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How Macedonian educational context supports leadership role of elementary school teachers

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Abstract

This paper deals with the problem of leaders and leadership in the educational context, particularly the leadership role of primary school teachers. Albeit we do not doubt that leadership is an essential teacher quality, a claim which is elaborated in this paper, nevertheless, it is beneficial to discuss the problem taking into consideration scientifically proven facts, as follows: the role of the teacher impacts the success/failure of any reform in the educational sector, the democratization of the educational environment, the success of the students, the professional development of teachers and their self-confirmation. This paper presents our analyses of the legal and sub-legal legislation regulating primary school education in the Republic of Macedonia. The purpose of the analyses is to scan the legislation for requirements which apply to leaders in the educational context. In order to confirm our hypothesis that teachers play a key role in the development process of school organization, we have analyzed the development plans and other pedagogical documentation of twenty-four primary schools.

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1. Introduction

If now, at this particular moment, we assign our society the epithet of being modern, it means that we think of its ability to monitor and participate in the production of global technological and scientific growth. In such a context, primary school is still an institution in which the world's knowledge and experience are transmitted in a most massive, organized, economical and most systemized manner and human capital able to continue to learn how to maintain society in a constant condition of modernity is produced. Taking into account the evidence of the teacher's key contribution in realizing educational work in school and, consequently, in the quality of educational outcomes, we should not be suspicious of the need to continuously enrich the repertoire of his/her professional roles. In this respect modern pedagogical science confirms more exactly that modern teachers, besides having excellent knowledge of the subject/subjects they teach and knowledge related to didactic-methodical shaping of teaching, should also develop competences to actively participate in the developing processes of school organization. Teachers as professionals daily perform complex tasks. If we analyze the regulations with which states regulate education as a sphere of social activity, it will be recognized that the teaching professional engagement refers to: planning, organizing, leading, mentoring, recording, evaluating, cooperation, analyzing, data collection, and processing. All these work activities involve the establishment of interactions with various entities within the

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institution, outside the institution, relating to the application, dissemination and processing of information, as well as analytical and research work that is directly related to the fulfillment of the functions of the school. Additionally, if we consider the European principles for teacher competences and qualifications, the quality of teacher competence can no longer be measured only through their knowledge, understanding, abilities, and skills necessary for quality teaching. Competent execution of all planned tasks will certainly depend on their leadership knowledge, skills and abilities. Teacher leadership is a pedagogical phenomenon which should be recognized as a factor that has a significant impact on the quality of relationships in school, work in the classroom and the school as a whole, as well as an opportunity for teachers' continuous professional development.

2. Leadership, teaching profession, benefits and perspectives

Leadership as a concept first started to be used in the field of politics and business, and, in the last thirty years, in education. Chemers (2002) defines leadership as a process of social influence in which one person wins the support of other people in order to accomplish a common task. In this context, teachers as pedagogical authority exercise social interaction with their students, colleagues, parents, individuals and groups from the local community. The analysis of a number of definitions and debates (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001; Goddard, RD & Goddard, YL, 2001; Donaldson, 2006) suggests several features of leadership that define this process, activity, role and relationship:

- Leadership is a relationship between an individual and a group
- Leadership presupposes the existence of a leader/person who possesses specific knowledge, skills and abilities.
- Leadership presupposes the existence of a group that will work to achieve common goals.
- Leadership requires the identification of desired changes in order to reach the set vision.
- Leadership is demonstrated in specific situations.
- No matter how much we would like to do that, leadership cannot be separated from power and authority
- Leadership prefers to establish a spirit of trust and mutual respect, as well as arguments used to defend one's attitudes.

Hence teamwork as a determinant of successful school is impossible to realize without teacher leaders, and, consequently, developmental changes and school reform cannot be expected.

The latest research in the field of school education indicates that the authority of the leader need not be concentrated solely in the person of the formal leader/headmaster but it can be split inside school, among employees. In school practice the tendency to abandon the idea of "singular" leadership and the acceptance of the idea of teacher leadership based on the principles of participatory and distributed decision-making becomes increasingly more expressed.

