

School Principalship Developments in Azerbaijan:

Challenges of Professional Development of School Leaders vs. Managers

A case study

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FOREWORD

NEPC Policy Labs are biannual events based on the comparative policy analysis conducted by NEPC members on a burning policy issue. It gathers policy makers, policy analysts and practitioners and consist of learning session where the results of the comparative policy analysis are presented and a policy solution generating session where through interaction and other thinking methods participants generate policy solutions and recommendations for their national education system.

The following publication is conceived as one of the “follow up” features of the Policy Lab that took place in Moscow in February 2017

dedicated to school governance, hosted by the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, with a focus on three countries: Azerbaijan, Kirgizstan and Russia.

This report by Elmina Kazimzade, Education director of the Center for Innovations in Education, Cathryn Magno (Institute for the Study of Human Rights) and Vafa Kazdal, (ADA University) is dedicated to the analysis of the Azeri case with the aim of identifying challenges of Azerbaijan school principalship and propose reflections beyond the policy lab completion.

CASE STUDY

Introduction

In the last decade school leadership has become a priority in Azerbaijan education policy agendas. The establishment of transparent, results-driven, and effective management mechanisms were highlighted as one of the main goals in the strategic plan for long-term national development 2013-2020 (Azerbaijan-2020, 2013). In education, it is expected that this goal will be realized through the promotion of shared leadership practices and implementation of measures to move from the so-called “memory school” to the school of ideas and thought” (The State Strategy, 2013). In recent years, challenges in the tertiary sector have also received attention from the government of Azerbaijan. A key national objective has been identified as developing human capital through increasing the quality of educational institutions. Azerbaijan seeks to increase investment in education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels; improving educational leadership has been identified as a key development priority (Kazdal, 2017).

In this case we examine the dynamics in school principalship policy development including school principal appointment and school principal preparation and training during and after education reforms, covering the period from independence in 1991 to the present, with emphasis on key developments in 1999 and 2014.

The following set of questions were used to guide our analytical framework:

- 1 How have principalship development programs aligned with real school conditions and school management and leadership demands?
- 2 Who provides educational programs (pre-service and in-service) for working and aspiring school principals?
- 3 How do school principal appointment policies impact the preparation and training for working and aspiring school principals?

Historical overview

Soviet legacy – Independence: from 1991 to 1999

In 1999, the education system functioned much the same as it did during the Soviet time. Regarding school principalship, the process of appointment and the job responsibilities were quite clear and were designated by the central government. Similar to the process followed in schools in most countries in the world, school principals did not receive specific training for their position. Generally, there were two routes to the principalship in Azerbaijan: 1) recognition as a “best” or “active” teacher who demonstrated the motivation and ability to perform the management tasks required for school oversight, or 2) experience as a leader in

another sector of society such as public administration or civil service who could be entrusted with management and administration of a school.

Both such appointments were made by local government authorities with approval from the Ministry of Education, without a clear, consistent or transparent process of application and selection. It was assumed that running a school required the same types of skills as running any other enterprise, and the majority of tasks were administrative, such as ensuring the presence of teachers and students, overseeing building maintenance, monitoring start and end times, and organizing finances and other resources. While former teachers might have also provided some pedagogical insights, as principals they were neither required nor expected to do so. Also, formally they were expected to teach, according to the job description, but this was practically impossible due to administrative overload. Indeed, they were often too burdened with bureaucratic tasks to spend much, if any, time evaluating the teaching and learning process throughout the school.

Decision-making power over teacher appointment was one of the most challenging issues during this period. Teachers were appointed at the school level from the beginning of the reforms, based on decentralization. School principals were eligible to appoint the teachers themselves. Later, however, this approach was considered to be non-transparent, with too high of a risk of corruption. Therefore new policy shifted the appointment to become more centralized, and the government introduced an e-system of application, registration and tracking with multiple stages of exams (MOE, 2014).

School principals during this era generally managed the school by maintaining processes and procedures already established, and submitting reports to the government as necessary. They were self-taught, and they learned how to resolve problems and overcome challenges while already in the position. There were no opportunities for professional development for aspiring or current school principals, neither public nor private. In 2005 The Civil Service Commission under the President of Republic of the Azerbaijan (CSC, 2005) was established and leadership was one of its priorities, but it was limited to civil service staff only. Any training offered would be related to general monitoring and public administration, with no specific content covering education or the oversight of schools. As there were no training opportunities school principals, neither were there requirements for professional development.

