School Leaders in Kazakhstan: Perspectives, Roles and Challenges

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Abstract

School leadership is back to fashion and became the major concern for many pieces of research. Expectations from schools and school leaders are changing along with time and society demands. Countries care about the future and its competitive capacity in a global arena, hence, one of the strategic directions is to invest in education. Moreover, current tendencies require reconsidering the activities of educational leaders at all levels. This paper aims at exploring the current situation of school leadership and school leaders in general and research the perspectives, roles, and challenges they face nowadays. The paper also considers international perspectives on school leadership as well as the context of Kazakhstan. The study discusses the variety of leadership roles and challenges the school leaders confront aiming at school development. The findings include the overview of school management systems and existing practices of school development in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, there is a number of challenges in understanding the concept of school leader and the roles due to the lack of consistent research on effective practices. The paper reveals a number of inconsistencies in terms of the lack of differentiation between the roles, characteristics, and responsibilities of school leaders. The research provides recommendations on conducting larger-scale research to enable the complete picture of school leadership in Kazakhstan.

Key words: Kazakhstan, school reform, school leadership, leader roles, challenges

Introduction

School is the most important environment in educating future generations; it influences the formation of a person's future identity. Countries care about the future and their competitive capacity in a global arena, hence one of the strategic directions is to invest in education. Moreover, current tendencies require reconsidering the activities of educational leaders at all levels. This article aims at exploring the current situation of school leadership and school leaders in general and research the perspectives, roles, and challenges they face nowadays.

The national education system of Kazakhstan consists of preschool, primary, basic (lower) secondary, upper (general or vocational) secondary education. Generally, 57% of the 7 696 public or mainstream schools (primary and secondary) in Kazakhstan are "ungraded" (UGS), which means there are not enough students to have their own class every year and to teach students from different age groups together in one class. According to the Constitution and the Law on Education, preschool, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education are considered to be compulsory and provided free of charge (MESRK, 2012). The fact that comprehensive school combines all levels (primary, secondary, upper general) may be considered as a potential challenge for any principal, since each level has unique peculiarities.

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The motivation for the research arises from the current tendency for reform which involves a desire to look into international perspectives, expertise, and knowledge on school leadership (Bridges et al., 2014). Learning and implementing effective school practices is one of the core objectives in the educational system of Kazakhstan (Davis & Winch, 2015; Koretz, 2002).

The issue of the need for school leadership research is emerging in Kazakhstan which explains the limited number of published papers or almost absence of academic research in English. Notably, school leadership is a relatively new concept as compared with school management. Regarding the approaches of rethinking the school leadership concept, the issue has been discussed at the level of the Ministry of Education and Science (Mukhtarova & Medeni, 2013).

Nevertheless, it is the case that the education system in Kazakhstan is only at the beginning of its reform journey, with a need not only to embed current initiatives, but also to build on them in order to meet the future challenges. School leadership has a pivotal role to play in this (Yakavets et al., 2017).

One general **research question** was set in this study: What are the perspectives of principals and teachers regarding a school leader? This general research question was developed into the following sub-questions:

1. Whom do the principals and teachers see as the leader of the school?
2. How do principals and teachers perceive the roles that the school leader fulfills?
3. What are the challenges the principals confront?

International perspectives on successful school leadership practices

The terms used to describe this field have transformed from 'educational administration' to 'educational management' and, more recently, to 'educational leadership' (Gunter, 2004). The question can be raised whether the changes like these are based on the semantic nature of the terms of the reflection of the substantive changes in the nature of the field (Bush, 2008). A different perspective argues that "the definition of leadership is arbitrary and very subjective" (Yukl, 2002, p. 4). However, Bush and Glover (2003) cover the major features defining leadership as 'a process of influence leading to the achievement of the desired purpose' (p.8). Successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values. They articulate this vision at every opportunity and influence their staff and other stakeholders to share the vision. The philosophy, structures, and activities of the school are geared towards the achievement of this shared vision (Bush & Glover, 2003, p. 5).

The definition arises three dimensions of school leadership: leadership as influence, leadership and values and leadership and vision.