Leadership activities actually arise from formally prescribed legal and secondary legislation under which teachers are required to realize educational work which in turn is based on the principle of pedagogical autonomy for decision-making in planning, organization and delivery of teaching, and to participate in the development processes of school. Thus schools need teachers who undoubtedly know and are able to lead outside of their classrooms, and to contribute to their professional community.

In its essence the teaching profession has a leadership dimension. If leaders are people who are lifelong learners, who possess competence for planning, organizing, conducting, evaluating, motivating and co-operating, we can freely establish an equation between pedagogical activity and leadership.

As early as in the fifties of the XX century research of teacher leadership started to be conducted in the United States. The results reveal that teachers who have had the opportunity to participate in decision making at school level demonstrate greater satisfaction from their work. The incentive for teacher's working morale and enthusiasm is proposed as a key argument for the necessity of teachers' participation in decision making and leadership in school. After thirty years, as a result of positive effects of teacher participation, this idea was developed in the strategy for improving teaching. According to Duke (Duke, 2005), participatory decision-making is one of the most important aspects of teacher leadership in school. (Petrovska Sonja, 2010, p. 131)

Manguin's research (2005) dedicated to teacher leadership shows that interaction with fellow teachers (teachers / leaders) is estimated as very useful in terms of: developing new ideas and techniques in the teaching

process, and saving time in the teaching planning process. Teachers indicated the help in the realization of teaching and performing experimental lessons as most useful activities. (Pavlovic Branka, 2008, p. 398)

Increasing school effectiveness and efficiency implies a positive change in any of its area of operation. Given the existential complexity of school organizations, the appearance of discrepancy between teachers' individual visions for development and visions offered by managers is inevitable. Thus, many organizational changes often create pressure, resulting in a refusal to be accepted by the members (Callan, 1993). (Petrovska Sonja, 2010, p. 132). One of the ways that can help in dealing with the pressures caused by organizational change is creating conditions for the involvement of teachers in decision-making. Integrated results of researching several programs for school improvement in this regard indicate this (Hopkins, 2001). According to them, one of the ten principles which each school improvement process should be based on is the participation of teachers in decision making. This participation in decision-making has a positive impact on teachers' attitudes towards work. Somech and Bogler (2002) showed that the teachers who participated in school decision-making have increased organizational commitment and civil behavior. Participation facilitates the process of introducing changes through increased engagement of those involved in the implementation of decisions. In fact, in this way job satisfaction can be increased, acquisition of new skills (leadership) by teachers can be ensured, as well as positive evaluation of changes that need to occur in the school framework. (Martin, L. & Kragler, S., 1999)

3. Methodological approach

How does the Macedonian educational context support the leadership role of teachers - is the fundamental question that we tried to answer. The subject of the research is the Macedonian educational context[†]. According to the theoretical analysis of the benefits of teacher leadership and links between the teaching profession and leadership, the aim of this study is to analyze the requirements needed to carry out the leadership role of teachers contained in state documents and the need to establish a teacher's leadership role expressed in school documents.

Analytical-descriptive method was used through analyzing the legal and pedagogical documentation and records (educational context). Qualitative analysis was performed based on previously prepared matrix of records in the following categories:

- Legal requirements with defined teachers' tasks; (Law on Primary Education of the Republic of Macedonia)
- Weaknesses and strengths in the school's work;
- Priority areas for change, developmental goals and activities

Sample: except for the law analysis is implemented on 24 developmental plans of schools in urban environments with approximately same characteristics in terms of size, age of the teaching staff, material and technical equipment.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Primary Education Act, 2008 - consolidated text, 2012 ([http // mon.gov.mk](http://mon.gov.mk))

Although no research data that describe the situation in Macedonian schools regarding the level of development of the leadership role of teachers, the Law on Primary Education in some cases explicitly and in some cases implicitly, determines the leadership position of the teacher in school. According to the Law on Primary Education the school principal has the official/ formal leadership position. Within the prescribed competences the principal is responsible for the school's compliance with the legality of the state and the successful implementation of the educational activity. The principal has responsibilities in the area of planning and programming of the school's work, in the field of quality assurance and improvement of educational work, in the conduct of personnel

[†] The educational context has been studied through the analysis of the Law on Primary Education of the Republic of Macedonia, 2008, and school developmental plans.

and financial policies, as well as in the area of presentation and promotion of the school in the environment. (Articles 128, 129, 130).

