

A head teacher's participation in a network as a way to educational leadership in schools

Danuta Elsner

Freelance consultant on educational management, Poland

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Introduction

A cooperation and self-education network as well as educational leadership are relatively new terms in the Polish educational system, only becoming generally accepted. Each of them is a central category of a separate national project implemented by a different team. Therefore, perhaps, it is possible to lose sight of the fact that these terms have a lot in common and that a successful implementation of the former in the teacher training system might considerably influence the effective introduction of the latter in school practice.

I will attempt to depict here what

links these terms. And although inevitably I have to refer to the substantive content and organizational solutions of the abovementioned projects, my deliberations will be focused on the values underlying both the networks and educational leadership. Therefore, I will base my deliberations on an axiological ground, since this is where I can find the most similarities between the terms. The objective of this article is to present them and to make both the project executors and its beneficiaries aware of them

A characteristic of projects introducing educational networks and leadership into the Polish educational system

In the recent several years, many national projects have been implemented in the Polish educational system due to the

financial support of the European Union. I will refer to two of them in my paper, i.e.:

a) the project entitled: “Teacher training system based on a generally available comprehensive school support,” hereinafter referred to as the “Teacher Training System ...”¹;

b) the project entitled: “Leadership and management in education – the preparation and implementation of a development and improvement system for head teachers,” hereinafter referred to as “Leadership and management in education ...”²

Within the “Teacher Training System ...” project, two new forms of teachers’ professional qualification improvement are being implemented, which are oriented towards the entire school development more than the individuals’ development. These forms are “support” and “cooperation and self-education networks”. As of 1 January 2016, they will be included in the set of obligatory forms offered by teacher training institutions, psychological and pedagogical counselling institutions and pedagogical libraries.

The “support” activities have been regulated by the law and they consist in:

- offering assistance of relevant employees of the above mentioned institutions in conducting a needs diagnosis in

schools,

- specifying the methods of meeting those needs,
- planning tailored support forms,
- supporting the plan implementation,
- cooperating in the effect evaluation and development of conclusions for the future³.

The legal regulations do not provide much information concerning cooperation and self-education networks. The above mentioned institutions have been obliged to organize and run such networks. Their participants are teachers employed at various positions, including head teachers, and representing all types of educational institutions. The networks’ objective is the improvement of the school’s (institution’s) work quality, in particular through the exchange of experiences between teachers⁴.

The “Leadership and management in education ...” project, on the other hand, is oriented towards the education of head teacher candidates and the training of both beginners and experienced school, kindergarten and educational institution head teachers. Its objective is the enhancement of leadership and management. The implementation of the objectives comprises the following activities:

- conducting a diagnosis in two areas:
 - a) the school and institution head teach-

¹ www.ore.edu.pl, extension: “wspieranie szkół i nauczycieli”

² www.ore.edu.pl, extension: “przywództwo”

³ The Regulation of the Ministry of National Education of 26 October 2012 amending the regulation concerning the teacher training institutions (Journal of Laws, item 1196, as amended).

⁴ Ibid.

ers' competencies, b) the effectiveness of the current educational forms and the improvement of the head teachers' professional qualifications;

- preparing training materials addressed to the three groups of educational managing personnel on the basis of the diagnosis;

- testing the materials;

- developing three models:

- 1) a model of head teacher candidates training,

- 2) a model of support for beginners,

- 3) a model of experienced head teachers training.

The training materials developed in the course of the project comprise the following leadership and management areas:

- leadership in a school/institution

- educational quality management,

- educational policy – a head teacher as a leader in the community,

- human resources management,

- strategic management in the social, legal and economic context,

- management of one's own professional development,

- leadership in practice – case studies

Both of the projects are currently in the final piloting stage. Attempts are being made to obtain additional funds to continue them.

Networks and educational leadership – the related issues

The related issues of both these projects can be analysed from various points of view:

- a) organizational – both of the projects have successfully completed the initiation stage. At present, the project executors face challenges related to the implementation and consolidation of changes brought about by the projects.

- b) substantive – both of the projects are oriented towards the improvement of teachers' professional qualifications (a head teacher is by law a teacher performing managerial functions), although in various scopes and forms.