Leadership as influence. The definitions of leadership indicate the expectation of involving social influence process by which intentional influence is utilized by one person over others to build activities and relationships in a group or organization (Bush & Glover, 2003). The three main aspects can be discussed in these definitions. The core concept is not authority, but influence. The two concepts are dimensions of power where the former bears to refer to formal positions like principal, while the latter could be resided by anyone in the school. Management is precisely connected to positional authority although leadership is independent of it. Besides, the process is intentional as the agent targets to achieve certain purposes. The third aspect can be explained by the matter that the agent exercising influence can be an individual or a group. The idea provides support for the concept of distributed leadership (Bush, 2008, p. 277).

Leadership and values. Although leaders are associated with values to a greater extent, it does not determinate the goals to be set or actions to be taken. "Good leaders are informed by and communicate clear sets of personal and educational values which represent their moral purposes for the school" (Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001, p. 53). Bush (2008) argues that the government

sets the primary values and they can be 'imposed' on school leaders rather than 'chosen' by them (p. 277). The tension can be the obligation of implementation of the policies and the need for teacher professionals to feel positive about new interventions. Largely, teachers report on positive emotional experiences of self-initiated changes while mostly negative referring to mandated ones. The notion 'influence' can be explained to be neutral as it does not indicate the actions to be pursued. Leaders are required to be restricted to act based on clear personal and professional values (Hargreaves, 2004).

Leadership and vision. For more than 20 years, vision has been viewed as an important component of successful leadership. Southworth (1993, as cited in Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2010, p.4) (1993) indicates that "the heads are motivated to work hard, because their leadership is the pursuit of their individual visions". On the other hand, an organization cannot always maintain a highly complex dynamic process of vision building (Fullan, 1992, p. 83). Another study refers to vision as 'adverse effects', which appear when teachers are not involved by principals in the vision-building process. Building a coherent vision has the potential to improve schools, but the empirical evidence of its effectiveness is still blended.

Nowadays, there are a great number of competing models of school leadership considering the typology for leadership. However, to negotiate with current issues makes the leader's role more challenging than ever before, as the demands and responsibilities have expanded substantially (Bush, 2008; Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010). Nowadays, evidence is conspicuous that principal's roles include creating learning communities, leading learning or changing and transforming their organizations (Pont et al., 2008). Furthermore, Shields (2004) describes leaders' work as follows:

Educational leadership is widely recognized 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 in achieving success. (p. 109)

To some extent success or the failure of a school is the burden and responsibility of a principal as "leading and managing have always been experienced as intensely demanding forms of work" (Gronn, 2003, p. 72).

The integration of qualities, skills, and abilities into well-organized and effective strategies to meet expectations of all the stakeholders promptly is the hardest challenge to a school leader who appears to be the school principal (Mukhtarova & Medeni, 2013).

In this case, it is also interesting to look into how the Competing Values Framework deals with leadership in connection with leader's role. Quinn and colleagues (1990) use the competing values framework of organizational effectiveness to categorize leaders' roles. Based on his review of literature on leadership eight categories emerge of leader behavior or roles. He argues that more effective managers can play multiple, even competing leadership roles, such as facilitator, mentor, team-builder, coordinator, monitor, organizer, innovator, entrepreneur, visionary, hard-driver, competitor and producer. Leaders are expected to perform all these roles and consider and balance the competing demands that are represented by each set of expectations (Quinn et al., 1990).

The principal may accomplish more interpersonal, informational and decisional roles as a manager (Straub, 2000). "School leaders should embrace community as an explicit, intentional, and programmatic component of the school curriculum" which displays the perspective of that the role of the leader is presumably to be in the public eye (Starratt, 2002, p.321).

In this manner, different approaches were taken to define the role including the principal's functions and all other aspects attached to the role. Furthermore, what could be emphasized is that politics, history, traditions, culture, and other factors determine the principal's role and responsibilities.

Conceptualizing school leadership and leader roles in the context of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan, like many other post-Soviet and post-socialist countries, has been carrying out educational reforms in the 1990s that could be characterized as a 'post-socialist education reform package' (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008, p.1). The set of policy reforms that included student-centered learning, student assessment standardization, curriculum standards, educational autonomy in terms of governance, finance and textbook publishing symbolized the acceptance of western educational values and 'traveling policies' (Silova, 2011). The period of educational transformation is seen to be uncoordinated with policy-makers conflicting to maintain Soviet traditions and re-position of the country closer to the West, and not to imply the Soviet way of interpreting proper education as better than the Western way, or vice versa, all at the same time (Yakavets, 2012, p. 44).

