Towards Professionalization of School Leadership: State of the Art in Macedonia in the Light of the Global Trends

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The article examines the issue of school leadership development as one of the key priorities of the educational policy agendas throughout the world. The main attention is given to the global trends defined by the oecd for professionalization of school leadership: (Re)defining school leadership responsibilities, Distributing school leadership, Developing skills for effective school leadership, Making school leadership an attractive profession. Within this general framework of expectations the current situation of school leadership in Macedonia is presented. The analysis is focused on the compatibility of the theory and practice of educational leadership in Macedonia, the challenges of the sustainability of the planned and implemented activities and the further possibilities for developing the school leadership in the country.

Keywords: leadership in education, school leadership, professionalization of school leadership, school leadership in Macedonia

Introduction: Importance of School Leadership

In recent years school leadership has become a key educational policy priority around the world. There are mainly two reasons that explain its importance. One refers to the crucial role that school leaders have in improving school and student achievements as confirmed by research findings (Teddlie and Reynolds 2000; Leithwood et al. 2006; Townsend 2007). Since the expectations for the school have been increased and schools become more accountable for the results, school leaders are seen as vital and integrating component of the school life: a good principal means a healthy school culture and climate, competent and motivated teachers, efficient teaching, improved student learning. Therefore school leadership is essential for improving teaching and learning in the school and raising school efficiency.

On the other hand the importance of school leadership de-

rives from the fact that it is the link that connects the school to the outside world, which is rapidly changing. The globalization, demographic and labor market changes, new technologies, reflect in schools in a way that they need leaders that will lead 'out there' beyond the school, as well as within it, in order to influence the environment that influences their own work with students (Hargreaves, Halász, and Pont 2008). Thus, school leaders have a pivotal role and responsibility in building strong ties between the school and the community and integrating the school's work with the community.

School Leadership Priorities

The importance of school leadership today stresses the need to reconsider its role. It is no doubt a complex and demanding role that combines managerial and leadership skills, resource management (human and financial) and leadership for learning. The successful school leader is the one who can establish a balance of these two components, can 'integrate the soft human elements with the cruel business behaviours' (Joiner 1987, 128). So, the main question for the policy makers today is how to develop this *super school leaders,* how to help and support their professionalization. In this article an attempt is made to address this question in global context and discuss the situation in Macedonia regarding those global trends. The starting point is the four main policy levers identified by the OECD as key factors for improving the school leadership practice (Pont, Nusche and Moorman 2008):

- (Re)defining school leadership responsibilities
- Distributing school leadership
- Developing skills for effective school leadership
- Making school leadership an attractive profession

Without going into in-depth analysis of these global policy priorities (since this kind of information is easily accessible in the OECD publications (Pont, Nusche and Moorman 2008), some key elements of each of the four levers will be drawn and used as a referential framework for discussing the current situation of school leadership in the Republic of Macedonia.

(Re)defining School Leadership Responsibilities

The first lever refers to three not only European trends in education that shape the school leadership role and responsibilities:

(1) Current *decentralization processes in education and the greater autonomy that schools gain* today calls for clear definition of school leaders' core responsibilities. The research results have shown that high-performing and equitable school systems tend to grant greater autonomy to schools in formulating and using curricula and assessments (OECD 2010).

Decentralization in education is one of the most important systemic changes in Macedonian education in the last decade. Its implementation meant allocation of power and responsibilities for the major educational issues (improvement of education quality, professional development of the teaching staff, financing, appointment of school principles) from state to local and school level. That marked the initiation of the following processes:

- Reorganization of the education administration and management through the new laws on local self-government and financing of the local self-government;
- Improvement of the management and administration of education including the strategic capacities on central level;
- Development of a more efficient system financial planning and financial management;
- Improvement of the management on a local and school level, as well as of the professionalism and effectiveness of the school and local self-government staff;
- Creation of a system of school self-government and facilitation of training in school management for school principals;
- Evaluation-utilization of the capacities of administrative institutions for school monitoring and assessment ('The Education Modernization Project' 2004).

