

**Teacher leadership:  
A concept that travels across cultural and national boundaries**

**Jelena Vranješević**

Teachers' Training Faculty, Belgrade University, Serbia

**Ivona Čelebičić**

proMENTE Social Research, Bosnia and Herzegovina

A paper presented within the symposium:

‘Teacher voice, self-efficacy and leadership: an international perspective’

at

**ECER 2013**

**Istanbul**

10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> September 2013

**Abstract**

The authors of this paper were participants in both the International Teacher Leadership project and the APREME (Advancing the Participation and Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Education) project from which research evidence is drawn. The analysis highlights the role of teachers as agents of change and shows how teachers can be empowered to address major social and educational problems. The linkages between the two projects enabled the researchers and activists to develop strategies and techniques for supporting teacher leadership. The paper shows how teachers were able to mobilise communities in pursuit of social justice by drawing minority families into the life of the school which contributed to overcoming cultural and ethnic conflict.

We begin with the presentation of a vignette that typifies the approach to teacher leadership discussed in our paper.

**Dženita`s story:**

**By respecting and understanding others, we respect and understand ourselves**

I have been a teacher at primary school in Sarajevo for 20 years. For several years I have been concerned about the inclusion of Roma children at school. Some of my attempts to involve them in school life were successful, but insufficient since those attempts included only Roma children in my class. The goal of my project was involving Roma children and their parents, in different aspects of school life, as well as their acceptance by other children and their parents. Through different school subjects I gave children more information about Roma culture. We talked with Roma children about their tradition, history, language, music. They had the opportunity to tell their classmates about their culture. I also invited Roma parents to join our classes and promote their culture. I talked to my colleagues about this project and most of them decided to include students and parents from their classes in this initiative. Together we organized workshops with parents and children on topics related to Roma culture, Roma identity and problems Roma people face in our country. We celebrated the Day of Roma People in our school and included it in official school holidays. We included Roma children in all school activities and offered more information about their culture. We also gave Roma parents an important role within the Parents' Council and other school activities.

Dženita belongs to a teacher leadership group, a network of teachers who are actively trying to build a professional learning community and to become the agents of change. Dženita participated in the project *Teachers as leaders of change* (implemented both in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) that aimed to empower teachers to take a more proactive role in the process of educational change. That project was created by merging two projects: the APREME project (Advancing Participation & Representation of Ethnic Minority Groups in Education) and ITL (International Teacher Leadership) project. The goal of the APREME project was to advance participation and representation of minority ethnic groups in education systems in the West Balkans countries by promoting good practices and supporting local initiatives. The emphasis of the project was on empowering teachers to build initiatives that advance participation and representation of ethnic minorities in education. The project had several phases,

local actions for fostering minority parents' participation being the last one. The APREME project defined the topic (minority parents' participation in schools) and ITL provided key values which were used to underpin the project (Frost, 2008) and a framework for the project's methodology (Frost & Durrant, 2003).

The reasons why this project was important for teachers in both countries are twofold: the first reason lies in the fact that both countries are multicultural and diverse in terms of different nationalities, ethnic groups and religions and that multi-culturality used to be and still is the reason for different conflicts. B&H is home to three ethnic 'constituent peoples', the largest of these being the Bosniacs. Serbs are the second largest group and Croats, the smallest. There are also differences in religion - Bosniacs are usually Muslims, Serbs are Orthodox Christian and Croats are mostly Catholic - and they all have their own history and rich cultural background. Unfortunately, during the war which took place between 1992 and 1995, these differences were exploited by those who wanted to promote hatred and conflict. In addition to these three constituent nations, 17 other national and ethnic groups live in B & H such as Roma, Albanians, Turks, Hungarians, Montenegrins, etc. In Serbia there are almost 40 different nationalities/ethnic groups (Serbs, Croats, Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Russians, Rosins, Hungarians, Bosniacs, Slovaks, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Roma, etc.). Residents of Serbia belong to various religious communities: Islamic, Jewish, Catholic, Christian-Orthodox and Protestant. Some residents of Serbia, however, are not religious, but declare themselves to be agnostics or atheists. Due to the wars in the past (the latest one from 1992 to 1995) and long period of isolation of the country, the fear of otherness is still very present in Serbia and differences are usually seen as threat rather than an asset.