The research and publications on the Kazakhstani schools and school leadership in English are limited, or almost absent. The reason for this is that school leadership is a relatively new concept as compared with school management. The Ministry of Education and Science admitted that the approaches are needed regarding the revision and rethinking of the school leadership concept. Baimoldayev (2009), 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' (p. 6). Moreover, the relevance of the issue has been raised by different researchers in Kazakhstan. Yakavets, Frost, Fimyar, and Bilyalov (2017) and the latest international reports (The World Bank, 2013) highlight the importance of enhancing the quality of leadership in Kazakhstani schools.

Generally, in Kazakhstani schools the leader is the school principal or director (Mukhtarova & Medeni, 2013). The legislation (e.g. the Standard Regulations for Operation of Educational Organisations, 2013) states that the school principal is accountable to local education authorities for:

- Compliance with state educational standards;
- The welfare of students and employees of academic institutions within the educational process;
- Financial and economic activities, including the misuse of material and financial resources;
- To prevent violation of the rights and freedoms of students and employees of educational institutions (Standard Regulations for Operation of Educational Organizations, 2013, p. 2–33).

Additionally to the responsibility for the realization of state educational standards and policy, the principal is in charge of organizing and coordinating the educational (teaching, curriculum, and discipline) processes at school by creating the necessary conditions for the school community, including teachers, staff and students. The principal is authorized to represent the school, take actions and make decisions on behalf of the school and sign official documents with individuals and organizations. Therefore, the leader is responsible for hiring and dismissing staff members, for health and safety issues and for building maintenance. The new responsibility added to the current duties of a director is managing the financial activities, which is usually called 'state purchases' (Yessimbekova & Aitbayev, 2010).

As these requirements show, a considerable part of the principal's role is to do with ensuring compliance to state norms, rather than focusing on strategic school leadership. The school principal's roles appear to be more managerial compared to the international perspectives on school leader practices. Goddard (2003) characterizes principal'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 principal's role (p.14)

The research on organizational, social and economic aspects of school leadership and the understanding of its meaning and practices concluded that principals are aware of their potentials and weaknesses (Bekbayeva, 2009). Another view is shared by an experienced school principal on some leadership strategies and monitoring them within the school, where the types of monitoring are distinguished as a classroom, general, thematic and individual, where accomplishing of these activities can be reached by working collaboratively with deputies and teacher leaders of methodological unions of different subjects (Kozybak, 2009).

There are some other concerns raised in the literature about the critical role of the principal's activity in the Kazakhstani context: raising the quality of education (Milovanova, 2010; Tauirbekova, 2011; Valieva, 2010), leading successfully without stress (Kondrashkin, 2010), effective organization of school management, and distribution of functional responsibilities (Dozortseva, 2011), correlation of leadership and gained achievements, and leader's spiritual-practical activities in nurturing stuff (Dorozhkina, 2011). Apart from these perspectives, there is a claim 'the art of leadership can be attained by experience and success; high performance of a leader dependent on the ethical values of the principal', and 'it is conditional for the leaders to be capable to build trust, be creative, be open-minded and respect different perspective, be analytical, be ready for decision-making and take strategic actions' (Zhaksylykova, 2010).

The current focus on school leadership in Kazakhstan depicts that the concept requires in-depth research in order to establish a modern theoretical framework. The published research papers try to describe and integrate the present characteristics of school leadership issues. However, the papers are mainly of reflective character and a constructive overview of the case is needed. The steps are being taken to discover new practices and strategies of leading schools in the period of continuous changes happening in the education system and moving towards the development of a modern culture of school leadership.

Methodology

The data were collected by means of individual semi-structured interviews to address the research questions. Qualitative interview is a crucial ground for exploring the ways in which subjects experience and understand their world. It gives unique access to the reality of people, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences, and opinions. It is a 'powerful method of producing knowledge of the human situation, as demonstrated by historical interview studies' (Kvale, 2008, p. 9).