Early school principalship developments – 2000-2013

In terms of legislation, an Education Law was adopted in Azerbaijan in 2009. The Law regulates all areas and aspects of education in educational institutions in the country (including primary school (1st-4th grades), basic (5th-9th grades), and full secondary (10th-11th grades), as well as a school readiness program currently in a pilot phase). Interestingly, the Education Law does not define the governance of educational institutions, per se. However, there exists also a Charter of School Pedagogical Councils which directs such councils (consisting of school principal, teachers, parents and others and required in all schools with more than three teachers) to do the following:

- make the school community aware of decisions of the state, decisions of the Ministry of Education's highest governing body (collegiya) and other regulations;

- support the creation of an effective work system in accordance with the state policy;
- work with talented children;
- approve lesson schedules, out-of-class activities, activities of students' councils;
- maintain stable student enrolment;
- oversee methodological council and subject commissions;
- improve the school work schedule;
- manage the transition of students from class to class/grade to grade), retention, re-examination and summer assignments; and
- monitor results of graduation exams and students' attestation ¹.

According to its Charter, the School Pedagogical Council is the highest governing body in a school and in general public schools the Pedagogical Councils should hold open discussions and make collegial/joint, democratic decisions. Council agendas can be formed based on suggestions of Council members, as well as other self-governing bodies. Pedagogical Councils are led by school principals and their decisions are legalized through school principal orders.

Meanwhile, between 2000 and 2013, several education reforms took place that inspired changes in various school procedures ranging from teaching methodology to school budgeting. Many of these changes were intermittent and/or geographically limited. Further, there was little attention to systemic change in governance structures either at the school, regional or national levels. However, by 2008, the then-Minister of Education voiced concern for school leadership and gave some attention to school principal preparation and training, through support for trainings provided by a local nongovernmental organization. These trainings occurred in both the capital city and rural areas, and included discussions of leadership theories, styles and skills. There was a push to "import" leadership concepts, but still questions regarding the appropriateness of non-indigenous (mostly Anglo-American) models of leadership. In response, efforts were made to develop locally resonant criteria for school leaders (although they were never officially endorsed) and interest continually increased around school leadership preparation (Magno, 2009). A contribution of these trainings was wider public discussion of the role of the school principal in distributed leadership models, which echoed calls for more democratic and transparent leadership of public schools.

Importantly, in the period from 1999 to 2014, the government with the support of the World Bank implemented a large-scale Education Reform Program, which had a strong focus on improving the quality and relevance of student learning to meet the needs of a market economy and strengthening the capacity for managing resources for education effectively, efficiently and equitably. The reform agenda was more focused on teaching practice and curriculum revising and teachers professional development system rather school governance and leadership support. The curriculum component these World Bank education reforms between 2008 and 2012 directed attention to school principals as school curriculum reform managers, but in the beginning of the reforms the teachers were considered to be the main target group

¹ see <http://edu.gov.az/az/page/72/302> for Education Law and <http://www.cabmin.gov.az/?/az/pressreliz/view/437/> or <http://edu.gov.az/az/page/74/3210> for School Pedagogical Council Charter and Exemplary School Charter).

and efforts were concentrated on teachers' professional support. The (potential) leadership role of school principals was neglected. The first trainings on curriculum management for school principals were provided in late in the reform implementation stages, only in the 2011-2012 school year (Sigma, 2016). This initiative – approaching school principals as school curriculum reform managers – might be considered as a first step toward the professional support of school principals as instructional leaders. However, this first initiative was not sustained and had limited impact on school principal professionalization because this training was considered simply as a supplement of support to teachers and curriculum management, ensuring the quality of teaching and learning in the schools. It was not a targeted leadership program. Therefore this training activity were a first country wide initiative aimed at school principals' professional development. Unlike with previous experience when most professional development activities were centralized these trainings were outsourced and various non-governmental organizations have been involved as main providers. (SIGMA, 2016). However, the non-governmental agencies were discovered as potential qualified training providers as a result of outsourcing policy

In summary, the main advantage of reforms between 2000 and 2013 was the growth of country-wide training opportunities to support school principals in managing teaching and learning quality within curriculum reforms. By contrast, the main disadvantages during this period include a lack of standards for developing school principals as instructional leaders and limited sustainability and effectiveness of training outcomes. The non-governmental agencies were discovered as qualified training providers as a result of outsourcing policy applied by the Ministry of Education within education reforms. This change that strongly impacted the further school principalship policy developments will be discussed in the next sections.