There is huge mistrust both in B&H and in Serbia between different nationalities (mostly between Serbs, Croats and Bosniacs) that is still present in spite of numerous initiatives that tried to build trust and reconciliation among different ethnic groups/nations. Learning for diversity is very difficult in this region because teachers frequently share dominant prejudices and convictions with other members of society. Teachers either do not understand and cannot recognize prejudices and discrimination of different minority and marginalised groups within the school/education context or deny personal responsibility in resolving problems of discriminatory practice in

education, and their own role in creating the learning context in which the same issues should be addressed from different and diverse perspectives (Pantic et al., 2010). This may explain why they are facing difficulties in how to work in diverse classrooms in multicultural settings. The ETF regional report reveals some problems teachers are struggling with, when it comes to inclusive/multicultural education. This is an example from Serbia:

Teachers don't know how to work with children who are not mainstream because at the faculty they are taught that children are a single (homogenous) category. They are taught that there are no differences. The result of such teacher education is that they fail to differentiate between the concepts of being equal and being the same and they therefore disregard the idea that 'we are not the same, but we should be equal.' Therefore, it's not unusual that teachers are afraid of diversity (Pantic et al., 2010:104).

This leads to the second reason why this project was important for teachers in both countries, and that is pre-service and in-service education of teachers and the educational system in general. Both countries are in the process of educational reform, aimed at creating an educational system that is inclusive, de-centralised, efficient and transparent; that promotes a culture of evaluation and self-evaluation, justice, tolerance and constructive communication; that engages well-educated, reflective and motivated professionals; that is capable of meeting special educational needs as well as the needs of minority and marginalised groups and that includes the perspective of life-long learning. However, a number of challenges still need to be faced.

- a) The educational system is still centralised, which diminishes the role of teachers and make them less visible in the process of education.
- b) The role of teachers is reduced to *implementers* of educational policies created by other experts in education – they are not seen as *creators* of their own practice nor reflective practitioners who constantly reflect upon and improve their practice.
- c) Teachers lack the competences needed for taking more proactive role in the process of education (self-fulfilling prophecies).

There is a gap between learning something and applying something, often caused by the lack of continuity between pre-service and in-service teacher education/professional

development, as well as the gap between their initial education and practice (Pantic et al., 2010; Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005). This lack of links between initial education of teachers and their professional development, and the in-service training is clearly evident at the moment when a teacher-apprentice comes to school and has to apply what he or she has learned as a student. When interviewed, a teacher educator at the University of Belgrade said this:

....when they go to the school they do not go to a context that enables them to implement what they learned here in the best way. They go back to an inert environment, where after two years they... adapt. Only the strongest ones have courage to stand up to their beliefs, the others conform... and all the effort here was in vain (Pantic et al., 2010).

During their education, the future teachers do not have enough chances to practice at schools and get acquainted with school life. Mentors within schools who could be a point of liaison between the school and the faculty are rare, so that novice teachers tend to quickly integrate into the existing culture and adapt themselves to the norms of the school (Pantic et al., 2010).

The education of teachers for different levels is fragmented. For example, elementary school teachers are educated at special faculties for teachers (Teachers Training Faculties or Pedagogical faculties), but subject teachers who teach higher grades of elementary schools and high school are educated in respective faculties based on their subject expertise (Literature, Science, Arts faculties etc.) At some teacher training faculties for elementary school teachers, students have been prepared to work in school and even to work in multicultural setting, but there is no such preparation in the faculties that educate future subject teachers. Those faculties are mostly content-oriented, focusing on acquiring subject knowledge such as language, history and natural sciences and they do not offer opportunities for student teachers to learn how to work with students nor provide any opportunity to develop an understanding of how to work with diversity in their classrooms.

Recent research and accompanying debates into the state and needs of the education and professional development of teachers clearly indicate that existing professional

development provision does not correspond with teachers' real needs or the need for reform as seen in the rest of Europe and beyond (Pašalić-Kreso et al., 2006).

Due to those challenges/problems, teachers accept mostly passive roles in the education system and do not see themselves as agents of change. They see educational reform as something imposed on them and most of them do not see the meaning of reform (Pantić & ČekićMarković, 2012), because they did not have chance to fully participate in the reform processes. For example, they may not have been consulted in any way. They perceive themselves as transmitters of knowledge and not creators of educational processes.

In this context, the idea of teachers as leaders of change was very challenging. In order to ensure the quality of teachers' involvement, the project was divided in several steps, each of them important for the process of developing future teacher leaders.