- c) axiological – referring to the values promoted by the projects. They have only been described in the “Leadership and management in education ...” project, in a separate publication entitled: *Educational values determining the learning process effects and the form of the educational leadership*.⁵

Whereas it is evident that the organizational and substantive issues are related, those referring to values remain assumptive, even more so because in the “Teacher Training System ...” project these values have not been articulated. The values included in the “Leadership and management in education ...” project are the following:

1. Freedom

⁵ www.przywództwoedukacyjne.org.pl extension: “wartości”

2. Equality and social justice
3. Respect
4. Trust
5. Responsibility
6. Courage
7. Honesty
8. Development and learning
9. Open-mindedness
10. Dialogue
11. Service-mindedness
12. Participation
13. Diversity
14. Reliability
15. Reflectiveness

A closer analysis of the values influencing the form of educational leadership leads to formulating a statement that co-operation and self-education networks are carriers of identical values because the learning process is a fundamental process in both of the projects. Therefore, I think it is first of all necessary for a head teacher or a candidate for this position to experience the abovementioned values by participating in team learning in a network so that later they could implement them in school practice. With this assumption, participation in a network becomes some sort of an experimental ground in which the values, which usually flee as being private and secret, are exposed, made legible and crystallized in action. Consequently, they can be gradually transformed into the head teacher's personal experience – both organizational and educational one.

The head teacher's personal experiencing of the values due to participation in a network facilitates:

- their crystallization in the roles played in schools,
 - a reflection upon oneself as a role model for others promoting specific values,
 - their reference to the conditions in the institution,
 - the presentation of arguments in favour of those values to persons who do not perceive their importance in everyday work,
 - a transposition of the values to specific pedagogical and organizational activities,
 - making relevant entries in school documents such as a statute, a concept of the school, an educational programme, a prevention programme, etc., and thus, institutionalizing the values.
- In the so-called traditional forms of head teacher training, such as courses and conferences, their participants can become aware of the values and acquire theoretical knowledge about them, including knowledge of how to implement them in the school life. Yet, these forms do not offer a possibility of experiencing them personally by facing the practical activities in which they are manifested. This is due to the fact that courses and conferences:
- are too short lasting,
 - their schedules do not provide for a follow-up,
 - their participants do not have any influence on the content, selection of methods and organization of classes,
 - whole-class instruction is dominant;
 - the participants are frequently ac-

tivated by the lecturers, encouraged to take part in discussions and to reflect upon them, but it is all done in a manner planned in advance.

Therefore, I think that participation in a cooperation and self-education network is an essential element of preparing candidates for head teachers as well as active head teachers to become educational leaders in schools. And it does not matter whether it is a network of teachers, head teachers or schools, and what kind of problem it attempts to solve. What matters is what a head teacher candidate or an active head teacher can experience and consider in connection with their participation in a network.

Experiencing values by participating in networks

The values presented in the previous section can be grouped with respect to what they refer to, i.e.:

a) the functioning of a network as a whole (freedom, participation, responsibility);

b) the team learning process implemented within the network (development and learning, reflectiveness, diversity, dialogue);

c) the social relations between the participants (trust, reliability, respect, equality and social justice);

d) the individual participants' behaviour (courage, honesty, open-mindedness, service-mindedness).

The values referring to the functioning of a network as a whole

Freedom comes first not without a reason. It is of special emotional importance for the citizens of a country like Poland. It is also the foundation of the networks' functioning in two aspects:

- the organizational aspect – externally, it is manifested in the fact that a) the establishment of a network does not require any legal actions; b) the networks operate outside the authorities' control. Internally, it is manifested in self-organization.

- the educational aspect which refers to the self-regulated team learning process.

For those accustomed to living in a hierarchical society, and our society still is such a society, the abovementioned “amount” of freedom of action may become – as Józef Tischner (1993) put it – “the unfortunate gift of freedom” that one does not know what to do with. And work in a network, due to the nature of this type of organization, actually forces one to make use of their freedom, e.g. necessitating the independent specification of a problem to be solved by the participants, or making a decision concerning the team learning methods, task allocation, methods of communication, etc.

Making use of such a large scope of freedom may be difficult for those persons who have always improved their professional qualifications participating in courses and conferences, i.e. forms

programmed by someone else from the start to the end. Hence, it is not astonishing that the recently established networks resemble courses. Is this wrong? According to Pieter Leehneer, not necessarily.

...networks sometimes lose the nature of a learning community and resemble courses or projects. This is not wrong if it lasts for a short time. In certain situations, it may even turn out to be a necessary stage of network development. In the long term, one should provide for the proper nature of its activities. (Leehneer, 2013).