Policy changes in school leadership – 2013-present: Demand for instructional leadership!

Prior to 2013, then, any systemic changes were made to school principalship policies. But in the last four years the following three significant changes have been accomplished by the Ministry of Education: 1) redefining the set of professional responsibilities for school principals, 2) implementation of a comprehensive competence-based school principals appointment system, and 3) outsourcing of training programs for aspiring school principals. Each of these changes will be discussed below with a brief analysis of their advantages and disadvantages. It is important to note that the three changes are somewhat intersectional and not mutually exclusive in their impact. Thus, the challenges of one might also affect the success of another. They should be considered both separately and collectively.

1- Redefinition of the set of professional responsibilities for school principals

The responsibilities of school principal are currently defined as follows:

- supporting and evaluating teachers
- ensuring the quality of the learning and teaching process
- involving school governance structures, e.g. School Pedagogical Council, in goal-setting, assessment and accountability

- school planning
- reporting (MOE, 2014).

Thus, the role of the school principal, particularly in view of the first two responsibilities, has evolved to be much more attuned to the education processes and the proficiency of teaching. In other words, it is suggestive of an instructional leadership approach, even if school principals have not, to-date, been specifically taught how to utilize such an approach.

Advantages of professional redefinition

This new role definition brings Azerbaijani school principals' responsibilities more in line with "international best practices."² It also suggests that schools will become the kind of learning communities called for in the literature on school leadership.

Disadvantages of professional redefinition

It cannot be assumed that a novice, or even experienced, school principal has the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively sustain school improvement, school change and teacher support. Ensuring quality of teaching and learning is a complex, multi-tiered process that demands specific capacity in the areas of motivation, innovation and interpersonal development. Codifying the new job requirements of school principal is not enough; instruction and mentoring must accompany the new law if it is to be practiced effectively. Further, the standards are being developed in a top-down manner; it is questionable to what extent the professional standards will be adopted with greater participation of all stakeholders. At the same time, it must be noted that the new practices, along with the theory on which they are based, are Western-oriented and thus have the potential for being inappropriately applied in the non-Western context. Therefore, it will be important to watch the future implementation strategies, including how new knowledge and skills are taught as well as how they are practiced by school principals themselves.

2- Implementation of comprehensive competence-based school principals appointment system

Regarding school principal appointment, the current four-step process is guided by the Regulations on School Appointment and Replacement in General Education Institutions of March 2016 (MOE, 2016). Recruitment and selection procedures start with a public announcement, followed by online submission of relevant application documents. Applicants must have, at a minimum, university education and five years of professional pedagogical or management expertise. (If the applicant has completed a university program in education management and leadership, three years of professional expertise is acceptable.) The ministerial team considers the application and if it meets all the requirements, the candidate is asked to take an exam consisting of a standardized multiple choice test (80 points) and a written essay (20 points), for a maximum score of 100. Applicants are required to answer 40 test items identifying their knowledge and skills in labor and education legislation (40 points), school management and finance (20 points), and statistics including a highlighted

² It is important to note that « international best practices » here in reality refers to « Western best practices » as documented in the largely Anglo-American literature on educational leadership.

topic related to the application of quantitative analysis of school data (20 points). The last stage is an interview administered by the Ministry of Education commission. School principal selection and appointments (and dismissals) are made by the Ministry of Education, with no role for regional or municipal educational authorities in any stage of the process. In period from 2014 to 2017 more than 2 200 applications were registered and 400 of them took part in the trainings funded by MOE. The chart below shows the number of trained nominees who were appointed as principals of schools located in capital city³.

Chart 1. Number of appointed school principals

As it seen from the chart in comparison with previous year in 2017/2018 school year the number of aspiring for school principals sharply declined. This decline might be explained by some challenges facing newly school principals appointed school in real school life. "In the beginning of our initiative (the procedures for school principals appointment and replacement, 2014 -EK) there was a some "euphoria" among school communities. People were excited by open merit based approach in school principal appointment and motivated to take part in the clear transparent selection process. Then some disillusion caused by school realities." (MOE official, personal communication 27 November December 2017). Therefore, newly appointed school leaders were challenged by lacking of ongoing support within and in schools with authoritative culture.