In this direction, amendments have been adopted of the Laws on Primary ('Zakon za izmenuvanje i dopolnuvanje na Zakonot za osnovnoto obrazovanie' 2004) and Secondary Education ('Zakon za izmenuvanje i dopolnuvanje na Zakonot za srednoto obrazovanie' 2004), which provided a legal framework for the start of this process. Within these regulations the tasks and responsibilities of school leaders (principals) in Macedonia are clearly defined. They can be divided into two sets: pedagogical and managerial (organizational). The first one includes, among others:

- organisation and monitoring of the implementation of curricula;
- preparation of annual workplan of the school;

- preparation of programme for school development;
- monitoring and assessment of teachers' work.

The other set of managerial tasks consists of those responsibilities that relate to the:

- organisation and coordination of the work of all school staff;
- care for the material condition of the school;
- participation in negotiations with the Ministry regarding staffing and financial needs of the school;
- selection of teaching and administrative personnel, its distribution and the termination of the employment;
- collaboration with the local community, the social, state, business, professional and scientific organisations, institutions, associations, etc. ('Zakon za osnovnoto obrazovanie' 2008, Art. 130).

Since the effective school autonomy depends on effective leaders, the question of relevance for Macedonian context is: Do the principals in practice have a capacity, motivation and support to use the autonomy, is the school leadership a decision making power regarding the curriculum, assessment, teacher recruitment, resource allocation? Regarding many of these components of school leadership in Macedonia the answer would be negative. Even though the state initiated a process of decentralization of education that was legislatively supported and enabled redistribution of competences and responsibilities between central, local and school-based level, there is still no clear picture in this area, and what is more important, there is a discrepancy between the theory and practice, between the regulations and documents and school principals' everyday work. School leaders' autonomy is often limited by the state and local education authorities whose decisions are usually with a strong political background. Therefore, it is necessary to develop mechanisms and instruments that will guarantee the national interest but also give the schools and their leaders autonomy in managing and adapting the school work to the local needs.

(2) The second element that contributes to the redefinition of the role of school leaders is *the improvement of students' achievements.* To realize this goal the emphasis is given on:

- Supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality through teacher monitoring and evaluation, teacher professional development, promoting team work and collaboration;

- Strategic planning;
- Strengthening strategic resource management (human and financial);
- System leadership (collaboration with other schools and the local community).

In the educational policy agenda of the Macedonian Ministry of education and science improving of teaching and learning is regarded as one of the most important determinants of the students' performance. Therefore, several steps on a national level were undertaken to improve the quality of teaching:

- Revision of curricula based on the implementation of the Concept of Learning Outcomes;
- Promoting modernization of teaching methodology by implementing several projects that enable teachers to encourage their students to think critically and creatively;
- Legally based obligation for professional development of teachers and school principals;
- Introduction of teacher portfolio as an instrument for stimulating teacher promotion and professional development;
- Legally based introduction of four levels of teachers' professional career (teacher-beginner, teacher, teacher-mentor and teacher counselor) as an instrument for assessment of teacher's work and career development;
- Introduction of external students' assessment as a tool for measuring the 'objectivity and professionalism' of teachers regarding student assessment;
- Insuring quality of teaching through the preparation of the programme for school development (every 4 years) that includes the results of the school self-evaluation (every 2 years), recommendations of the evaluation report of the State Educational Inspectorate, as well as the opinion of the Bureau for the Development of Education ('Zakon za osnovnoto obrazovanie' 2008).

One of the recent important changes aimed at improving teacher quality is teacher professional development that is made compulsory and prescribed in the Laws on Primary and Secondary Education.

There are currently several modes of provision of in-service programmes for teachers and school staff in the country. The first involves a systemic approach, usually organised by the Bureau for

the Development of Education, which is a body of the Ministry, designed to reach all the schools in the country and ensure they are all provided with the same materials and instructions. However, the role of the Bureau is usually heavily linked to current curricula issues, so there is little space for introducing different topics.

The other way of professional development is provided by a considerable number of domestic and international organizations that over the last two decades have organized trainings on various issues that responded to the local school needs. Even though the national education system has benefited from contributions from these non-governmental and international initiatives this mode of in-service training has a major disadvantage to be limited only to the selected teachers and schools thus not providing dissemination and institutionalization of the offered activities on a system level.

