LEADING BETTER LEARNING: SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND QUALITY IN THE EDUCATION 2030 AGENDA

REGIONAL REVIEWS OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES

ABSTRACT

I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The current focus on school leadership is the result of a combination of three factors: evidence from research, change and complex expectations about the school system, and the imperative to improve quality. While the last EFA decade has witnessed notable progress in access to education, with most countries achieving universal basic education, a number of international reports and studies, including the GMR, PISA, SACMEQ, PASEC, etc., have raised concerns about the quality of education, particularly in developing countries. To address quality issues, countries have invested in teacher training, learning materials, equipment and facilities, but few have attempted to tap the potential of school leadership as a lever for improving teaching and learning outcomes. Though, the international evidence suggests that successful school leaders can improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their support and influence on teacher/staff motivation, commitment and working conditions (Leithwood et al., 2008). It also claims that school improvement rarely occurs in the absence of effective leadership and that school leadership accounts for up to 27 per cent of variation in students’ learning achievement, second only to classroom teaching (Leithwood et al., 2006; Robinson, 2007).

Based on these findings, UNESCO, pursuing its mission to support countries in achieving quality education for all, has launched a comprehensive set of regional comparative review of policies and practices on school leadership, as a very first step of an applied research to produce and share knowledge and lessons on this important issue, with a view to helping countries develop sound policies to support effective school leadership. Besides, many countries have mentioned the need to enhance school leadership, as key ingredient to reinforce governance of education system for increased performance and efficiency. Therefore, school leadership emerges as a key policy priority in line with the Education 2030 Agenda, articulated in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal: “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

This review pursues three interconnected specific objectives, namely:

- To produce knowledge base and inform the global debate on policies, practices and trends on school leadership. Most of existing studies and research in this area are concentrated on OECD countries. There is a need to broaden this knowledge base and learn about school leadership in other regions of the world.

- To raise awareness on the potential of school leadership as a means to enhancing school performance and students’ learning outcomes, especially in developing countries. It is worth considering how school leadership reforms and trends in OECD countries can inform education policies in other countries or regions, and to what extent the knowledge base, developed in the context of the developed countries, can be useful for other countries or regions, particularly those with different cultural and political contexts.
To promote further research, data collection and analysis on school leadership, with the aim to support the development of sound leadership policies and practices to improve school performance and students’ learning outcomes in an effective and sustainable way.

Against the above context, the review is framed around the following key questions related to policies and practices on school leadership in different countries/regions:

- What is the profile of school leaders in the region concerned? This referred mostly to demographics and qualifications, both for primary and secondary education (ISCED levels 1, 2 and 3).
- What are the current regulatory frameworks, involving requirements for access, training, contractual arrangements, work tasks and responsibilities as well as supervision and support? Particular attention was given to qualification frameworks when they exist.
- Are there recent and/or ongoing reforms of the profession or policy debates about the transformation of the role of school leaders and the implications for training, both initial and in-service?
- Are there evidence-based policies and research about school leaders; topics and issues of common interest across countries?
- Based on the above (expected findings), what policy recommendations would make sense, from the perspective of promoting/reinforcing school leadership to improve learning outcomes and school environment?
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II. KEY FINDINGS

The main findings are classified following the research questions:

1. PROFILE OF SCHOOL LEADERS

1.1 Gender: School leadership is still a male preserve
Although there are more women than men in the teaching profession, still it is observed in all the regional reviews that women are generally under-represented in senior positions in schools. The proportion of men in leadership positions at global level tends to increase when compared to the proportion of men in teaching. There is a tendency that women lead only in primary schools and small schools, as it is the case in some Eastern European countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia), in some South and West Asian countries (e.g. Sri Lanka and India), in the Arab States and in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, it was found that, in Latin American countries, women constitute the absolute majority of both teacher and school leaders.

1.2 Age: An ageing workforce (over 50), near retirement
The ageing population of school leaders represents a growing issue in some of the regions. This general trend reflects the fact that school leaders are selected among experienced, aged teachers, the main path to school leadership position. Some exceptions from this trend are observed in the Eastern European region, in Romania and Serbia, with an average age below 50. Primary school leaders in the LAC countries are also slightly younger with an average age of 40-50.

1.3 Uncertain qualification and appointment mainly based on teaching experience
In many countries, school leaders begin their careers as teachers and advance to the position of school leaders at the end of their career. This transition to school leadership positions at an advanced stage of their careers explains the high average age of school leaders. Among the countries studied, the qualification criteria to become a school leader mainly vary between a valuable teaching experience to a successful completion of a school leadership training programme.
2. CHANGING GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Governance structure affects school leadership patterns and models: the gradual movements towards decentralization have led to a change in school leaders’ roles and responsibilities:

From a centrally led to a more autonomous system:
migration of responsibilities

Centralized
• Implement government policies
• Keep school clean and safe
• Realize administrative tasks

Decentralized
• Manage resources
• Recruit staff
• Support teachers
• Shape a vision of academic success for all students
• Organize, coordinate and supervise activities, trainings, etc.
• Interpret and implement new curricula

Countries’ position according to the degree of decentralization and school leadership model

3. ISSUES RELATED TO THE WORKING CONDITIONS

In coherence with the education system’s governance reforms and the new accountability framework, potential and current school leaders need support to better master their new roles and responsibilities. These include training, remuneration, appraisal and feedback.

3.1. Training as a support
In general, the reviews pointed out the absence of systematic school leadership training programmes among the countries studied, though some promising initiatives have been mentioned.

3.2 Unattractive status and remuneration
For most of the countries studied, information on school leaders’ salaries is very limited or non-existent. When data are available, school leaders’ salaries are typically higher than those of school teachers. But, in general, the small salary difference does not reflect school leaders’ workload and
responsibilities. This explains why so few teachers are seeking for school leader positions. Exceptions are found in some Latin America and Caribbean countries.

3.3 School leaders’ appraisal and feedback: A mixed picture
While most countries have a performance appraisal process, the regional reviews mentioned several issues on the quality, the mechanisms, the responsible authority, the period and the consequences of the appraisals.

4. Research and knowledge gaps: A major barrier to situation analysis and policy formulation for effective school leadership
The authors of the regional reviews noticed a severe lack of data and information on school leadership, which constituted a major limitation on their studies. Very few countries had relevant data and information on school leadership, and there was a general lack of national and regional information and documents related to the school leadership policies and their implementation. Countries with relevant data tend to be in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, with some in Latin America.

5. Policy recommendations
5.1. Make school leadership a priority in the education development agenda
5.2. Establish appropriate institutional and policy frameworks for effective school leadership development
5.3 Professionalize school leadership career and make it more attractive
5.4 Set up viable systems of information, networking and research on school leadership

6. UNESCO’s proposed Agenda for Effective School Leadership in the framework of the Education 2030 vision
6.1 Promoting research, knowledge production and sharing
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