Therefore, **participation** is very important in networks, since it is through participation that the network participants can accomplish freedom individually and as a team. Several active participants may indeed sustain the functioning of a network for some time, but is is insufficient for it to survive, and even more insufficient for the problem to be solved within the network. Therefore, right after establishing a network, the roles and tasks of particular participants are specified so that everyone has their tasks allocated. Thus, the practical implementation of one of the network's principles of functioning becomes possible – one can take from others as much as one gives to others. Without organizational and educational participation of its members the network will die a natural death. This experience may also be valuable for school head teachers or candidates for this position.

Freedom of choice and participation in

the network activities are connected with **responsibility**. It is not legal responsibility but moral one. The network participants are responsible for the atmosphere fostering team learning and for its effects. At school, head teachers have numerous legal forms they can use in order to exact the employees' responsibility. In a network, they can learn the "soft" forms, such as conversation, persuasion, ostracism, etc.

The values referring to the team learning process

The promoters of **development and learning** in networks refer to the concept of constructivism in the psychology of learning in which the process is understood as active constructing of knowledge. Hence, the process participants are not treated as if they were jugs to be filled with knowledge, which is often the case in courses or conferences, but also in classes in school. If head teachers experience the reconstruction of possessed knowledge and the construction of newly acquired knowledge due to their participation in a network, then there is hope that they will be willing to transfer that to their schools and make the pupils active participants of classes, and then gradually depart from whole-class instruction. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the collectivity of the learning process in networks – we learn with others and from others. Due to an intellectual confrontation with the other participants of the network, a head teacher or a head teacher candidate may

check and develop the reconstructed and later the constructed notions and terms, as well as get feedback information.

This brings us to the remaining values – **reflectiveness** and diversity. When reflectiveness is mentioned, a concept of a reflective practitioner, Donald Schön, comes to mind; it is based on an assumption that ... *the success of professional activity does not depend so much on the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, as on the ability, both in the course of dealing with a particular case and after completing a certain stage of work, to have a specific type of reflection which he called “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action”, respectively* (Liszka, 2013).

Networks are splendid places for “reflection-on-action”, reflection on specific behaviours or decisions made by a head teacher in school. And since this is done in a group of persons holding an identical position and hence dealing with similar problems, one can count on their understanding, empathy, suggestions and hints. Having experienced such reflections in a network, a head teacher as the head of a teachers’ board will be able to implement them in school as well. Meetings of the teachers’ board, subject teams, cross-curricular or task-oriented teams are a good place for “reflection-on-action”.

A network is also an excellent place to experience **diversity** in several aspects – a diversity of professional experiences, learning styles, opportunities, views, etc. The diversity of views

seems to be the most problematic. It is still perceived as a threat rather than a chance. And yet it is difficult not to agree with Peter Senge who claims that ...

Collaboration does not mean that everyone has to agree with everyone or share the same views. On the contrary, the true meaning of perceiving others (...) is revealed when there are differences in views. It is easy to experience collaboration when everybody agrees with everybody. When there is a significant difference of opinions, however, it becomes much more difficult. But the benefits are also much bigger. The best results are achieved when we accept the idea that opponents are simply colleagues with different views (Senge, 1998).

The results mentioned by P. Senge may be revealed when yet another value is exposed in the network, i.e. **dialogue**. Senge distinguishes between dialogue and discussion as the ways of conducting a discourse.

In dialogue, a group analyses complicated difficult problems from various viewpoints (ibid. p. 239). A discussion, according to him, is an exchange of opinions, some sort of verbal “ping-pong” implying a winner-loser relation (ibid., p. 238). In dialogue, according to P. Senge, there are no winners or losers. *In dialogue, people achieve the level of understanding problems which they simply cannot achieve individually* (ibid., p. 239).

Values referring to social relations between network participants

The experience of authentic dialogue leading to the solution of a problem analysed by a network may encourage a head teacher to make it a *modus operandi* in situations of resolving school problems. For that to happen, though, **trust** in social relations is necessary. No wonder that P. Senge mentions trust when deliberating on dialogue. According to him, ... *A unique relationship develops among team members who enter into dialogue regularly. They develop a deep trust ...* (ibid., p. 245).

Trust in social relations is still quite problematic for us. This is confirmed by Małgorzata Kamińska's research on teachers' social potential carried out in 2011; she focused in particular on trust and **reliability** in it. For the purpose of the research, she considered the following characteristics to be expressions of the values: *certainty, predictability, responsibility, reliability, effectiveness, efficiency, authenticity, security, experience and competencies* (Kamińska, 2013, p. 100). Her research indicates that ... *"Trust and reliability have been given the least number of positive marks by the surveyed groups."* And she adds, *the highest percentage of ambivalent marks* (ibid., p. 103).

