

Ethical Challenges of Educational Leadership in the Countries of the CIS

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A good manager does things right. A leader does the right things. There are many good managers doing right the wrong things. (Warren Bennis)

There is no school administrators' pre-service training in the CIS (Former USSR) countries. As for the in-service training it has been traditionally focused on educational management. As a result schools in the CIS countries are run as well-oiled machines but there is a big question mark over whether these machines are running in the right directions. Doing things right implies certain beliefs by school administrators about what is "good and bad" in education. However while in their everyday lives educational decision makers are confronted by ethical dilemmas there is little or no attention at all to these issues in the system of their training. There is an assumption that it is an impossible goal to influence and change their values and attitudes.

After some 30 years of continuous attempts to challenge this assumption we should admit that it is indeed a very difficult goal to achieve. Through our research in the '80s (the first in the USSR dissertation on democratic school leadership) and then in the '90s (international exchange projects with the U.S. and EU counterparts) we identified seven ethical dilemmas faced by school administrators in the region. We should admit that not much has changed since then and that responding to these ethical dilemmas is still the key challenge of democratic educational leadership in the CIS countries. These dilemmas are as follows.

1. Focus on meeting each individual student's educational needs versus focus on meeting standardised requirements set by the central authorities.

In traditionally centralized school systems this belief conflicts with the existing leadership and teaching practices where students are expected to meet standardised requirements and where standardised methodologies aimed at an “average” student are applied. The new assumption shifts the focus in training and professional development of school leaders to promoting their expertise in creating educational environment tailored to each individual student needs, interests, and personality. It is not only a student to be blamed for failure to succeed in school but a school leader for failing to create the environment for success of this student.

2. Educational quality versus equity.

Streaming and tracking students based on their abilities and behavior have been the major pedagogical ways of responding to diversity in secondary schools in the CIS region since the '90s.

“Even at the very first stage of education, a differentiated approach is followed in teaching and raising children. This differentiation is essentially achieved by varying the actual teaching process: The syllabus is covered at different speeds for different children; children are given a wide range of options in their subjects and activities; set work is adapted to individual capabilities; classes and groups are streamed on the basis of recommendations by psychologists and medical workers” (Belarus Report Under Article 44 of the Convention On the Rights of the Child). The efforts by the CIS countries to raise education quality by segregating students based on their abilities and promoting “elite” classes and schools conflict with enabling equity in education. It is an important task for school leaders in the countries in transition in each case to find a reasonable balance of quality and equity and to ensure inclusive high quality education for all students. It is also a challenge for the system of school leaders' training and professional development to equip them with corresponding methodologies and skills.

3. Competencies-based approaches versus mastering encyclopedia knowledge.

The focus of education in the CIS countries is still mainly on the mastery of encyclopedia knowledge. However in a world where information is expanding geometrically, mastery is an impossible goal. Instead, each student needs to develop key competencies including the skills to master new information as it is created and a desire for continuous learning. Higher order thinking skills that allows students to evaluate the worth of new ideas should be a major goal of the curriculum. In this respect Russia could serve as an example where a radical curriculum reform aimed at shifting to a competencies-based paradigm started in 2009. However there is a serious concern about the ability and expertise of the currently practicing school leaders and teachers to adopt and use this new paradigm.

4. Focus on individual strengths and interests in socialization of students versus focus on the interests of a group and society.

The socialization of students, the formation of their relations with the surrounding world, should be based on a balance between the best interests of the students and the usefulness of those interests to the society providing the education. This assumption definitely conflicts with the Soviet educational methodology of socialization based on the priority of the group interests over the interests of an individual.

5. High academic pressure versus caring about students' health.

According to the opinions of parents, students, and school administrators in most cases, school leaders in the post-soviet countries are not concerned with students' health problems because of their ignorance and lack of motivation. They strongly object to caring about students' health as their responsibility and to considering it as a parameter of school effectiveness. They would rather blame health care institutions for doing nothing. Some middle schools and especially university oriented high schools advance entrance health requirements that make it possible only for students with very good health enter these schools. High academic pressure in these schools often leads to health problems and initially healthy students have to leave school later as well.

6. "Family" type culture versus a "machine" culture.

The metaphor of a good family should be the basis for school practice. In a good family, each child is loved for who that child is not what they should be. Caring for the individual requires a balance between meeting the requirements for being part of the family and the growth of the individual. In traditionally centralized school systems schools leaders and teachers strongly objects to building a "good family" type of organizational culture in school and to being evaluated by students, parents, and educational authorities based on the criteria of 'caring'. These educators are convinced that any technique is good when dealing with students as long as the technique leads to improved academic achievement. This type of educator expects long term appreciation will be replaced by short term hatred when the student understands that some unpopular means are used for the students' sake.

7. Collaboration versus competition.

In the CIS region competition among students and also teachers is still a driving force for promoting their excellence. This often resulted in a hostile, competitive culture both in students' and teachers' groups. A new challenge for school leaders is to develop an atmosphere of collaboration among students, parents, teachers, and administrators for the common good of each student and the school. This assumption implies that there is enough 'space' for everybody in school to be successful and to be praised. It also implies that success of a particular individual

in school depends on the success of other individuals (group, class, school) so that individuals are motivated to support each other and share in the success of their colleague rather than be successful because of the failure of others. A quality school in this respect is the one which has developed a culture that respects collaboration and co-operation for the common good.

8. Democratic schooling versus authoritarian schooling.

In the CIS countries, an authoritarian, top-down system of school management has been challenged by the process of democratization. The new belief is that all parties that are impacted by the school should have input into the design of the education of that school. The principle of consensus should govern the input of the eight stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, administrators, staff, community, higher education, and government policy makers. The school leader needs to build this consensus by their actions and words. Where consensus conflicts with laws or professional standards, legality and professionalism should be paramount in the decision. While new democratic structures in schools are now in place in all the CIS countries little has changed in real democracy there and much needs to be done in changing the values and attitudes of school administrators as well as in their training on how to enable democratic governance in schools.

All the dilemmas above are interrelated and have implications for the educational leadership development in the CIS countries in transition. It is a challenge for the system of training and professional development of school leaders in these countries to promote corresponding values of school leaders and equip them with leadership and management methodologies that ensure adequate response to these dilemmas.

About the Author

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