

**ECER 2015**

A symposium in two parts

**The role of teacher leadership  
in the transition to democratic society**

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**Abstract**

This paper is an overview of the symposium. It describes the eight presentations made during the two part symposium and then itemises the points that emerged in the discussion with the symposium participants.

This symposium arose out of the ongoing work of the International Teacher Leadership (ITL) initiative (Frost, 2011) which has developed as a network of activists, teachers, researchers and advocates who share a commitment to the non-positional teacher leadership approach developed in the context of the HertsCam Network and subsequently in collaboration with partners in at least seventeen countries in Europe and the Middle East.

The event provided an opportunity for members of the network to meet and exchange accounts of progress in their home countries. It also provides an opportunity for us to share our work and open it up to scrutiny by academics.

The symposium was opened and chaired by Gordana Miljevic who is based at the Centre for Education Policy in Belgrade. She has played a key role in developing the ITL network since it was launched in 2008. At that time she was a Programme Manager for Open Society Foundations (OSF), an organisation which has offered both funding and moral support. In her introduction Gordana commented on the way the non-positional teacher leadership approach (Frost, 2013) had been taken up, adapted and used in so many countries. Her title was ‘From a Snowdrop to a Snowball – not Avalanche’. She used the metaphor to indicate how the idea had travelled with varying degrees of intensity starting with an initial meeting of representatives from 7 countries in 2008 with 10 more being brought in by OSF a year later. Currently it is ‘still snowing heavily’ the UK, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Macedonia and a few other places. More recently we have seen new programmes in Egypt and Palestine and related research in Central Asian republics such as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. So far we have seen a one completed PhD, four current doctoral studies and a host of journal articles, reports and books.

### **Presentation by Majda Joshevska and Suzana Kirandjiska**

Colleagues from Macedonia made a presentation under the title of ‘Can Teacher Leadership Save the Teaching Profession?’ They shared the mission of their organisation<sup>1</sup>, which is to provide programmes that enhance the education and culture. They explained that their programmes operate in a range of different settings to enable children achieve their full potential through education. They talked about their ‘Readers are leaders’ project, funded by US AID in which the teacher leadership strategies and tools developed within the ITL initiative were used to support development work. The current ‘Learning Communities’ project also deploys the non-positional teacher leadership approach. The goals of this project are:

- the establishing of school-based professional development infrastructures
- enhanced professionalism (Evans, 2008) and the strengthening of school learning cultures
- a sense of ownership and increased self-efficacy beliefs of teachers

This project involves more than 60 schools across the country and already it is clear that participants are able to lead their own development projects and develop their capacity to gather evidence and document their work. The capacity for reflection is being developed and networking is providing opportunities for teachers to learn from and inspire each other.

A full account is available in the paper referred to in the symposium (Joshevska & Kirandziska, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives ‘Step by Step’ – Macedonia

## **Presentation by Nurbek Teleshaliyev**

Nurbek is in the final stages of a doctoral study at the University of Cambridge and his thesis accounts for his research which explores the way that some teachers in schools in Kyrgystan exercise influence in their schools. These are known as ‘Teachers with a capital T’, a term used in that region to denote those with many years of experience and considerable resilience who others look to for guidance and support. Nurbek’s doctoral study is built around research questions such as follows:

What factors contribute to the continuing commitment of Teachers with a capital ‘T’ to teaching and the teaching profession throughout their careers?

How do Teachers with a capital ‘T’ enact their professionalism?

How do Teachers with a capital ‘T’ influence other teachers?

His presentation began with a portrayal of the context which is not really conducive to what Eric Hoyle called ‘extended professionalism’ professional (Hoyle, 1974; 2008). He focused on the eight teachers he had studied, chosen because they were seen by their colleagues to be exemplary, experienced and engaged with their colleagues. He gave us a preview of the main findings of his doctoral study which indicates that Capital T teachers are a valuable, if relatively untapped, resource in the education system in Kyrgystan. Their leadership, although significant, remains isolated and limited in its impact.

## **Presentation by Gisela Redondo-Sama**

Gisela is a Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. Her presentation focused on her recent visits to Macedonia and Bulgaria to investigate the progress of programmes of support for teacher leadership in countries where the International Teacher Leadership initiative had been launched in 2009-10. Gisela had previously been involvement in research focused on the role of parents and community as a member of CREA, a multi-disciplinary research coordinated from the University of Barcelona and dedicated to transformative social science.