Advantages of new appointment system

The systemization of the recruitment process exemplifies the Ministry's efforts to develop school principalship policy that is transparent and accountable, with a selection system based on clearly established knowledge and skills requirements. In other words, a merit-based selection model has been introduced. Also, the new recruitment process has a strong impact on the motivation of school principals to invest time in professional development.

Disadvantages of new appointment system

The national education law does not clearly identify the role of families and community in school functioning and does not give decision-making power to the community in school management; if community members and families are displeased with a school principal they are powerless to effect change. Further, there persists a lack of community trust of school administration and a lack of well-developed administrative resources (Mikayilova, 2008). As well, because instructional leadership is not a widespread approach, awards and punishments still constitute the main motivational tools used by school principals. This brings into question the types of knowledge and skills currently measured and prioritized by the Ministry during the appointment selection process.

3- Outsourcing of training programs for aspiring school principals

Since 2013, the government has outsourced school management and leadership training activities to numerous governmental and non-governmental institutions. A broad range

³ The new procedures on school principals appointment and replacement were applied in Baku schools only.

of providers are represented by higher education institutions and private educational organizations applying various teaching methodologies in school leadership training outlined in accordance with above-mentioned school management areas.

Providers of school management and leadership are becoming prominent, significant actors in the area of professional development for school principals; we will summarize the content and approach of programs to which we have access and will provide an overall analysis of training provision as it exists currently.

The primary universities offering training for educational leaders include Khazar University, Qafqaz University, State Economics University (SEU) and the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (ADA). In addition to universities, several independent organizations, such as the Azerbaijan Teacher Development Centre (ATDC), also offer training for school principals.

Khazar University

Khazar University offer the program consisting of 7 modules that take place 12 weeks and comprise 128 hours. The program includes the following courses:

- Education management
- Curriculum implementation and management
- Information and Communication Technologies
- Education Law
- Education Finance
- Psychometrics
- Educational psychology
- Statistics⁴

State Economics University

The SEU has provided a leadership preparation program that takes place over three months and comprises 180 hours. The following courses are taught:

- Education quality management
- Education legislation
- ICT & learning technologies
- Statistics and qualitative methods
- Educational leadership
- Educational psychology and personal development
- Curriculum: theory and applications
- Education finance
- School community and support for community relationships

⁴ This course is mostly about “Quantitative methods in education “

Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy

A relatively new institution, the ADA was founded in 2006 and granted university status by the Ministry of Education in 2014. ADA defines its comparative advantage in the fields of diplomacy and international affairs, public policy, business administration, information technology and engineering, as well as teaching excellence, education leadership and administration. The ADA's newly established School of Education aims to enhance a model education system, structure, governance and pedagogy and then share that model nationally. The school "aspires to become not only a national resource for preparing a new generation of educational leaders and high-quality teachers to serve as advocates for change in teaching, management, and policy-making in education, but also a local and global resource for research in education and educational policy that would help to identify the latest and most innovative trends in education, as well as bridge these trends and their practice with research and policy" (Kazdal, 2017).

The program consists of 90 credits. Students study for two years, taking three courses (18 credits) each semester and one course during the summer session. Instructors use pedagogies such as problem-based learning, case study analysis and collaborative team tasks and all students are required to complete a practice internship. The course content covers the following areas:

- Understanding oneself as a leader through self-awareness and reflection
- Leading and managing organizational change
- Creating conditions for talent development and high performance
- Supporting organizational learning and learning communities
- Innovating through entrepreneurial thinking and action
- Using inquiry and data for continuous improvement
- Directing supervision and evaluation systems
- Managing and allocating resources

Azerbaijan Teacher Development Centre (ATDC)

The ATDC offers several programs including an "Emerging Leaders" series of six training sessions (9 hours) examining the values underpinning effective leadership, a "Strategic Planning" course, and other webinars and trainings for educational leaders. The program(s) are often designed jointly by international scholars and national experts. In 2017 they are providing a "Principal's Leadership Institute" – a year-long program designed to provide mentoring and support for school principals.