The implementation of the teacher professional development in Macedonia is closely connected to the introduction of teacher promotion and teacher portfolio. Yet, the planned model of teacher promotion is still theory. At the moment there are no divisions for teachers by levels based on teacher portfolio and in-service trainings requirements. On the other hand, teacher monitoring and evaluation is one of the important pedagogical tasks of school principals, which is regulated by the law, and every school principal decides his/her criteria who will be a teacher-mentor. Even though teachers' levels still don't exist, most schools/principals are assigning mentors to teacher-beginners because it is required by law. However, the collaboration and support between teacher-mentor and teacher-beginner is often poor and done more on a formal level.

(3) Another trend that contributes to the improvement of definition of the school leaders responsibilities is *developing standards or frameworks for the profession of school leaders*. It should be done by joint efforts of the national policy makers and representatives of the school leadership profession and based on effective leadership practice and the needs of national education systems.

In the Republic of Macedonia the principal tasks and responsibilities are defined in the law regulations. However, there are no standards created by the policy makers and the representatives of the school leaders, which will be used as a basis for recruitment, training and appraisal of school leaders.

Distributing School Leadership

Regarding the second lever three OECD recommendations are crucial:

- Encourage distribution of leadership by creating formal teams or informal ad hoc groups based on expertise and current needs;
- Support distribution of leadership;
- Support school boards in their tasks.

In the Republic of Macedonia the distributed leadership 'across different people and organizations' in general is limited to the school boards that are bodies of administration of each primary and secondary school and consist of representatives of teachers, parents, local authorities and central government. The roles and responsibilities of the school board members, as well as of the principals, are defined in the legal regulations but there are no recruitment criteria based on the candidates' skills and commitment. The Law also permits appointment of an assistant principal that would be 'responsible for managerial and pedagogical matters' ('Zakon za osnovnoto obrazovanie' 2008, Art. 131), but in practice this position is rarely implemented. Although in many schools there are teams of teachers responsible for different tasks, inclusion of larger group of professionals in and outside the school is often not supported. Usually the school principal has the main power and influence in the school, he/she shares the same political interest with the local authority (municipality) and implements decisions 'from above' without much space for maneuver.

Developing Skills for Effective School Leadership

School leadership development is the crucial factor for successful leader's performance. This issue became a reality since the beginning of the new millennium and the focus today is given on developing the following school leadership skills:

- Guiding teaching and learning by enhancing teacher quality that will lead to improved learning outcomes;
- Managing resources;
- Setting goals and measuring progress;
- Leading and collaborating beyond school borders.

The school leaders' formation is seen as a lifelong learning process in which skills and competencies are to be developed through

a comprehensive training that is based on pre-service qualification programmes, induction programmes and professional development programmes for established school leaders.

The leadership skills development in Macedonia in general mostly takes place in the initiating stage of the school principal career. There is no undergraduate study in school leadership, but since 2008 a compulsory and law-regulated training programme for school principals was introduced for candidates for principals in primary and secondary schools. This training enable them to pass the formal examination that is one of the legally prescribed conditions, beside higher education diploma and five years of working experience, to apply for the position of school principal ('Zakon za osnovnoto obrazovanie' 2008, Art. 128). The Law, nevertheless, gives the possibility to become a principal without passing the exam, but it should be done within a year since the date of employment.

The training programme for principals is delivered by the National Examinations Centre, a body within the Ministry of Education and Science, which is the only institution in the Republic of Macedonia authorized for qualifying candidates for principals in primary and secondary schools. The programme consists of six modules:

- Introductory module
- Theory of organization
- Communication in educational institutions
- The school principal as pedagogical leader
- Planning and decision-making
- Legislation and finance ('Programa za polaganje na ispit za direktor na osnovno uciliste' 2005).

The training is carried out by elected professional trainers and it is followed by an exam that is held in front of an examination committee established by the director of the National Examination Centre. Candidates who passed the exam are issued a certificate for completion and are qualified to apply for the position of a school principal.