Because of her experience of the INCLUD-ED project (Flecha, 2012) she had a particular focus on teachers’ projects that featured the inclusion of parents and community dimension. In her paper (Redondo-Sama, 2015), Gisela outlines the dimensions of her research interest – teacher leadership and the role of parents and community in the life of the school. She gives an account of the investigation in which she and co-researchers interviewed teachers in both countries to find out how their involvement in programmes linked to the ITL initiative had enabled theme to develop a range of strategies for working in collaboration and dialogue with parents.

### **Presentation by Hanan Ramahi**

Hanan is a doctoral student at Cambridge and she launched a teacher leadership programme in her school in Ramallah in the West Bank, Palestine, using tools and approaches adapted from the HertsCam approach. Her presentation was entitled: 'Emancipatory education for Palestine: the power of teacher leadership'. This title reflects the particularly challenging nature of the Palestine context and its need for home-grown solutions to the problem of an education system that has been twisted out of shape by successive waves of foreign intervention. In Hanan's paper (Ramahi, 2015) the 'Teachers Leading the Way' programme she has built is cast as one example of the counter-hegemonic programmes and activities that facilitates critical thinking, meaningful knowledge building that relate to local realities and the collective empowerment of oppressed peoples.

For Hanan the central goal of her programme and for emancipatory education more widely is enhanced human agency. Her paper presents evidence of what is being achieved through the TLW programme. This is related to Hanan's work on emancipatory education commissioned by the Rosa Luxembourg foundation.

### **Presentation by James Underwood**

James is also a doctoral student at Cambridge. His teaching background as well as experience with the British Council and one of the British teacher unions led him to research focusing on teachers' experience of international networking. His presentation reported on the conceptual underpinnings of his study and then dealt in brief with emerging themes such as: the role of international networking in the sharing of practice, the role of international networking in enabling democratic debate and the personal rewards for teachers of engaging with professionals from other nations.

In the attendant paper under the title of 'Exchanging knowledge and building communities via international networking', James presents more details evidence arising from a series of interviews with teachers in schools in the Balkans where the International Teacher Leadership initiative had flourished (Underwood, 2015).

### **Presentation by Ivona and Jelena**

Ivona Čelebičić is director of proMENTE social research in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Jelena Vranješević is an academic at the Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade University. They were both involved in the International Teacher Leadership initiative and more recently have collaborated on a research project which evaluates aspects of the teacher leadership work that Ivona and her organisation have facilitated.

Under the heading of 'Teacher attitudes toward their proactive role in managing educational changes', Ivona and Jelena outlined a vision for educational change in Bosnia & Herzegovina

to create an equal and just society, through trust building, partnerships among students and improvements in the capacities of teachers, school leaders and policy makers in order to bring about systemic curriculum change. Their research featured the use of a questionnaire which was an adaptation of one used in the survey for Education International (Bangs & Frost 2011). It had been used to gather data about teachers' attitudes to the idea of being proactive agents of change.

Ivona and Jelena did not present a paper but their work is documented in a chapter in the book - 'Transforming Education Through Teacher Leadership' (Vranješević & Čelebičić, 2014).

### **Presentation by Aidar Khoroshash**

Aidar Khoroshash is currently a doctoral student at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan and until recently he was a teacher at the Nazarbayev Intellectual School of Astana. Aidar's presentation, under the title: 'What Is It Like To Be a Teacher Leader in Kazakhstan?', was based on his doctoral study focusing on teacher leadership.

The way leadership is understood in this post-Soviet context is very interesting. Aidar's research takes into account the changing context since Kazakhstan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Like in many parts of Central Asia, the rapid pace of change following the collapse of the Soviet Union has tended to undermine teacher professionalism. Aidar has been investigating how teachers in two of the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools perceive their roles and the extent to which they see themselves and their colleagues as having a voice and influence over professional decision-making in their schools.

### **Presentation by Maria Assunção Flores**

Maria Flores is a professor at the University of Minho and had been involved in the International Teacher Leadership initiative from the very beginning in 2008. The title of her presentation was 'Networking and its role in professional development: the potential of teacher leadership in Portugal'. For Maria, the ITL work was one dimension of a wider programme of research, a 3 year project funded by the National Foundation for Science and Technology. The context of the research was economic and financial crisis in Portugal and policy changes in education that were profoundly demoralising for teachers. A national survey prepared the way for creating a network involving 60 teachers drawing on the ITL methodology to support teacher leadership. Data from this part of the project indicated that networking is an invaluable source of support. It reinforces teachers' motivation and moral purpose. It enables then to build a sense of belonging to a professional learning community and the capacity for innovation. The data from this research is powerfully illustrative of the potential for teacher leadership. Comments from teachers included:

*I have learned that as a teacher I can take the lead and do something for myself, for my school and for the teaching profession.*

*My main learning has been the ability to work collaboratively in projects with other colleagues in my school. And this has enhanced my self-esteem.”*

*I have learned that professional knowledge may be built in a collective way... As a teacher you can be a leader in your school...*

Maria’s work clearly has major implications for the professionalization agenda in the education system in Portugal. Her book arising from this project is a significant contribution to the field (Flores, 2014).

