Beyond Uniformity: on School Leadership Policy Development in Europe

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Abstract

The paper draws from the work conducted in the context of the European Policy Network on School Leadership (EPNoSL). Based on an in-depth review of the literature, on research conducted by the EPNoSL partners, on the discourse that took place in on-line seminars and forums and in national workshops and Peer Learning Activities, it identifies critical policy goals for the promotion of school leadership under the scope of equity and learning in school systems across EU. In particular, the paper analyses in depth policies that can create an enabling school leadership environment, focusing on school autonomy, accountability, and distributed leadership.

1. Introduction

The major challenge to strenghten collaboration in policy-making on school leadership in EU is posed by the high diversity of school systems, even within a single country. Diversity is evidenced in the governance structures between school systems (centralisation-decentralisation) and within school education levels, between school learning and leadership traditions (e.g. Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, Latin etc.), between types of school programmes (general, academic, comprehensive etc.), between types of school maintainers/owners or in the size and location of schools. Diversity is also evidenced among pupils in terms of their socio-economic, cultural and linguistic bakground. All these have important implications on different stakeholders' expectations from school leadership and on the ways school leadership is practiced in schools.

Given the above, the European Policy Network on School Leadership (EPNoSL) engaged, representatives of at least 12 ministries of education in Europe, a wide range of organizations, academics and researchers in the field, and national and international associations of school leaders and parents, in a pluralistic, dynamic and reflective policy discourse aiming to promote policy collaboration and networking and facilitate policy planning and implementation on school leadership across Europe. In this context, it utilised a series of transversal activities, involving state-of-the-art expert reviews and theory-building papers [1], knowledge sharing and networking [2], empirical research [3], and international Peer Learning Activities and national level workshops and conferences [3] [4]. In the following chapters briefly are presented some main issues around which a strong consensus was reached.

2. School leadership policy development: autonomy, distributed leadership & accountability

How school leadership is understood shapes school leadership policies as well as the ways school-level actors will engage in it. The EPNoSL project considers school leadership as a multi-faceted process of strategically using the unique skills and knowledge of teachers, pupils, and parents, toward achieving common educational goals. School leadership therefore coveys dynamism and pro-activity and is not restricted to school heads but also includes other individuals in the school communities who play a leading role.

School leadership should be viewed from the perspective of equity and learning which constitute the most critical challenges leadership in European schools has to address effectively. Other perspectives, such as managerial or administrative ones are, or should, essentially be framed within

the wider discourse on how school leaders can utilise them to promote equity and learning in schools. Equity in education can be understood through two closely intertwined dimensions: fairness and inclusion [5]. The equity perspective in school leadership, although critical, it is often largely ignored because of the misleading assumption, often made in the educational leadership and management discourse, that policy makers or family/society factors are predominatly those that are generating and maintaining inequality in schools. However, it is important to recognise that schools also play a part in creating, maintaining or increasing inequality [6]. Regarding the perspective of learning, there is little evidence indicating a direct relationship between school leaders' dispositions and practices and pupils' learning achievement (see, e.g., [7] [8]) or teachers' practices, beliefs and attitudes [9], given also the important methodological challenges related to the isolation of the impact of school leaders from other contributing factors [10][11]. Leaders contribute to pupils' learning mostly indirectly, by their decisions and daily practices that affect organisational-cultural, professional and pedagogic aspects of school life, and school leadership is considered to be second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning [12][13].

Based on the above, the EPNoSL project suggests that the three most critical school leadership policy goals for all school systems in EU to achieve are:

(i) The promotion of an enabling school leadership environment.

(ii) The promotion of professional standards, evaluation and research on school leadership for equity and learning.

(iii) School leadership capacity building for equity and learning.

In particular, the promotion of an enabling school leadership environment provides the ground upon which school leaders can address effectively challenges of equity and learning performance. This policy goal can be achieved through policy-making targeting:

(i) School autonomy for equity and learning.

(ii) Distributed leadership for equity and learning.

(iii) School accountability for equity and learning.