This research is of interest in terms of studying principals' and teachers' perspectives on leadership roles and practices. From the principal's perspective, this research has value because it carries on to dig up the existing literature on specific school leader practices to consider whether leadership effects can be associated with specific practices and behaviors. From the teacher's perspective, the study is relevant because it is a starting point to explore the importance of teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership and their relationship with school effectiveness.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two school principals and two teachers with more than three years of experience. It is necessary to exclude novice teachers and principals in order to achieve a clear vision of school effectiveness and school.

The selection criteria for the schools were as follows: a) schools willing to participate in research; b) experience in learning and institution development; c) schools involving innovative practice lastingly over the average.

Semi-structured interviews are one-to-one interviews, lasting for an hour or so that will have general questions on the participants' experience in education. The interview questions were designed to get an in-depth picture of the topic under discussion, in particular, the interviewee's perspectives on school leadership, roles, and challenges.

Findings and Discussion

Since the beginnings of principalship practice in Kazakhstan, educators have struggled to define the distinctive role of the position. The researchers repeatedly explored the concept and its influence in the larger social and educational context, encouraging principals to be 'bureaucratic executives' (Beck & Murphy, 1993).

All four interview participants recognized the school leader to be the principal of the school. Hence, the principal 1 says, *'the true school leader is the person who has been engaged at career stages of the school life: studied at school, worked at school starting from a school teacher, then becoming the head of the department or the team leader. The principal who has been involved at most of the levels will be well-prepared for the principalship position'*. Principal 1 emphasized the importance of involvement in terms of the ability to understand different perspectives upon the matter. Principal 2 brought a point of true willingness to perform the job saying *'school leader is the one who has got passion, related competences, experience, and the will to contribute to school improvement'*.

Teachers' perspectives align with the principals', concerning the way they see the school leader. Namely, teacher 1 says, *'The person capable of teaching. The person who has been a teacher because administrators often forget what teachers feel'*, and emphasizing that *'the principal is the one to learn what jobs people do in the school because a lot of positive atmospheres that are created in schools are things that are not visible on paper. The principal needs to learn from the person 'what is your job?' 'what are you doing in the school?'*. The second teacher's vision aligns with the views already said: '*Even though you are a school leader you should still have the same passion as an amazing teacher who wants to foster learning for the students. Being a school leader does not mean that you are just a person in management who has to manage but you have to love learning and teaching as well'*.

Principals do not have much time for theoretical debates, but tackle with the role definition in a daily routine like 'What students, teachers, parents, and the management company expect from me?', 'What should be at the top of the to-do list?'. As the literature review shows, a substantial part of the principal's role is to deal with ensuring compliance to state norms, rather than focusing on strategic school leadership as the roles appear to be more managerial in Kazakhstan, compared to the international perspectives on school leader practices.

Regarding the principal roles, being a motivator, monitor and team builder were mentioned across the interviews. Principal 1 indicated that *'doing everything together is important. If the principal does things himself even if it is painting the walls'*, which aligns with one of the teacher's responses: *'The principal motivates the staff by example, literally by own example'*. Principal 2 expanded the vision saying: *'One of the roles of the principal is to motivate, to be an inspiration by creating an environment where everyone feels to be the part of the team and everyone knows each other's role clearly in reaching the goals of the school'* which leads to the team aspect as well. Another teacher's perspective comes together with the idea of a healthy environment: '*The principal must be very supportive. The principal creates a positive environment in the school. The school culture is positive. I mention this once again, he or she shapes the vision of academic success. The vision, mission of the school, like a goal-setting'*. In order to build rapport with the team, one principal brought up honesty to be crucial in team-building, saying: '*I want to be respected not because of fear but who I am as a person'*, adding that the ability to listen and hear your colleagues is important as well.

Monitoring the academic performance and staff performance is also one of the roles of the school leader and it is challenging to measure the outcomes. One of the principals suggested lesson observations and providing feedback to be essential in following and improving teacher performance, while the other principal said that outcomes are mainly measured by students' achievement levels like national testing results or SAT and IELTS scores.

In addition to the roles mentioned above, one of the teachers acknowledged the following roles: *'leadership, vision, approachability, communication with people inside and outside the school, having love for education and teaching',* while the second teacher brought up the issue of decision making saying that *'the principal is the one who is going to have to make tough decisions'*. Furthermore, there is quite an interesting perspective on collaborative decision-making: *'the goals can be set by listening to everybody, so it could be in collaboration. So the principal and the senior admin team including the heads of department, different schools call these different ways, everyone should be aware of the school goals, but it is the principal who makes the decision at the end of the day'.*

Addressing the challenges the principals face the first and foremost is the pressure coming from all education stakeholders, including government and management companies, which complies with the role of maintaining the school and meeting the state norms requirements.

