Redefining School Leadership Responsibilities

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Abstract: This paper attempts to bring together theory and practice to provide recommendations for education stakeholders to clarify the core responsibilities of school leadership. School leaders can only make a difference if they have autonomy and support to make significant decisions and if their responsibilities are well defined. The paper presents evidence on the specific leadership roles that can positively influence teaching and learning and argues that school leadership responsibilities should be redefined to focus on teaching quality goal setting and implementing intelligent assessment systems, strategic resource management and collaboration with external partners. It looks at ways in which leadership definitions or frameworks can be designed and improved to support recruitment, training and evaluation of school leaders.

Keywords: School leadership, redefining, stakeholders, responsibilities, autonomy

INTRODUCTION

School leadership can make a difference in student outcomes by creating the right environment for teachers to improve classroom practice and student learning. Research evidence shows that there are specific leadership roles that have greater influence on teaching and learning than others. In practice, however, school leaders can only have an impact on student outcomes if they have enough autonomy and support to make important decisions and if their major responsibilities are well-defined and focused on teaching and learning [1].

The definition of core leadership responsibilities needs to be guided by research on the leadership practices most likely to improve teaching and learning as well as by specific country needs and challenges. In many countries, there is a lack of clarity about the core tasks school leaders should dedicate their time to. Improved definitions of core leadership responsibilities can provide a firm foundation for the profession and constitute a key point of reference both for those who consider entering the profession and for those who are in charge of recruiting, training and evaluating them [2].

Improving definition of school leadership responsibilities

The analysis of practice has shown that in increasingly decentralised and accountability-driven environments school leaders take on a much broader set of tasks than a decade ago. In many countries, school leaders report high levels of stress, role overload and uncertainty because many of these new responsibilities of school leadership are not explicitly accounted for in their job descriptions. In many settings, definitions or frameworks for school leadership are not explicitly focused on practices to improve teaching and learning but rather on the traditional tasks of head teacher or bureaucratic administrator.

For school leaders to perform at high levels, it seems essential that their responsibilities be well defined and expectations be clearly spelled out. Some countries have therefore engaged in the development of leadership frameworks, or standards, for the profession. Such frameworks serve to define the nature and scope of school leadership and the types of responsibilities leaders are expected to fulfil. According the review of research on leadership standards by Ingvarson *et al*. [3], school leadership frameworks are important for at least three reasons.

First, such frameworks are a way of setting boundaries and making it clear what school leadership does not include. Leadership frameworks provide a firm foundation for the profession and they can constitute a key point of reference both for those who consider entering the profession and for those who are in charge of recruiting them.

Second, frameworks defining the wide range of leadership tasks at school level make it clear that certain conditions need to be in place for school leaders to be able to perform effectively. For example, frameworks can be a crucial basis to improve the relevance and effectiveness of professional training and development provided to school leaders. They can be a starting point for the design of improved and consistent professional preparation and development.

Third, frameworks for school leadership provide a reference to evaluate its effectiveness. Unless responsibilities are defined in a clearly confined and feasible way, it is impossible to evaluate leadership quality. Frameworks can serve leaders themselves in guiding their learning and evaluating their progress and/or they can help employing authorities in managing performance and assessing whether school leaders fulfil their contractual duties.

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Leadership frameworks or standards can be developed with varying involvement of the profession. In the Netherlands, for example, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders in Primary Education (2005) were established by an independent professional body initiated by the Minister of Education, while in England the government commissioned the responsibility of developing and implementing National Standards for Head teachers (2004) to two non-departmental public agencies (the Training and Development Agency and the National College for School Leadership) and in Scotland it was the devolved government (Scottish Executive) that had responsibility for the development and review of their Standards for Headship [3].

While standards provide common ground by which people can perform and evaluate performance, they do give rise to some concerns. If too prescriptive and detailed, they can contribute to increasing "intensification" of the school leader's role and discourage practitioners [3]. Critics in the United States fault them for perpetuating dominant conceptions of power (English, 2000). Still, it is vital that they provide definitions of school leadership roles that contribute to improve school outcomes.

Summary conclusion and recommendations

Research has shown that school leaders can make a difference in school and student performance if they are granted autonomy to make important decisions. However, school autonomy alone does not automatically lead to improved leadership unless it is well supported. In addition, it is important that the core responsibilities of school leaders are clearly defined and delimited. The definition of school leadership responsibilities should be guided by an understanding of the leadership dimensions most conducive to improving teaching and learning.

Provide higher degrees of autonomy with appropriate support

While school autonomy seems to be positively correlated with improved learning as measured by international assessments such as PISA, school autonomy alone does not guarantee school improvement. Unless school leaders have the capacity, motivation and support to make use of their autonomy to engage in the practices that are most conducive to improved learning, school autonomy may have little influence on school outcomes.