School autonomy becomes a critical policy action for equity goals, as decreasing educational inequities within and amongst schools requires a vast array of initiatives that redress the entire range of discriminatory and exclusionary practices that are produced and re-produced within the school environment. Policy making regarding school autonomy should ensure that schools have enough room for manoeuvre to take their own management decisions and to deal with concrete school needs in relation equity and learning, and that constrains from the outside - and inside - are reduced to the necessary and legitimate frames, values and norms [14]. Policies for the promotion of school autonomy should specify in what decision-making areas autonomy has to be widened (or even narrowed down), for which purposes it is granted, and what should be the appropriate mechanisms (accountability systems, frameworks, standards) through which autonomy can be controlled or counterbalanced. In principle, policy makers need to ensure that policies on school autonomy are based on trust in the professionalism of school leaders and on mutual understanding. This is because policies that grant more autonomy to schools and in parallel promote an over-regulated accountability system can be detrimental to the room for manoeuvre that school leaders actually have to promote equity and learning. Among the implications of policies that widen school autonomy is that the work of school leaders becomes more demanding and complex. Therefore, reforms that introduce more decision-making powers at school level should be accompanied by targeted professional development opportunities for school leaders and changes in the curricula of programmes that prepare future school leaders. Finally, the pace with which reforms that grand more autonomy to schools are introduced, is a critical factor in their implementation. Particularly in traditionally centralised systems, changes in the governance of schools should be introduced in a gradual manner so that they become more capable to cope with their new tasks and responsibilities.

Distributed school leadership has also been identified as a key policy strategy for improving the quality of education [15] [16]. It is considered as a culture that views leadership as emerging from ongoing flows of interactions across the organisation and its hierarchy, not simply from the actions of the top school manager or a formal leadership team, and values leadership contributions from across the

school and its hierarchy. Policy making should ensure that leadership opportunities enable different sources of expertise and perspectives to influence the school's work, facilitates flexible, collaborative working relationships across traditional boundaries and hierarchies, and creates flatter hierarchies [17]. Deepening distributed leadership for attaining equity and learning goals should become part of a wider strategy based on the notion that democratic decision-making can be more effective in meeting the local needs of disadvantaged groups of students as well as empowering staff and students engage in the operation of their school. Distributed leadership requires respect for both autonomy (individual views, professionalism, creativity and needs) and authority (school purpose, goals, values and structures), which means school members helping to shape schools' educational purpose, values, etc. as well as working within these. Helping distributed leadership to be fair and of benefit to the learning of all requires it to be guided by a broad concept of social justice that encourages schools to ask critical questions about involvement (participative justice), respect (cultural justice), learning (developmental justice) and resources (distributive justice) [18].

School autonomy and the distribution of leadership, in their turn, reinforce the need for accountability systems [19]. The policy debate around accountability has not been settled in Europe, with many divergent approaches currently in operation [20], based on the market logic, the managerial logic, the public logic, the professional logic or the ethical logic [21]. Among them, the managerial logic has underpinned many education reforms related to accountability [22] and in parallel has been strongly criticised on the grounds that it places too much emphasis on measurable outcomes, thus failing to reflect the full purposes and goals for which schools and school leaders should be held accountable [23]. Policy solutions should take into account that while governments are responsible for the overall quality of education and therefore they need to steer and control schools, schools are responsible for the quality of education provided to the children of specific local communities and families and therefore they have also to ensure that the legitimacy of their decisions and practices, their fairness, inclusiveness and quality, are also recognised and valued by the local communities they serve. Finally, school accountability policies to be efficient require supportive policy measures such as the provision of adequate training and open access to data that can promote evidence-based school leadership practices.

3. Conclusions

A comprehensive and coherent approach to policy development is critical. This is because policy decisions affecting school leadership in one area, such as reforms that introduce more autonomy to schools in, for example, choosing learning content or managing resourses, can have multiple implications in others. Policy decisions create new realities that in turn pose new challenges for policy making. Threfore, it is importnant to analyze the ways that different school leadership policies interplay and influence the overall capacity of school leaders and their schools to address equity and learning challenges in their schools. A basic policy lesson learned is that there is no unique road to policy development. There are different ways through which EU countries can address issues of school autonomy, distributed leadership and accountability to achieve an advanced level of school leadership policy development.

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