The first step, a very important one, was the selection of schools which were supposed to participate in the project. In both countries there was public call for schools, published in the local media. The selection criteria used were the following:

- Multiculturalism in school (children and parents that belong to different national/ethnic minorities)
- The school is clear about the problem it wants to deal with
- The problem identified by school includes various issues around cooperation with parents from different ethnic minorities
- The school has a commitment toward fostering parents' participation
- The school has the capacity to plan and implement school-based initiatives
- There is good cooperation between the school and the local community.

After reviewing all applications, five schools in Serbia and six schools in B&H were chosen. Some of them were selected because they have a large population of Roma children and they would like to establish partnership with Roma parents in order to improve the quality of education for Roma children. Other schools were selected because they work in multicultural settings, with children from different ethnic groups, and they would like to foster the participation of parents from minority groups and help them to cooperate better, both with the school and among themselves.

The next step was initial meetings with teachers/school representatives. In Serbia there was one meeting (a two day seminar) for teachers who were elected to represent their schools (two teachers from each school) and in Bosnia initial meetings were school-based. The aim of the seminar/initial meetings was to inform participants of the topic of the school-based initiatives (parents' participation as defined in APREME project) and the process of planning and implementing initiatives (the ITL teacher leadership project methodology). During the initial meeting/seminar in Serbia participants were asked to think about problems concerning parents' participation they would want to work on, the goal they would like to achieve, obstacles and opportunities in achieving the goal and steps toward that goal (activities that have to be done in order to achieve the goal). They were also asked to think about the impact of their intervention (who would be affected by their initiative and in what way) and about potential stakeholders in the whole process. They were asked to help with establishing the group of teachers in their schools who would be interested to join them and plan some action that would foster parents' participation. The method of planning and implementation as well as the role of the mentors in their future work was explained to them. According to participants, the training was helpful in clarifying the goal and the process of school-based action planning and implementation. They said they were committed to the process and they would help in the coordination and organization of local school teams. In Bosnia, initial meetings were held in schools, aimed at informing school management and teachers about the project and establishing groups of teachers committed to work on their development projects concerning parents' participation.

The third step was school-based work with teachers who were interested in participating in the project. At the beginning, they were asked to identify problems they consider important when it comes to partnership with parents from different minority

and marginalised groups. Problems identified by teachers in Serbia and B&H were divided into several categories:

- In some schools the main problem identified by participants was how to promote the value of education and to help minority parents (especially Roma parents) to provide better support for their children in the process of education.
- In some schools, the problem was how to foster Roma parents' participation in different aspects of the school life, to achieve better cooperation between parents and school and to increase inter-cultural sensitivity in school (for all parents, not just Roma parents).
- In some schools with different national/cultural minority groups, the problem was how to support parents from those groups in promoting their cultural identities and make them more visible in the formal and informal curriculum.
- In two high schools (one in Serbia and one in B&H) the problem was the fact that parents' participation is gradually decreasing during the education process, so when the student comes to high school, parents' participation is reduced to a minimum. Teachers wanted to find ways to involve more parents in different aspects of the school life and to make that involvement more sustainable.

There were 52 teachers who actively participated in the project (24 in Serbia and 28 in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and one Roma teaching assistant (a person from the Roma community who supports Roma children in the process of education – representing “the bridge” between Roma community and school) from Serbia. Including the initial meeting, there were six meetings per school. Besides that, participants and mentors were in touch through individual sessions (at least one per teacher) in B&H and Skype or mail correspondence (in between formal meetings). Meetings were held usually after the school day and the structure of meeting was discussed in advance by the mentor team according to the specifics of the school context and needs of the particular group. The atmosphere was relaxed, teachers were encouraged to talk openly about problems they have, weaknesses they faced during the projects, lessons learned, ideas for future

work, etc. Teachers did not hesitate to talk openly about problems they faced during their development projects. In one school in northern Serbia one teacher said that she was relaxed because

*nobody would judge my suggestions and opinion and I am not going to be labeled in any way.*

In Sarajevo, one of the participants commented:

*this work with colleagues was very valuable. The atmosphere was very nice, ideas were exchanged freely and all of us helped each other, in a way, to implement our projects in the best way. I felt support of the people I don't know, and everyone was able to give me the idea or some advice on how to be more successful. The support and availability of the project leaders at any moment meant a lot, too.*

School mentors, or group leaders, were highly experienced professionals who are in different ways involved in teachers' pre-service and in-service training. Since they all had experience in working with teachers, they were respected by participants and they gained their confidence very quickly. That was both helpful, because participants were open enough to talk about problems they are facing, and restrictive, because they expected from the mentor to solve the problem instead of them. Some mentors reported that attitude as the main obstacle at the beginning, so they had to show very clearly that they are there to support, not to act instead of teachers.