Analysis of leadership preparation outsourcing

The program developed by the first three universities partnering with MOE integrates academic experience in business and administration management to curriculum for school managers and has diverse teaching approaches and topics. The training certificate from partner-universities was recognized by the Ministry of Education and there was partial state funding which allows for free tuition fees for candidates selected among winners of a Ministry competition. However, the content and teaching practice are influenced by summative assessment that is organized in a form of multiple choice test exam that affecting reflective learners motivation. Training participants were mostly focused on memorizing the information about state policy in education and relevant legislation documents, school management, school finance and statistics rather reflecting and developing personal leadership capacity to sustain effective school governance.

Since 2015 as MOE completed a pilot project on school principals professional development, the funding for tuition free training provision were ended. Currently Khazar University continues the training provision for aspiring school principals at their own expenses.

The approach of the ADA focuses on reflective learning (case studies, inquiry projects, research based assignments) with strong emphasis on leadership capacity development accompanied with hands-on practice. However, English is the language of instruction so many students are not able to meet language expectations; as a paid education program, it is expensive, so most of candidates from ordinary school cannot afford the tuition fees.

The ATDC program(s) include relevant, contextualized content, and follow-up individual support is offered. However, the programs are expensive so most of candidates from ordinary school cannot afford the tuition fee; the training program is not certified yet.

The government was expecting to build capacity in this new field, and the first three university providers were selected and appointed by the Ministry of Education as partner-organizations for the new school principal project. The government applied this new approach, having been inspired by the decentralization model borrowed from previous international education projects. In general, benefits have included more resources being allocated to policy strategy developments as well as increased support to non-state actors which ensures diversity of approaches and some market competition. In contrast to these clear benefits, constraints are also present, such as the lack of professional standards, uniform preparation content, and qualification of instructors in the educational leadership programs.

Conclusion

Prior to 2013, there were very few efforts to prepare effective educational leaders in Azerbaijan. However, much like many other countries around the world (Magno, 2013), interest in the need for special training for school principals has become a priority for the Azerbaijani government and the Ministry of Education. Implementing post-2013 policy changes has brought several opportunities and challenges to the education sector.

Reform efforts since 2014 have brought new opportunities for school principals – both those in position and teachers aspiring to become principals – to be trained in skills and knowledge specifically related to the effective leadership of schools. Such leadership includes cooperative governance along with various stakeholders such as government representatives, community members, parents, and of course teachers and students. It also includes administrative competence and, above all, expertise in assisting all teachers to continually improve teaching and learning across the school system. The government has opened the training offerings to a variety of institutions, giving prospective students several program choices. A related change, and one that incentivizes aspiring principals to take part in training, is the reform of principal selection and appointment procedures, which now require demonstration of certain knowledge and skills in order to be considered for a principal position.

Alongside the opportunities are five main challenges. The first is related to the format and consistency of school principals preparation and training. Most professional development programs on school management are designed in a form of training courses without follow up activities. There is a need for school principal professionalization with more **clarity of criteria and standards** across programs. Also, there is a lack of systemic professional support that involves **school-based mentorship and coaching** after completion of training courses or programs. In 2017, the Ministry of Education has started revising school principal selection procedures including mentoring support in order to strengthen the school-based support of newly appointed school principals, but this has not yet started in practice. A third challenge results from a mismatch between program pedagogy and the Ministry's selection and appointment requirements. The content and teaching methodology applied in the various professional development programs tend to be student-centered and reflection-oriented, while the Ministry's assessment that takes the form of a multiple choice test exam. Although the Ministry's attempt to make selection and appointment more transparent should be applauded, the test does not encourage the application of **critical, reflective learning**. Training participants therefore become more focused on memorizing information about state policy in education and relevant legislation documents, school management, school finance and statistics rather reflecting and developing personal leadership capacity to sustain effective school governance and transformation. A fourth challenge is the cost of some of the available programs. They are simply too expensive for many aspiring and sitting principals, so in order to increase attendance, **cost must be reduced or subsidized** in some way. Lastly, while there might be a few online offers from various programs, in general there is **limited access** to training programs for all – especially rural – principals.

Over the coming decades, it will be important to watch how Western dominance of theory and practice affects school principal training and practice in Azerbaijan. For example, will there be a shift toward increasing instructional leadership or remain focused on distributed leadership? It will also be critical to monitor the efforts of the government in overcoming the challenges listed above.

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