- Countries where school leaders do not currently hold considerable decision making authority should explore ways to provide to provide greater degrees of autonomy to school leadership, but keep in mind that certain conditions need to be in place for school autonomy to lead to learning-centred leadership.
- Greater degrees of autonomy should be coupled with provisions for new models of more distributed

leadership, new types of accountability and training and development for school leaders.

Redefine school leadership responsibilities for improved student learning

Bearing in mind the need for contextualization, there seems to be ample evidence from research and country practice on which to encourage country, regional and local policy to use evidence on core leadership dimensions as a basis for designing the job descriptions of their future leaders. To this end, there are four broad groups of interrelated leadership responsibilities that have consistently been identified as associated with improved learning outcomes:

Encourage school leaders to support, evaluate and develop teacher quality

Teacher quality is probably the most important school-level determinant of student performance and school leadership focused on improving the motivation, capacities and working environments of teachers is thus most likely to improve student learning. To enhance the capacity of school leadership in supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality, policy makers need to:

- **Strengthen school leader's responsibility in curricular decision making:** so that they can adapt the teaching programme to local needs and ensure coherence across courses and grade levels to achieve school goals and performance standards.
- **Provide training for school leaders in teacher monitoring and evaluation:** either as part of initial training for school leaders or in forms of in-service professional training courses. Ensure that school leaders have the time and capacities necessary to fulfil the core task of teacher evaluation satisfactorily.
- **Enhance the role of school leaders in teacher professional development**: school leaders can ensure that teacher professional development is relevant to the local school context and aligned with overall school improvement goals and with teachers' needs. To enhance school leaders' capacities in developing their staff, policy makers should consider devolving discretion over teacher training and development budgets to the school level.
- **Encourage school leaders to promote teamwork among teachers:** by explicitly recognizing the core role of school leaders in building collaborative cultures and by sharing and disseminating best practice in this domain.

Support goal-setting, assessment and accountability

Goal-setting, assessment and school accountability are key responsibilities of school leaders in most countries. In order to optimize school leaders' use of accountability systems for school improvement processes, policy makers need to ensure that a number of conditions are in place:

- **Provide school leaders with discretion over strategic direction setting:** and enhance their capacity to develop school plans and goals aligned with broader national curriculum standards and responsive to local needs.
- **Promote "data-wise" leadership:** Provide support and training opportunities for school leaders to ensure that hey have the knowledge and skills necessary to monitor progress and use data effectively to improve practice.
- **Encourage school leaders to distribute tasks related to assessment and accountability within schools:** by developing a group of people who are competent and confident in analysing and using data to design appropriate improvement strategies [4].

Enhance strategic financial and human resource management

Effective planning and management of resources can improve school outcomes by strategically aligning resources with pedagogical purposes. It is therefore important to ensure that school leaders are better equipped to make strategic use of resources.

- **Enhance the financial management skills of school leadership teams:** This can be done by providing training in this domain to school leaders, by establishing the role of a bursar or leadership team member with budgeting qualifications at the school level (for larger schools or clusters of small schools) or by providing financial support or services to schools.
- **Involve school leaders in teacher recruitment decisions:** School leaders should be given opportunities to influence decision making on teacher recruitment in order to improve the match between the school and the selected candidate. At the same time, it is important that parallel steps are taken within the system to professionalise school-level recruitment process to avoid an inequitable distribution of teacher quality and to protect teachers' rights [5].

Adopt a systemic approach to leadership policy and practice

Collaboration with partners external to the school is a new leadership dimension that is increasingly recognised as a clear role for school leaders, as it will benefit school systems as a whole rather than just the students of one individual school. For system leadership roles to be effective, policy makers need to ensure that school leaders have the time, capacities, administrative support and tools to become involved in matters beyond their school borders.

- **Develop opportunities for school leaders to cooperate actively with surrounding schools:** and the local community to ensure improved student trajectories, alignment of the curriculum at the local level, coordinated course offerings and sharing of resources.
- **Encourage the distribution of leadership responsibilities within schools:** so that other people can ensure continuity in the core leadership tasks within each individual school while school leaders are engaged in activities beyond the school border.

Develop school leadership frameworks for improved policy and practice

School leadership frameworks can bring needed uniformity by providing a research-based metric for procedures intended to strengthen the field, like preparation and selection. Frameworks can also serve to signal the essential character of school leadership as the provision of leadership for learning. Yet, space for contextualization is important to allow for local and school level criteria. When developing and introducing leadership frameworks, a number of steps should be considered:

- **Build on commitment not compliance [3]:** School leadership frameworks can be developed with varying degrees of involvement by the profession. To make frameworks relevant and ensure they become real guidelines of practice, it is important that representatives from the school leadership profession are involved in their formulation and development.
- **Provide definitions of school leaders' major domains of responsibility:** these domains should be guided by evidence on effective leadership practice.
- **Use frameworks to provide coherence to different domains of school leadership policy:** Frameworks should provide guidance on the main characteristics, tasks and responsibilities of effective school leaders. They can and should thus be used as a basis for recruitment, training and appraisal of school leaders.

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