Sessions were very participatory: the structure was open enough for different suggestions and needs. During the sessions it became very clear that most of the teachers liked the structure. They were willing to participate, but they needed 'strong' facilitation, so mentors had a difficult task: how to support teachers and yet not do things for them -how to preserve the facilitator role. Gradually, during the process, teachers started to be more independent. They realized they had freedom to explore different opportunities and at the end of the project they acted like autonomous professionals.

The teachers were very satisfied with the support they received. They said that they learned to think in terms of small steps, they learned to plan things better, they learned how to conduct surveys in order to get to know what their students and parents think

and what they needed, and they learned the importance of being informed through all the phases of the project. They also learned more about genuine cooperation with parents. One teacher said: 'I learned how to do things *with* parents, not *on behalf of* them!' Evaluation showed that teacher leadership process was challenging both for teachers and mentors. Teachers said that at the beginning the idea of teacher leadership was very attractive and tempting, but they were vague about how to implement this idea in their work. Through facilitation they realized they have many possible ways of doing this and that was valuable for them. Another benefit is that they were "liberated" in the way that they stopped expecting enormous results that "would change the whole educational system". One teacher said: "Now I realize that I can make changes on a small scale that would still be valuable and appreciated". For mentors, the main problem was how to "liberate" teachers and how to remain in a facilitator role. One mentor said:

*My problem was how to resist not to judge their projects in terms of sustainability and not to impose my perception of the problem and possible solution.*

### **Outcomes – development projects**

51 projects were developed during this process (23 projects in Serbia and 28 projects in BiH). Teachers' projects were diverse in terms of level of parents' participation, different aspects of school life in which parents were involved and the level of multicultural cooperation between parents, students and teachers. Projects were divided into five groups:

#### ***Informing parents about different aspects of school life***

Informing parents about different aspects of school life and the ways they could be involved in the school life is one of the prerequisites for active parents' participation and successful partnership between parents and school. Informing parents is especially important when it comes to Roma parents because one of the main problems identified by teachers was lack of information. Roma parents often do not know how to participate and they do not know school procedures that enable their children to benefit from education. That is why some teachers' projects were aimed at informing Roma parents about possibilities that are offered through elementary education, benefits

and opportunities of elementary education, rights and duties they have in the process of education and procedures for the enrollment of their children in elementary school. The idea was to motivate parents to support the education of their children and to involve them actively in promoting the value of education.

### ***Educating parents / Parents as educators***

Some projects used parents as a valuable resource to talk about some issues that might interest other parents and children. Parents' expertise in many fields was used for the education of other parents and students. Parents talked about some problems that are important for other parents: how to deal with peer violence, how to cope with adolescent crisis, how to help children with studying, communication skills, conflict resolution, etc.

### ***Parents' participation in curricular activities***

Some projects undertaken by teachers in Serbia aimed at encouraging minority parents' participation in the formal curriculum: parents were invited to participate in different courses (such as Folk tradition, History and Language) and to teach students about their culture and their language. Those projects were very important for minority parents' visibility: by involving parents from minority groups in the teaching process, their perspective became present and visible in formal school curriculum.

### ***Parents' participation in extra curricular activities***

Parents were encouraged to take active roles in creating and conducting different workshops together with teachers and students: sports events, reading books, art classes and exhibitions, science workshops, drama classes, giving school performances during the national holidays of different minority groups (international Roma day, for example) etc. These projects were significant because different cultures were promoted and parents and students from different cultures had the chance to get to know each other's culture better and to interact with each other.

### ***Parents as activists take the initiative to improve life in their local communities***

These projects were the most participative ones, because parents were acting as real activists, agents of change, taking initiatives to improve life in their local community. Together with teachers they were trying to identify problems in school life that affect

their children the most and they planned the action necessary to solve those problems. Parents were visible as potential allies and partners with teachers, trying to work in the best interests of their children.