In the past decade, the pressure of standard-based accountability has intensified those issues. The Institute for Educational Leadership (2000) listed the principal's traditional managerial roles and also added that principals today must also serve as leaders for student learning. They must know academic content and pedagogical techniques. They must work with teachers to strengthen their skills. They must collect, analyze and use data in ways of fuel excellence. They must rally students, teachers, parents, local businesses and other community residents and partners around the common goal of raising student performance as well as they must have the leadership skills and knowledge to exercise the autonomy and authority to pursue these strategies. Both principals addressed the issue of motivating teachers for implementing innovative practices, while one of the principals says: *'It is challenging to bring changes and new practices like differentiation to teachers who have been teaching a very long time and have views of more traditional teaching'.* The other principal acknowledged, *'the lack of teacher's enthusiasm in bringing some extra work as you need to raise awareness and explain the importance of student's benefits and needs'*. One of the teacher's opinion followed the above-mentioned: *'Commitment can be an issue from teachers, sometimes staff members might not be committed'.* Financial issues are also important, and one of the strong motivators is high salary. The second teacher also mentions the external pressures that a principal confronts: *'The principal needs to devote time to educate the stakeholders. The principal has to spend time with the people exercising some pressure, explaining the reasons, explaining what the school is about, inviting them to participate in the school life, and making them see what the school is about.'*

The most instant response to the challenges is simply to work harder. The school leaders keep doing this, tackling the problem upon the matter, but the point of diminishing returns may be reaching. Principals admit that they need more training as leaders, because even if they try harder, that might not help them confronting issues for which they had not been trained.

The responses show that mainly when the participants were asked about the roles of the school leader, there is no clear differentiation between roles, characteristics, and responsibilities. However, mainly the roles of being a motivator and team-builder were mentioned along with the importance of monitoring the student achievements and teacher performance. The main concurrence that appeared to happen across the interviews is that the principal is considered to be the school leader. Even though the literature review showed the school leader role to be more of managerial leadership, the responses show that principals' and teachers' perspectives include strategic school leadership as well.

Limitations

The number of interview participants is limited to two schools only: two principals and two teachers respectively from each school. This does not enable to make a complete picture, for which a larger-scale research is necessary.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of principalship in Kazakhstan, in almost thirty years of independence, the school principals have changed substantially. They experience rethinking and rebuilding school management by expanding the role responsibilities and its meaning. The results being found only attempt to contribute to school leaders' practice development.

There are some points where principals and teachers mentioned the leader to be an initiator of change and motivator for improvement. One of the key points of successful practices is to be passionate about their job that can lead the staff members and sustain the leader's position within the organization. Further, it could be suggested for leaders to be more open-minded for feedback, inquiry-oriented, to be critical in-process within and outside the school, to ask questions to their colleagues and to see the situation from different positions. Overall, the leaders' main task is to contribute to the development and sustainability of a community in achieving the common goals of the school.

Moreover, creativity is an essential point of successful practices. The principal may engrain and inspire it among the staff as it is the school leader who is expected to create a supportive, healthy and friendly school environment where everyone contributes to the school life and feels to be a part of the big team. School becomes a place of fulfillment where the "we" is higher than individual preferences.

Whether the principals are successful as leaders is mostly identified by teachers based on principals' human relation skills, level of trust, the way decisions are made, or the failure to deal with conflict (Bulach et al., 2006).

The uniqueness of each school leadership practice according to a specific school and reform context in which one is working along with practices is the part of being an effective leader in any context (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 6). Lezotte (2006) indicates that "each demands a different set of knowledge and skills, most of which today's leaders have not had the opportunity to learn" (p. 6).

The abundance of information on the models and responsibilities of effective principals' guides schools towards effectiveness and promotes the academic success of the students and this may be an endless debate, since the principal's roles are always expanding and dynamic. However, in this research, the debate can be moved beyond principal's responsibilities and associated practices toward perspectives from principals and teachers on the understanding of leadership and school leader's roles can be identified.

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