

The Teacher Leadership in Kazakhstan (TLK) initiative – lessons for Ukraine

David Frost

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I was very fortunate in being able to visit Kazakhstan for the first time in 2010 as part of my work with the University of Cambridge. During that trip I had the pleasure of meeting Saule Kalikova from the Soros Foundation in Almaty. I told her about HertsCam and our approach to teacher leadership. We met subsequently when I spoke on the subject in Baku, Azerbaijan and in Belgrade, Serbia. This meeting of minds turned out to be very fruitful.

Independence, modernisation and reform

The Republic of Kazakhstan came into existence as an independent country in 1991 in tandem with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since that time, the country has been tenaciously pursuing a programme of modernisation and reform in which education has been a prominent feature. A key strategy was the Boloshak scholarships that allowed many thousands of young people to study abroad. They would harvest knowledge from around the world and bring it to bear on institutions and practice in the new Kazakhstan. Gulmira Qanay was one of the Boloshak generation. When she came to study with me in Cambridge in 2015, her family name was Kanayeva, as it is rendered in Russian. Subsequently, Gulmira took legal steps to change her name to Qanay, the Kazakh version of her name. This is just one signifier of the resurgence of young Kazakh intellectuals.

Introducing non-positional teacher in Kazakhstan

Dr Qanay, as she is known these days, had asked me to supervise her PhD study because she wanted to do something to help the teaching profession. Her mother, a lifelong teacher, was a source of inspiration. Gulmira could have just studied the use of the non-positional teacher leadership approach in HertsCam / ITL, but she chose the more challenging approach which was to take action to set up a programme for schools in her home city of Taraz. Gulmira analysed the system into which she wanted to inject the idea of teacher leadership and concluded that it was very centralised and hierarchical. Social constructivist pedagogy was not yet established (Kanayeva, 2019). Into this milieu, Gulmira introduced a programme based on the teacher-led development methodology through which teachers are empowered to identify a concern that reflects their values and situations and then plan a collaborative process of review, evaluation and development aimed at improving practice. Remarkably,

Gulmira was able to make this work even though the professional cultures and the structure of the education system were less than propitious.

In 2019, the Soros Foundation in Kazakhstan asked HertsCam to help devise and launch a three-year project to bring teacher leadership to the whole of Kazakhstan. By this time Gulmira Qanay had finished her doctoral study (Kanayeva, 2019) and was working as a researcher at Nazarbayev University. Her expertise would be crucial to the success of TLK. We assembled a team - Emma Anderson-Payne, Sheila Ball, Paul Barnett, Tracy Gaiteri and Val Hill - to fly out to work with Gulmira to launch TLK with presentations and workshops for school principals and facilitators from six regions of the country. During an intense three-day programme, we established the foundations of what would turn out to be a very successful project. Now, there years later, we can reflect on this success and on the implications for other post-Soviet countries.

Evaluations of TLK

There have been a number of evaluation studies and publications focused on of TLK (Qanay et al., 2019; Qanay & Frost, 2020; Qanay, Courtney & Nam 2021). The evidence of success is copious and persuasive. The latest evaluation confirms a number of key findings about the impact on teachers' professional learning, on their schools and on the development of classroom practice, discussed briefly below.

The impact on teachers' professional learning was profound. It involved changes in the way the participants see their professional identity as teachers, their capacity to exercise leadership, their pedagogical understanding and their self-efficacy. Participating in TLK also strengthened their sense of moral purpose – their commitment to improving the life chances of the young people they teach. This is all fine of course, but in the context of a teacher leadership initiative, what is even more important is the effect those participating teachers had on their schools. This was manifest in part through the professional learning gains of the colleagues who were drawn into the participants' projects. Each teacher participating in TLK designed a collaborative process which involved several other teachers in their schools which, for many of them, was a transformative experience. The cumulative effect of all of this collaboration and innovation was to enhance the professional cultures in the host schools. A parallel programme of leadership development for school principals reinforced this. This featured presentations and discussions involving school principals in Kazakhstan and the UK.

The most important dimension of impact was on the development of pedagogical practice. The final TLK conference provided ample evidence of practice development. Thirty six out of the 500 teachers who participated in Year 3 of the programme presented accounts of their

projects. In a survey following the conference, teachers reported a remarkably high level of the adoption of new practices beyond the participants' own classroom. In the majority of cases, it was reported that innovations had become embedded in the routines of school life which is a very positive sign of sustainable change. These findings were corroborated in the survey of facilitators.

The TLK initiative faced the challenge of the pandemic, but it quickly adapted and went online. In the final year a further challenge arose when Gulmira Qanay was asked by the government to become the Rector of a University in Almaty which left little time for TLK activities. Once again, the project showed resilience. A core of seasoned facilitators from amongst those inducted in 2019 stepped forward to help coordinate activities and support others. They played key roles supporting the final conference. This suggests that TLK has successfully built capacity for sustaining support for teacher leadership.

Key messages for policy

A book which documents the TLK initiative will be published in Russian and Kazakh in the coming few weeks and key messages for policy makers are summarised in a chapter to appear in a book being published in English (Qanay & Frost, 2022). These messages are outlined here in brief:

- Teachers and school principals value school-based professional learning.
- Non-positional teacher leadership really does work in Kazakhstan.
- Principals embrace transformational leadership to shape professional cultures.
- Non-positional teacher leadership supports innovation, change and reform.
- Vice-principals are highly effective in the role of facilitator.
- The TLK model is evidently sustainable.
- International networking can aid internationalisation at very low cost.
- Non-positional teacher leadership supports constructivist pedagogy.
- Institutional collaboration enables innovation.
- School principals welcome the non-positional teacher leadership approach

(Qanay, Frost, Zakayeva & Kalikova, 2022)

We are looking forward to webinars to coincide with the launch of the book.

Relevance for Ukraine

Policy makers and members of the education community in Ukraine may find this account interesting, but at the time of writing, they obviously have other priorities. However, there is a particular reason I want to bring this to their attention now. The emphasis in the story about TLK is on reform and school improvement, but there is also strong evidence from a number of other countries that non-positional teacher leadership plays an important role in societal renewal. In the Western Balkans, for example, colleagues who used this approach were motivated by its potential to promote inclusive and democratic values in a post-conflict context. In the Middle East the approach was seen as an antidote to the colonialism that still undermined education and social progress. In Cairo, the launch of the programme followed the revolution which saw the fall of Mubarak. Our colleague, Amina Eltemamy, saw the approach as having the potential to address matters of social justice. She saw the connection between, on the one hand, teacher autonomy, voice and decision making in their professional lives, and, on the other hand, societal renewal (Eltemamy, 2018). In Palestine, our colleague Hanan Ramahi recognised the emancipatory power of non-positional teacher leadership. She used it in Ramallah in the Occupied Territories and observed that it enables teachers to become the authors of their own destiny. She argued that this is the kind of practice that can help to promote values such as resilience and self-reliance (Ramahi, 2018).

For the reasons outlined above, I am publishing this article in the Ukrainian and Russian languages in the hope that we can offer a strategy to enable teachers and schools in Ukraine to strengthen their grip on their own narrative. Arguably, an important part of the defence of Ukraine is cultural and, for that reason, perhaps non-positional teacher leadership can contribute to securing the country's destiny as an independent and free nation.

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