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Title: Dimensions of the Role of the Head Teacher in the Educational System in Poland

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Citation style: Dyrda Beata, Przybylska Irena. (2008). Dimensions of the Role of the Head Teacher in the Educational System in Poland. "The New Educational Review" (Vol. 16, No 3-4 (2008), s. 127-135)



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Dimensions of the Role of the Head Teacher in the Educational System in Poland

Abstract

Education is increasingly defined as an essential factor not only in cultural and social progress but also in economic and political development.

The effectiveness of a school's management depends mainly on its leaders: the head teacher and deputy head teachers. Their roles, duties, competences and professional preparation are presented in the following article.

Key words: *head teacher, educational management, competences of school manager*

Introduction

Since the 1980s reforms and modifications of elements comprising educational systems have been implemented in all European countries. They particularly concern educational management. Observing the changes in educational management two aspects can be mentioned. They are: decentralization and involving society in the decision-making process. In general, decentralization means shifting decision-making from the central to regional and local level. Decisions can concern changes in the structure of the educational system, modifications of curricula, the process of teachers' employment, educational supervision and financial management. Referring to socialization, which in fact is the consequence of decentralization and democratization of education, it enables individuals involved in education to participate in the process of school management. These individuals could be: parents, representatives of local authorities, groups of educational consultants, representatives of teachers' associations, pupils, members of the business world, ethnic and linguistic minorities or even religious groups. The same changes have

been taking place in Poland, too, but they started some 10 years later because of the political transformation.

The amount of attention paid to educational reforms is rising as social expectations towards it are rising, too. Education is increasingly defined as an essential factor not only in cultural and social progress but also in economic and political development.

The effectiveness of a school's management depends mainly on its leaders: the head teacher and deputy head teachers. Their roles, duties, competences and professional preparation are presented in the following sections of this article.

Duties and responsibilities of the head teacher

Regarding the role of the head teacher it is important to remember that each school is unique because of the main important parties: teachers, pupils and parents. