors, program coordinators, etc.) and informal (event initiators, educators active in participation in conferences, meetings, etc.) have become an absolute necessity. However, there are some grave obstacles to involving all teachers and lecturers in leading at least certain activities at their institutions and beyond. The article aims to find out the viewpoints on leadership at universities in Georgia. A survey was held in three universities with 96 lecturers as respondents. It applies a questionnaire with 10 close-ended items assessed via Likert scale and an open-ended question concerning the attitudes of lecturers towards leadership and their motives for wanting or not wanting to be leaders. It is concluded that lecturers, probably, do not realize the great need on educator-leaders of contemporary education in the time of continuous and intensive reforms. Lectures need to be educator-leaders in the classroom, among colleagues and in professional self-development. They have to lead some events, at least from time to time.

Keywords: educator-leader, teacher-leader, educational reforms, shared leadership, effective educational institutions, leadership qualities, assessment of leadership

Introduction

Educator-leaders are indispensable nowadays, as the ever ongoing reforms in education may confuse any, even very qualified educator. Besides the numerous innovations in the psychological and pedagogical sciences, there are plenty of new formats of paperwork which have never before been demanded from an ordinary teacher. To overcome this problem, among educators we need to have those who are ready to spend hours getting acquainted with all these innovations (or at least organizing their study and sharing among teachers) and then presenting them to their colleagues. Principals and vice-principals at schools and rectors and administration at universities cannot any more be the only leaders at educational institutions, as there are too many innovations, and too much subject-specific knowledge is needed. Shared leadership, both formal and informal, has become a necessity. To provide efficient teaching and learning, educational institutions of today have to be learning communities not only for students, but also for teachers.

Quality leadership is a key component of effective educational institutions. Effective educational institutions are not only schools/universities where individual effective educators work, but where there is a team, in which the more experienced and older teachers share their knowledge, while the younger and less experienced teachers use their energy for creating effective learning atmosphere. Sustaining the quality of school/university leadership is as essential today as having a highly qualified teacher for every classroom.

Teacher-leaders and teacher leadership are not very new concepts. In the 1980s, for example, there were the "teacher career ladder" initiatives. These initiatives took place on the background of educational reforms that started at that time. As reforms are going on practically non-stop, the role of leader teachers has been increasing over the last decades. The issue of leader-educators has been mostly researched for schools, but it is actual for universities as well.

Definition of leader-educator

Various authors, as well as various educators, as this study showed, understand the term 'deader-educator' differently. Schmerler (2009) asks the following questions in order to get an adequate definition of teacher-leaders:

Is 'teacher leadership' actually a truism? (After all, all teachers are leaders within their own classrooms.) Is it an oxymoron? (Teachers teach, leaders lead.) Is it a specific, designated role? Or is it a hard-to-get-your-hands-around abstraction, visible only in its subtle impact on school culture? Is it, in fact, even a useful construct, something that can help us make sense of the way schools either change to accommodate the needs of their students or remain stuck in old, corrosive patterns of failure? (Schmerler, 2009: 4)

The answer he gives is – all of these. What educator-leader definitely is not it is just a formal position. Of course, teachers with positions at school and university (the department chairs, the staff developers, the head teachers, mentors, program coordinators, etc.), to fulfill their duties, need

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to realize leadership qualities. But it is very desirable that all teachers from time to time are leaders on a voluntary basis. They can and should lead professional learning communities, organize various events: presentations, teacher seminars on certain topics, practical or theoretical conferences, round tables / discussions, open lessons/lectures, etc.

Teacher leaders are teachers who aspire to stretch beyond their classrooms to engage in leadership roles that take many shapes and forms, both "informal" and "formal". These teachers view the school as a whole, see the "big picture" and focus on how they can help improve aspects of the school to result in increases in student achievement. Teacher leaders see themselves as "teachers" first and do not want to become principals or administrators, but want to work collaboratively with their colleagues and school administrators to improve school and student performance. (Education Commission of the States, NJ3, 2010)

Roza's (2003) study aimed to identify the most important skills principals are looking for in school leadership. The top five skills identified are listed below and are preceded by the percentage of respondents who ranked that skill as the most important or second most important:

1. 98% - Ability to motivate staff and hold them accountable for results

2. 90% - Ability to execute a school improvement strategy

3. 9% - Ability to minimize conflict at school level (among teachers and parents)

4. 6% - Ability to use money to effectively further improvement goals

5. 1% - Responsiveness to central office demands

According to York-Barr and Duke (2004: 287), "teacher leadership is the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement". They (ibid: 289) developed a framework for teacher leadership shown in Figure 1.

The Vermont Task Force on Teacher & Leader Effectiveness (2013:2) developed Teacher Leader Standards for teachers in leadership roles:

Principles of effective teacher-leader evaluation:

1. Safe and open (transparent) collaboration is necessary.

2. Measures of teacher and leader performance are most helpful and meaningful when they are based on levels of performance and measurable standards. ..

3. Integrated systems (e.g., recruitment, selection/placement, induction, professional learning, performance management and evaluation, and career continuum) must link evaluation procedures with curricular standards, professional learning activities, targeted support, and human capital decisions.

4. Teachers' and leaders' input (e.g., self-assessment, goal setting and self-reflection) in determining performance and learning outcomes should be part of the evaluation process.

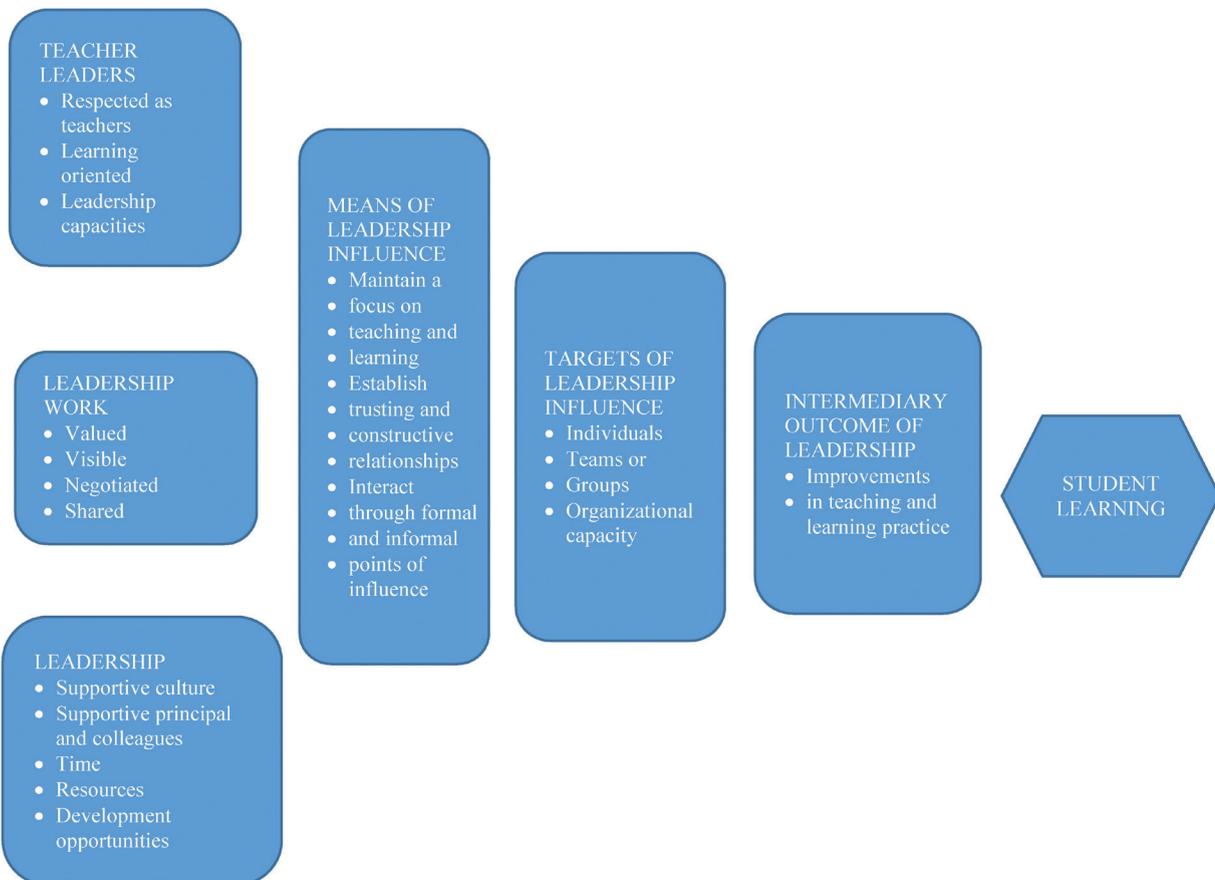5. While standards are essential, teachers and leaders

Figure 1. *Framework for teacher leadership*

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should also help to define a set of practices and student growth and learning objectives to be assessed.

The Vermont Task Force on Teacher & Leader Effectiveness (2013:3) also developed a very appropriate triangulated Framework of Teacher and Leader Evaluation, presented in the figure below. "The evaluation framework begins with observation of practice and examination of artifacts, but incorporates two more elements: validation by examining indicators of student growth and learning outcomes; and assessing evidence of professional contributions. The various elements are combined effectively to create a unified system. All three elements are essential for providing educators with the information they need to grow professionally and to improve student growth and learning. When combining observations with other indicators, the relationship to student outcomes becomes stronger, and better identifies teaching effectiveness".
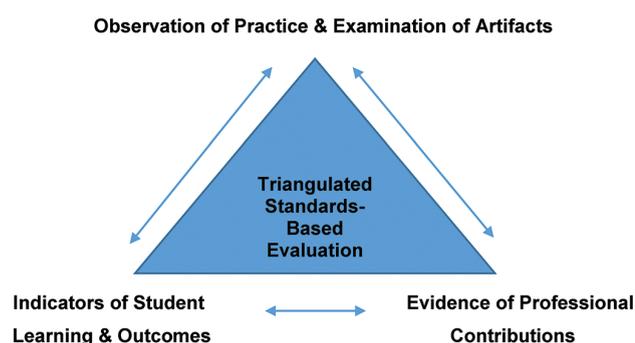

Figure 2. *Framework of Teacher and Leader Evaluation*

The booklet (ibid: 5) views Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED). This framework is an evidence-based approach to measure the effectiveness of school leadership behaviors known to influence teacher performance and student growth and learning. This framework comprises core components (refer to characteristics of schools that support the learning of students and enhance the ability of teachers to teach) and key processes (refer to how leaders create those core components). The VAL-ED tool identifies six key steps or "processes" that an effective principal takes when carrying out his/her responsibilities.

1. Planning
2. Implementing
3. Supporting
4. Advocating
5. Communicating
6. Monitoring

The elements of an effective leadership evaluation cycle will include:
• Professional Growth Plan
• Observation
• Data Collection
• Feedback
• Formative assessment
• Summative assessment
• Reflection
• Improvement Plans (ibid:14)
   To sum up:
   • Educator-leader is not an administrative position, it is the active role the teacher plays in the classroom, among the colleagues and his/her own professional development.
   • Educator-leader may constantly or on a temporary

basis lead on a different scale, from a small group of teachers to the whole school community.
   • S/he should be motivated to improve the quality of teaching and learning and motivate others.
   • S/he should visualize the strategies to achieve better teaching / learning, have a plan, do one's best to fulfill it, reflect over the fulfillment and assess it, think of improvement.
   • Educator-leaders are student-centered, they think first of all of students' needs, interests, background knowledge; they get and provide timely feedback.
   • Educator-leader leads the students in his/her classroom in effective learning, helping them to develop productive learning strategies.

Review of some research on educators-leaders

Rhoton and McLean (2008) held a study dealing with summer schools organized in 2006-2008 for 74 science teachers. The control groups dealt with various professional topics, whereas the experimental groups, in order to develop in them leadership qualities, was mostly offered topics in educational leadership. Among them were also education administrators whom this professional development program help to realize the need of changing the professional development climate, and involving into it all teachers in turns as leaders.

Eighty-four percent of the teachers in the experimental group agreed that the trainers demonstrated how project materials and project resources could be presented or shared with peers. The other 16% were uncertain. One hundred percent of the teachers agreed that the instructional methods and procedures demonstrated by the trainers helped them in learning more effective methods of delivering their science curricula, including leadership in the classroom. One hundred percent of the teachers rated the overall effectiveness of trainers' visits to their classrooms as more effective than the in-service normally provided by their school systems.

The study showed a triple effect:
• Trainees' knowledge concerning educational leadership increased; they started to understand how necessary it is to be an educator-leader, also they were 'armed' with strategies of developing leadership features and behavior.
• They applied the gained knowledge and increased their leadership behaviors.
• Students' learning outcomes also increased.

No such results were reported in the control groups, whose trainees were not very satisfied.

Carver and Klein (2013) held an action research dealing with educator-leaders. The program studied is a university-based principal preparation program in the Midwest. As a state-approved principal certification program, the curriculum is aligned with state and national leadership standards, candidates are required to complete a substantial internship experience, and program faculty incorporate performance-based assessments into their courses. Because this is a cohort-based program, candidates take their courses as a group throughout the entire seven-semester program. A typical cohort enrolls 10-15 candidates. Located in a suburban community, the university draws students from a wide variety of school contexts: public, private, parochial and charter, as well as urban, suburban and rural. Two cohorts of students were invited to participate in the study and twelve signed statements of consent. The participants were asked

to complete eight reflections across a thirteen-week term. Nearly all candidates, often more than once, commented on how the readings introduced them to new ways of thinking about leadership and, more specifically, the role of principal. One of the shifts that candidates make was leadership from a classroom-only perspective to one that encompassed the entire building or organization. Sharing the leadership with teachers was another issue. The participants of the research expressed great satisfaction and hoped they would be able to apply in practice the obtained knowledge and problem-solving skills.

Reasons for lack of educator-leaders

Irrespective the obvious necessity of educator-leaders, unfortunately, there are not so many teachers/academics all over the world who volunteer to do the job, unless required by their direct job responsibilities. The reasons why is it is difficult for a teacher to be a leader are multiple:

• Teaching is anyway very time-consuming, being a leader of other educators makes it even more time-consuming/

• Nobody pays the teacher/lecturer for being a leader, or even if they pay (heads of departments in schools, administrative positions at university), the payment is not adequate for the job.

• Not only payment, but also other incentives are inexistent or insufficient.

• Colleagues may view the educator who is eager to share his/her knowledge as arrogant and pretentious as they believe they know as much or more, but do not undertake to 'teach' others.

• Hierarchical relationships between school / university staff do not support the idea of leaders other than staff in corresponding administrative positions; administrators may even perceive efforts of teacher leadership as violation of their rights.

According to Lieberman and Miller (2004, p. 84), teacher leaders commonly report feeling trapped in the "middle space" - "between the teachers whom they attempt to influence and represent and the administrators who count on them to do work that the administrators are, for various reasons, unable to do themselves - while being trusted fully by neither" (Schmerler,2009: 3).

Methodology

The research focuses on the attitudes towards leadership in education in Georgian universities. A survey (quantitative and quantitative) was held concerning lecturers' views on educator-leader's qualities and job.

The objectives of the research were to find out Georgian lecturers' points of view on leadership in education:

• Is the quality of teaching connected with leadership?

• Who are / should be educator-leaders, administrators or just lecturers?

• In which spheres of lecturer's work they are ready to be leaders?

• Do lecturers see themselves as educator-leaders?

• Lecturers' motives for supporting or opposing leadership in the classroom

The quantitative survey – questionnaire - included 10 close-ended Likert-scale format questions. The questions

were made based on the above analysis. The lecturers had to rate in terms of 1 (minimum) -5 (maximum) points how much the statements concern them.

The qualitative study involved an open-ended question dealing with lecturers' views on the reasons for the need (or its absence) in educator-leaders.

According to, e.g., Diniz-Pereira (2003), "individualism is one of the strongest marks of traditional teacher identity, so to collect lecturer responses is not easy.

The participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. The researcher handed out 120 questionnaires. 96 respondents from 3 universities in Georgia (one private and small, two state and big; two of them in the capital and one – regional) filled in the questionnaire, but some were not filled in completely or according to the required format, so only 80 answer sheets were finally taken into consideration.

As the respondents come from the basic types of universities in Georgia and taking into consideration the lack of desire of lecturers to answer any questionnaires, even such short ones, due to limited free time as well as the individualist character of teaching profession hopefully, this study is representative enough of the trends among lecturers in universities in Georgia.

Questionnaire results and discussion

The survey results are presented in Table 1.

Leaders are not born, people become leaders. However, there exist personal features which make leadership easier. The answers to question one show that, though many enough (43% - answers '4' and '5') lecturers are leaders by nature, so it is easy for them to be leaders in the classroom and in professional activities in their university, there are also quite many who do not see leader's potential in themselves (34.5% - answers '1' and '2'), which makes it difficult to involve them in leadership activities even from time to time. On average, lecturers do not very strongly view themselves as leaders (3.3).

Fewer lecturers (42.5% - answers '4' and '5') respond to question two that they are trying to be leaders in their classrooms (average 2.9). Though contemporary teaching has to be student-centered (e.g., Wright, 2011) and it may seem that the times of educator-leaders are in the past, this is a wrong comprehension of teacher/lecturer role: contemporary educators are no longer movie stars, they are stage managers and their role seems to be invisible. However, it does not mean that they are passive assistants who are only waiting for students' request to help. In reality their role is even greater, as it requires a high level of qualification to be the invisible, unnoticeable leader.

The fact that lecturers, due to various reasons, including their character and wrongly interpreted concept of student-centered education, do not try to lead their students to forming the necessary competences, is worrying. Probably, this is also linked with a **wrong image of a leader** (in fact, authoritarian leader) who **dominates** over the lead, which is based on lecturers' experience (democracy is not built quickly and the image of a leader as a democratic leader has to be established, which takes time).

The majority of lecturers do not think it is **difficult** to be a leader in the classroom (question three: average – 2.325 and 62.5% think it is not difficult - answers '1' and '2'), which means that they are just reluctant to do so, not have difficulties of being so. We need to think seriously of ways how to

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Table 1. Results of the questionnaire on lecturer leadership

	1	2	3	4	5	average point
Q1 - I am a leader by character.	17%	17.5%	22.5%	22.5%	20.5%	3.300
Q2 - I am trying to be a leader in my classroom.	5%	15%	37.5%	20%	22.5%	2.900
Q3 - . It is difficult to be a leader in the classroom.	40%	22.5%	20%	7.5%	10%	2.325
Q 4 - I am just trying to do my job well, without trying to be a leader in the classroom, among colleague-teachers, in self-development, etc.	7.5%	17.5%	25%	15%	35%	3.175
Q5 - . It is not enough to be a leader in the classroom to provide students' good learning.	0%	13.75%	13.75%	22.5%	50%	4.250
Q 6 - Teacher-leader prevents students from independent learning.	32.5%	17.5%	35%	7.5%	27.5%	3.400
Q7 - I like being among leaders during teacher meetings.	15%	27.5%	22.5%	10%	25%	3.475
Q8 - When I am involved in self-development, I am trying to be a model for other teachers.	7.5%	20%	27.5%	30%	15%	3.250
Q 9 - For me leadership in teaching means occupying some administrative position.	35%	10%	25%	15%	15%	2.650
Q 10 - To teach well, teachers don't have to be leaders.	12.5%	35%	12.5%	25%	15%	2.950

motivate teachers to be leaders.

The average level of the answers to the fourth question concerning being a leader not only in the classroom, but also among colleague-teachers and in self-development, is a bit higher than to question 2 (3.175), however, not high enough. There are a half of teachers, answering positively (4 or 5 points) to the question, however, still many enough (25%) answering negatively (1 or 2 points).

Requirements towards effective teachers are numerous. However, if not crowned by leadership, they may not reach the desired outcome. Though the answers '4' and '5' are, of course, the correct answers to question five, still they show the very low rating of leadership for lecturers among the features of good teaching (the average answer is high - 4.25, which means that there are other, much more important parameters of good teaching – a view, which was, probably, OK a couple of decades ago, but not now).

Independent learning is indispensable in higher education (Tennant, 2006). This is why finding out whether, according to lecturers' views, educator-leader may hinder it is important. A considerable part of teachers (35% - answers '4' and '5') – see answers to question six - thinks that teacher-leader prevents from independent learning (average 3.4, which is high enough). On the other hand, more teachers (50%) think that teacher-leaders do not prevent from independent learning (answers '1' and '2'). Answers to this question once again brings me to the idea of wrongly understood student-centered education.

Teachers may want to be leaders in some respects of their professional activity and be less reluctant to do so in other respects. The answer to question seven shows quite a positive attitude towards the leadership at teachers' meetings (average 3.475), 35 % of teachers like it (answers '4' and '5'). However, there are approximately as many who totally dislike it (answers '1' and '2' - 42.5 %).

Modeling is an efficient way of teaching and learning. According to answers to question eight, 45% of respondents try to be a model in their self-study, however, many enough (27.5%) do not care about being a model to anybody. The average level of leadership in self-development is not too high (3.25).

As it has already been mentioned, leadership in education is no longer tightly linked with administrative positions. It was pleasant to see that, according to answers to question nine, the majority of lecturers do not associate leadership with administrative positions (answers '1' and '2' – 45 %, average 2.65). However, still many enough (30%) believe that 'leader' and 'administrator' are synonyms (answers '4' and '5' %). They definitely need to change their viewpoints.

The summative question ten tells us that in general (average 2.95) teachers do not associate leadership with good teaching. 40 % of teachers think so (answers '4' and '5'). Luckily, there are many enough teachers (47.5% - answers '1' and '2') who do not think there is no need to be a leader in order to do good teaching.

What is characteristic, a considerable part of lecturers (12.5-37.5%) answer "3", which may indicate either lack of opinion or indifference to the issue under study, which is also very undesirable. It may also deal with unclear, differently understood nature of the term 'leader'.

In fact, lecturers' opinions split into two camps: of supporters and opponents of leadership in higher education, with a thinner slice of hesitant ones. The whole picture shows us that lecturers, probably, do not realize the great need of contemporary education in the time of continuous and intensive reforms to take the lead, at least from time to time, or are not efficiently stimulated to become leaders, if not on a constant, then at least on a temporary basis.

Among the answers to the open-ended question "Why teacher should / shouldn't be a leader in the classroom?' some typical answers involved:

Yes:

• Usually teachers have an important role in the classroom, whether they are delivering lectures or practical classes. Being a leader means a lot of things. Leaders are not born originally, they learn to be leaders throughout lives. Teachers have to be leaders because they are responsible for classroom management, which is really difficult… So today every teacher is the leader and the manager of their classes without exaggeration

• They should – to lead the students to the posed aims.

• In my opinion if the teacher is the type of a leader who has a good classroom management, we have a really good teacher. Without it we will have poor results.

Yes and No:

• Teacher should be the guide (plus other functions), but not the one who dominates. (This, and some more answers confirm my idea of possible misinterpretation of the term 'teacher-leader').

• A teacher should expose his/her leadership potential in order to make the students do what s/he wants, but s/he shouldn't try to be a leader or an authoritative person in the classroom, it's better to be an observer, and check the students' work.

• It depends on what the term 'leader' means: provided that it implies a good facilitator for the learners, then it does matter, and a teacher should be a leader in the classroom to give the right guidance to his/her students. Conversely, if a 'leader' means that a teacher ought to talk interminably him/herself at the lecture, then, definitely, a teacher should not be a leader in the classroom.

No:

• Teachers and students should be both responsible for learning. Personally, I believe, more teacher leadership is needed on the initial stage of education. At university comes the time for gentle leadership where student individually explores and discovers the subject (with the help of the teacher, of course, but not under a dictator teacher.

• The statement 'to teach well. The teacher doesn't have to be a leader' is most suitable for me, as, according to the communicative method, which I use during the classes, my role in the teaching process is that of a facilitator, not a leader.

• I think if a teacher is a leader in a classroom, it means that students passively receive information, and they are not actively involved. A good language teacher serves more as a guide who leads students generally in the right direction.

Limitations of the study

The study was held in one country, in three higher education institutions out of 149, including colleges, according to National Center for Educational Quality (n.d), which is a limited number, with 96 lecturers (also not very many). Besides, the situation in other countries may be very different. In the process of holding the questionnaire some additional questions (such as "How do you understand teacher-leader?") arose, which require additional investigation in the future. The problem is too vast to be covered in one research, however, it does speak about the general trend, at least, in Georgia. Ways to stimulate leadership also have to be investigated, to come to really conclusive answers.

Conclusion

The research raised more questions than gave clear answers. Anyway, putting up an important question is also beneficial. The research can stimulate lecturers to become contemporary educator-leaders and not isolated figures as they often are.

Though this issue was not in the questionnaire, from the contradictory enough answers it is clear that the desire (or lack of such) to be a leader largely depends on the image of a leader one has in mind, or, otherwise the views on necessity to be a lecturer-leader depends on the type of leader (democratic/authoritative or authoritarian) one thinks of.

The results of the quantitative and qualitative study are in congruence with each other. They are also analogous to the analyzed literature, so they are trustworthy enough. The main obtained answers to the questions posed by the research are:

• Many enough (43%) lecturers view themselves as having leader's character (question 1).

• Approximately as many (42.%) are trying to be leaders in their classrooms, but quite many (20%) are not trying to be leaders in the classroom (question 2), even though the majority of them (62.5%) do not think that to be a leader in the classroom is difficult (question 3).

• Many lecturers (40-50%) do not link the quality of teaching with leadership (questions 4, 10).

• Half of the respondents answered that teacher-leaders do not prevent students' independent study (answers '1' and '2'), however, there are quite many (35% - answers '4' and '5') who think they are (question 6).

• Many (30%) still believe that administrators should be educator-leaders (question 9)

• If we compare lecturers' approval of leadership in various spheres of their activities (questions 2, 7 and 8), they find the idea of being a leader during teacher meetings the most attractive (average assessment 3.475), being a model in self-development as more or less attractive (average assessment 3.250), while leadership in the classroom as the least attractive one (2.900).

• The answers to the open-ended question about the motives of wanting (or not wanting) to be leaders in the classroom confirm the lack of lecturers' understanding of the meaning of student-centered education and educator-leaders' role.

Whatever the reasons, the results of the survey do show that the respondents are not very willing to be leaders. It means they need to change their views on leadership in contemporary society and try to be real democratic leaders - people who are ready to take the responsibility for the future of education. This, in turn, means that a system of measures to stimulate democratic leadership in university lecturers has to be developed, researched and applied.

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