Networks are an excellent social community in which head teachers may develop relations based on trust and reliability, also because they are small organizations. At present, the cooperation and self-education networks of teachers and head

teachers usually consist of approximately 25 persons, and school networks – of several institutions. The development of the abovementioned values in a school community comprising several hundred persons or more is considerably more difficult. Participating in a network, a head teacher may observe that joint work and/or learning develop trust, and thus people get to know one another better and in time they become convinced that the other person behaves in accordance with the social standards effective in the group. Furthermore, the difficulties related to the development of social relations in schools based on trust and reliability may become a problem to be solved by a head teachers network – how to execute educational leadership so that people within the school community would trust one another and were reliable towards one another?

Surely, this will also be fostered by **respect** for others, regardless of their position in school or role played by them therein. The problem is that sometimes there is no respect in the relations between the governing authority and the head teacher, and therefore the latter finds it difficult to show respect to others. A cooperation and self-education network may in fact become an enclave in which no distinction is made between those at higher and lower positions, those with more and less experience, those working in "good" and "worse" schools, those with better or worse local connections, and in which nobody is ostracised for some reasons. A network is a learn-

ers' community in which everyone is by definition appreciated and accepted.

Consequently, there is **equality and social justice** which can be experienced due to the partner relations in a network. A network is an organization without hierarchy, without a permanent managerial group, in which certain roles are played or tasks are implemented in a rotational manner. In such conditions, equal treatment of participants and attention paid to the common good, i.e. welfare, become daily practice. Gaining such experience in a network, a head teacher will find it easier to create similar conditions in school, with respect to pupils, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents.

The values referring to the network participants' behaviour

Honesty can be analysed in two aspects in this context: the personal and social one. In the former, honesty means being righteous, reliable, diligent in implementing tasks entrusted to one in a network. In the latter, it means opposing other people's dishonesty, e.g. making use of other people's solutions, materials, ideas and attributing them to oneself. This inevitably links honesty with another value – **courage**. It takes a lot of courage not to yield to one's own temptations of "taking a short cut" and to other people's pressure, or to tell someone something straight from the shoulder. Network participants find it easier than head teachers, since they will not be sanctioned for their courageous state-

ments, for instance, losing their position.

Service-mindedness in this context means serving others. Not without a reason, Ryszard Stocki mentions this value in a sub-chapter entitled: "The characteristics of real change leaders". Head teachers who want to play the role of change leaders implementing educational leadership in schools should become people serving others. In his deliberations the above mentioned author claims that *realizing the value of service-mindedness is something like a psychological revolution in the mind* (Stocki, 2003, p. 23). And he continues: *...Modern business gives us more and more examples that accepting a service-minded perspective has not only an ethical dimension but also entails economic success* (ibid., p. 30). I think that this statement can well be used with reference to schools. Serving others in a network - offering advice, support, sharing experience and knowledge – may make it easier for a head teacher to get rid of domineering behaviours and to create their own model of educational leadership in school based on service to others. For that, however, one has to be **open** to changes, in particular personal changes, including changes in the method of professional qualifications improvement. One has to move from passive participation in training forms offered by someone else to active development of oneself, and to join an already existing network or establish a new one.

The abovementioned values are frequently verbalized in networks in the

form of a mission or joint operation principles, sometimes referred to as a contract. An example of such verbalized values may be the mission, objectives and guidelines to joint work presented by the members of the *European Network for Improving Research and Development in Educational Management and Leadership* (ENIRDELM). (Elsner, 2013) They show head teachers how to speak of values in school documents in a manner free of generalizations.

Conclusion

In her work entitled: “Values and Leadership” Anne Gold states that *It is difficult to write about values in a way that sets out alternative and choices because when writing I am so affected by what I believe is the right way to be. I find it almost impossible to be non-judgmental, because my values even inform the choices I made about what to include and use in this publication and what to leave out* (Gold, 2004, p.23).

In my case, not only my personal beliefs but also 24 years of experience gained through participation in the works and team learning in ENIRDELM have an influence on the discussion of values in this article. It was easier for me as a head teacher of a teacher training institution to implement the values that I had first experienced, felt and thought over in the organization. I had simply practised them before. That is why writing these words I would like to encourage

head teacher candidates and active head teachers to take this way, already tested by me – from participation in a network to educational leadership in schools, kindergartens, educational institutions – although, I am aware that this is the proper way to choose only in those countries in which such networks are novelties.

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