The aim of this training programme is to improve the professional competencies of school principals. Nevertheless, the evidence from the practice shows that there is a significant number of school principals that are insufficiently prepared to do their job. This situation put forward the question of quality of the offered

training as well as the trainers' competences, but also actualizes the need of establishing clearly defined criteria for selection of future principals and strengthening their initial education and professional development. The current practice shows that there is no systemic approach in providing organized forms for professional development of principals, but it is a result of the individual principal's initiative and motivation to improve the competencies. Also, there are sporadic cases, even though recently increasing in number, of school principals, or school principals' candidates, that continue their education on Master level in teacher faculties that offer courses in Management of Education.

A significant contribution to strengthening the school leadership capacities in Macedonia was recently given by the implementation of the Balkan Project Development Educational Leadership Trainings Project that was organized by the Dutch School for Management in education in Amsterdam in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science in Macedonia and the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje (Miovska-Spaseva, Andonovska-Trajkovska, and Selimi 2013; Miovska-Spaseva and Andonovska-Trajkovska 2013). The project aims were to improve the quality of education in participating countries through the professionalization of their school leaders. In the period 2011–2013, 25 participants from six countries in the Balkan region were having intensive two-year trainings on capacity building for educational management training. The training consisted of the content of 10–12 modules and the methodology of modern training methods to apply in educational management training. Whether (if at all) the benefits of the project activities will be institutionalized and will result with the desired quality effects, and to what extent it will impact the quality of school principals' preparation, should be assessed in the years to come.

Making School Leadership an Attractive Profession

There are four main recommendations regarding this OECD policy lever:

- Focusing on leadership succession planning through identification and development of future leaders with high potential early in their careers.
- Professionalizing recruitment procedures and eligibility criteria that should address a wide range of candidates' know-

ledge, skills and competences (pedagogical as well as mana-gerial).

- Making school leaders' salaries attractive, which means significantly higher than the ones of teachers and other members of school leadership teams.
- Acknowledging the contribution of professional associations as an important instrument that enables school leaders to be actively involved in policy formulation and implementation.

If we take these recommendations as criteria for the current situation in Macedonia, we can say that school leadership is not regarded as attractive profession. Several indicators support this conclusion:

- There are no developed strategies for identifying talented candidates nor for supporting and developing their leadership skills.
- There are no selection criteria that will address wide range of skills and competences (pedagogical, communication and managerial), The current eligibility criteria (5 years experience in an educational institution and compulsory training for principals) are more or less formal norms that do not provide comprehensive picture of the candidates' profile. Therefore, systematic, objective and effective recruitment process is missing.
- There is no attractive school leaders' salary. It is about 100 Euro more that the average net wage in the country (approximately 340 Euro in June 2013 (State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia 2013)) and about 60 Euro more than the average teacher salary. So many principal candidates with high potential do not apply for this position because the financial reward does not correspond to the enormous workload, responsibilities and pressures they will face with.
- There is no active professional association of school leaders in Macedonia that will enable them to be actively engaged in the process of policy making, thus contribute to shaping the conditions in which they work

These indicators shows that this lever is weak element in the process of school leadership professionalization in Macedonia and there is an urgent need for envisioning strategies, programmes and incentives that will make school leadership more attractive profession.

Conclusion

School leadership development is one of the key priorities of the educational policy in Macedonia. It is acknowledged that 'new times require new principals – managers, who are able to develop real and quality developmental plans of the educational institutions, who are good organizers, communicators, motivators, decision makers and executers, team leaders and evaluators.' (National Programme for the Development of Education in the Republic of Macedonia 2006, 338). During the past few years the legislative foundation of school leaders' professionalization is established. But, the results of various research, analyses and insight from observation of the work of school principals point to their inadequate preparation for the performance of this complex and responsible assignment. Therefore 'the theory' needs to be reexamined and further developed by coordinated action of the policy makers, higher education institutions and school leader themselves in order to create a system of efficient initial education and professional development of school leaders. It should be based on the general trends, but also on the in-depth analysis of the current situation in the country in order to avoid the risk of rushed, partial and inefficient changes and bridge the gap between the education policies and practices.

On the practical level the main issue of Macedonian school leadership as well education in general is its politicization. The school leaders' selection and work needs to be based on effective, objective and transparent criteria, and not on political membership and/or suitability. The school principals have enough complex professional burdens to carry; they don't need political issues as well. Acting in a changing environment they need to stay committed with their primary task, namely enabling students to learn. And they can do that only with professional leadership.

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