### **The impact of the teacher leadership process**

Evaluation showed that the teacher leadership process had impact on 4 different levels:

#### ***Impact on teachers***

At first, teachers had problems with the concept of leadership in terms of taking the initiative because a) they thought they were not competent enough and b) they thought they needed to create major change in the educational system. Gradually, they were becoming more and more proactive. What helped them most was the teacher leadership itself, e.g. small steps from the definition of the problem and planning actions to create change, to the evaluation of achieved results and planning new steps. They were *learning by doing* which was very valuable for them and after each step they were becoming more self confident and proactive. The idea of teacher leadership is in a way different from many other forms of professional support (usually in the form of in-service teacher training), for several reasons.

First, this work is undertaken completely by teachers. The mentor is a facilitator and provides support, but the idea is the teacher's and the implementation and evaluation are done by teachers themselves. Secondly, it fosters teachers' autonomy and freedom to change and improve her/his practice and this is done by teachers themselves – through their teacher-led development projects and 'experimentation'. In other programmes, teachers are prepared for the change they need to make and strongly directed through this process. Third, teacher leadership does not provide the content or identify things that need to be improved or changed. Instead it provides tools through which change could happen. Finally, teacher leadership is not exclusive. It does not require months of education and training, like some in service training programmes. Every teacher could be a leader, as one teacher from Sarajevo commented:

*I learned that we should appreciate ourselves and our work more, because every change, no matter how small, is very important and big.*

### ***Impact on parents and students***

Teachers reported increased level of parents' participation and motivation to be involved in different aspects of school life. Parents were very glad to be informed about different opportunities for their involvement. They were motivated to participate and they attracted more parents to become involved. What is especially important is the fact that parents were involved not only in extracurricular activities, but they participated in curricular activities too which is rare in our schools. They were involved in teaching and that was genuine participation, rather than tokenism. Parents learned how to be effective allies to teachers in the best interests of children. Concerning children, they all had a chance to learn about other cultures and children from minority and marginalised groups experienced the visibility of their culture inclusion of their group perspective in school curriculum.

### ***Impact on school***

Since all the developmental projects had the same overall objective, that is, how to foster parents/minority parents participation in different aspects of school life and how to improve cooperation with parents, we might say that those projects made a significant impact on schools. School became more open for parents. Experiences from the projects that showcased parents as activists pointed to the impact of the projects both for school and the local community. They indicated that school could expand its traditional role (teaching and learning within the 'school walls') and become interested in solving the problems of the local community. This opens the field for genuine cooperation between local community and school and real partnership between parents and teachers. What was also clear after the projects were completed was that both teachers and parents started to perceive their roles and relationships in different ways: they stopped being opponents and started to be collaborators on the same task: meeting the best interests of children.

### ***Impact on educational system***

This impact could only be concluded indirectly, since it was not tangible like the previous ones. The Teacher Leadership project is about *decentralization* in education,

about empowering teachers to be creators of their practice, not just implementers of the ideas created by other experts in education. It is about empowering teachers to become reflective practitioners, who critically examine and reexamine their practice. This competence stands highly on the list of competencies needed for working in contemporary world, according to educational policies in Serbia and B&H.

### **Concluding remarks – possible challenges**

The main challenge we faced after the project was how to keep up with good practice. Teachers were highly motivated by their development work. They were very engaged in doing their development projects, but the question of sustainability of their motivation still remains. Do they need further mentoring and support? How can we make the core group (the group of teachers who participated in this project) sustainable? How can we attract more teachers from the school? After ‘beginner’s enthusiasm’, are they going to go back to previous mode of professional work and cooperation? These questions were discussed with teachers. Teachers said they would like to have support in the future although this does not have to be regular. They found it important to have a “resource person” to whom they could talk to if needed. They were very proud of what they achieved and they would like to share that. We talked about modes of promotion of projects they created and some teachers mentioned so called “open classes” (classes that are open for all teachers who would like to participate) and public discussions on the level of town or even region through which they could share what they have learned during this process.

One important step toward sustainability is networking. Teachers said that they would like to share this experience with other colleagues from their school and from other schools. That is why we organised national network events for all schools that participated in the project, but also regional network events where teachers from B&H and Serbia got together and exchange their experiences. For some teachers, because of the war and post-war isolation, that was the first time they had the opportunity to meet their colleagues from the other country, and discuss some professional issues. Those network events were great starting points for building allies, since this is a crucial element of the teacher leadership process: teachers need support from other colleagues

and they need to explore different ways of how to make allies within their group of colleagues, nationally and regionally. This is how the concept of teacher leadership might travel across cultural and national boundaries.

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