### **Issues emerging**

At the conclusion of each of the two sessions of this symposium, participants were invited to raise issues.

- Can the snowball model of change work?
- What are the benefits and limitations of deploying teacher leadership as a strategy in other initiatives?
- The importance of teachers identifying their own agendas for change cannot be over-estimated.
- Enhancing teachers’ professionalism is a core goal.
- The assumption that the most important resources for leadership are power and authority is brought into question by this work.
- The role of organisational support is a crucial variable - not just symbolic support but support that actually facilitates and enables teachers to exercise leadership.
- Teachers’ belief that they can make a difference has to be cultivated deliberately and it takes time
- Does this work really need a conducive environment or can it be used to create that environment?
- Does teacher leadership inevitably mean that teachers will enable other’s voices – eg community/ parents
- Is the concept of community problematic? Whose community? How can we account for different factions and interests within the same location?

- Why would a teacher be willing to commit time when they are not paid extra to lead change? The benefits for teachers include the enhancement of agency, the sense of being fulfilled and of being morally justified. Teachers love to refresh their values and to meet other teachers for mutual inspiration.
- Can teacher leadership help to overcome the harsh realities of social division and oppression, for example, as we see in Palestine?
- What happens when empowered professionalism bumps into managerialist constraint or worse?
- Support is crucial – this is technical and principled, skilful, artful facilitation involving tools and techniques
- ‘Waiting for someone to evaluate us’ or learning to do self-evaluation?
- Is it beneficial for teachers to see themselves as part of an international profession? Does it enable them to rise above the limitations of their institutional and national contexts? Is it potentially emancipatory?
- Teacher policy is increasingly globalised – with pressure from such things as PISA, so is the time right for a more globalised approach to professionalism?
- What might be the role of teacher unions in enabling teachers to see themselves as agents of change ?
- How can we judge the impact of a teacher leadership programme? What are the criteria?
- When governments enable and when sponsors fund programmes such as these, what would satisfy their need for accountability?
- Is there a paradox that the teacher leadership work we are talking about here is individualised in that each teacher owns their agenda and designs their intervention, but their projects tend to lead to collaboration with colleagues?
- Are school principals threatened by teacher leadership? We find that once they experience it, they find it non-threatening and helpful to the culture of the school and in improving practice.
- The question of esteem and status of teachers – does it depend on social standing or can respect be achieved by teachers working with the community and parents?
- Could teacher leadership be seen as a device to draw teachers into the process of implementation of centrally mandated reforms?

- How can funded research projects incorporate support for teacher leadership?
- What part does publication have in enabling teachers to share their knowledge and inspire each other to engage in the leadership of development work?
- The challenges and the benefits of teacher leadership as we have described it here seem to be universal. We recognise them in Ramallah as much as in Sarajevo. They are not essentially different to those experienced in Hertfordshire in the UK.
- Is this about cultivating hope? Is it therapeutic?

### **Rounding off the symposium**

Following the rich discussions illustrated by the list of points above, the session was rounded up with information about the book - ‘Transforming Education Through Teacher Leadership’ (Frost, 2014). This book contains accounts written by teachers and about teachers’ leadership of development work. A theory of non-positional teacher leadership is drawn from the narratives. Linked to this was mention of a recent book edited by two Dutch teachers, Jelmer Evers and Rene Kneyber called ‘Flip the System book’ which features a chapter by John Bangs and David Frost (2015).

The final announcement was to draw attention to relevant websites such as the HertsCam Network site: [www.hertscam.co.uk](http://www.hertscam.co.uk). There was also brief mention of the new venture from HertsCam which is a masters degree programme based on the principles of teacher leadership which is designed and taught entirely by serving teachers. The masters programme has its own website: [www.hertscammed.com](http://www.hertscammed.com).

Finally, participants were invited to view and download our papers here:

[www.teacherleadership.org.uk](http://www.teacherleadership.org.uk)

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