Working duties of a teacher are in the function of achieving the set goals of primary education in the Republic of Macedonia and are structured in several areas: teaching, extra-curricular activities for students, collaboration with parents and social environment, collaboration with the principal, collaboration with professionals and working in teams (formal and informal) which are formed in school institutions. Teachers perform most of the legally prescribed duties in teams in which they are leaders. According to such a position, the successful performance of their duties will naturally depend on their leadership competences. If in turn the ultimate goal is the creation of a school environment in which every child learns and achieves results in accordance with his/her individual capacity, then the link between teacher leadership and success in any school is obvious.

Teachers in the Republic of Macedonia have the opportunity to manifest their leadership competences in several areas of school life: mentoring teacher trainees and students of teachers colleges (Article 86), leadership of professional associations (Article 144) as formal vocational school authorities responsible for promoting educational process on specific subjects or for students of the same age, project leaders in school terms, school board presidents[‡] (formal school governing bodies) (Article 124). Within these areas, teachers are leaders of groups who make decisions or participate in decision-making regarding the creation of developmental plans and annual work programs of the school, they decide on the financial operations of the school, and they have the opportunity to participate in the creation of personnel policies of the organization.

The analysis of teacher leadership positions in accordance with the legal provisions found that out of 24 schools in 21 schools the school board presidents are teachers, in two schools they are parents, and in one school it is a professional associate – pedagogue. Of the total 46 teachers who work with children aged 6 -11 (primary school) 15 teachers are presidents/leaders of professional associations[§], and 20 are mentors to teacher trainees.

4.2. Developmental plans

- Weak and strong aspects in the working of the school;
- Priority areas for changes, developmental goals and activities.

The analysis of 24 schools showed that in developmental plans in 18 schools short comings were detected in the area of School culture, in terms of lack of interest and willingness of teachers to work in teams. However, in three schools only the area of School Culture is set as a priority area for change, and Promotion of Teamwork in School is set as a developmental goal. On the other hand in the area of Teaching, goals are set that point to a diagnosed need for training teachers to integrate ICT in their teaching, and activities are mainly carried out by teams of teachers who have already acquired knowledge and experience in this field. In all 24 schools teams managed by the teacher are formed for achieving developmental goals. Mainly these are teams for implementation of project activities in order to achieve goals related to environmental and civic education, self-evaluation teams and teams to create activities associated with the area - Collaboration with the family and local community. So, our schools function in a paradoxical situation which undoubtedly leads to a reduction in the quality of school education. The analysis explicitly shows that schools are in need of team organization; they are formed in order to achieve goals in different areas that are important for the quality, but real will, willingness, and consequently, the knowledge and skills for team action are almost non-existent. None of the developmental plan has a goal that presupposes the development of leadership skills of teachers and the development of skills and abilities for working in teams.

[‡] School board – management body composed of nine members [three teachers or professional associates, 3 parents, 2 representatives of the founder (local government) and 1 of the MES of RM]

[§] Professional associations of the school align the criteria for planning teaching and assessing student achievement, give suggestions to school teachers' boards for improving educational work, decide which textbooks are to be used in primary school, discuss parents' and students' remarks, and perform other professional activities determined by the school's annual program of work.

5. Conclusion

Horizontal system of governance and decentralization in primary and secondary education in our country created the formal conditions for the participation of teachers in management and running of schools. Despite the legal possibilities for the development of teacher leadership, practice shows that although an important resource it is used very little, or, when used, it has a formal rather than a substantive character. However, the very fact that schools provide an opportunity for team work gives hope that the idea and practice of teacher's individualistic position is being abandoned – the one of a passive and solitary implementer of the curriculum, closed in his/her classroom, and the need for building creative professionals and leaders in their surroundings is being recognized..

For this reason, the principals must introduce radical changes in school organization, in terms of introducing participatory and distributed leadership. Schools must not be placed in the mold of bureaucratic management, and the pyramid has to be nullified and the principle of decision-making from the "bottom" should be introduced. After all, the criteria for effective and efficient school require this. Students are in the focus, and around them the interests of parents, teachers and society are intertwined.

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