Leadership in education: interaction of policies, schools and community

NEPC Conference *Primary Colours of Education #3 - School Leadership matters* is a natural continuation of the past three year's strategical exploration of the topic.

NEPC has been exploring school leadership directly through its two recent studies on school governance (Gabršček, 2016; Lenskaya, 2017). Studies show the great power and important role school principles have on school governance level, as well as a lack of professional support available to them in some countries and the tendency to confuse leadership with management - not only by school leaders and school staff but in, some cases, by policymakers.

From these premises, the conference aimed to point out some of the policies, practices, and concrete case examples that can better support effective yet inclusive leadership in our schools.

The political context matters!

It was remarked that the social and political context in which the educational system operates makes all the difference. In some countries, school leader is seen more as a function (job description that happened to someone?), rather than a personality trait, a passion to manage and lead and be visionary. Nonetheless, according to several experts, what works in one context is not necessarily and directly replicable in another, and the "travelling" pattern of good practices do not always follow the traditional divisions "north – south"/"west-east", as one of the key messages of the conference was that actually all societies and systems are facing same, or pretty similar, issues and challenges. Exchanges, confrontations and flux of information should be mutual and a multi-way process.

How to reinforce and support school leadership?

Contributors and participants proposed their various approaches to the school leadership(s) support and reinforcement. Some emphasised the importance of teacher leadership, as the teaching body is the first and most direct contact with the students. Others stressed the importance of distributive leaders/distribute leaderships and its different implications, as research points to correlation with

school effectiveness, as well as the possibilities made possible through ever-changing digitization processes that affect interactions, communication, collaboration and innovation in schools and among schools and relevant institutions. However, new buzzwords and trends preferred by donor policies or educational policies should not overshadow what should lies at the heart of every teacher, educational practitioner or educational policymaker: humanist value-based education. The lack of ethical and integrity component of school organization was also highlighted as a factor that can prevent the rise of appropriate leadership.

The next step for NEPC network

Considering these aspects, from NEPC's point of view, it is important to clearly identify what school leadership means to the network and what it should or would like to emphasise regarding inclusive, distributed, effective and participatory leadership. A study on academic terminology of school leadership could be a useful tool to plan future investigating actions in this direction.

The "making of" school leaders across (orga)n(iz)ational borders

"We would like to believe that school leaders are made and not born", Professor Cathryn Magno said during her introductory lecture. To do so, it is important to implement recognized and effective school leadership programs and to find a way to influence the policy-making level. The comparative approach is seen as crucial, and the networks are considered a useful tool to build up and exercise the advocacy capacity at all levels. They could also be an important way of "federalisation" of certain sensitive issues across countries, in order to obtain a stronger resonance, especially in the case of partners and organizations operating in complex environments.

The school at heart of the community

As NEPC program advisor Aleesha Taylor reaffirmed, "education is a political process" and, in this regard, a possible key factor could be represented by the importance of mutual connection between schools and communities. "The first place where you have the feeling that society changed is school", commented Mario Bajkuša, president of NEPC Governing Board. Perhaps, it works in the opposite direction as well: changing the education systems could be the first and preferential direction to affect the society, as proposed by Batjargal Batkhuyag, executive director of the Mongolian Education Alliance: "The school should be the centre of community development".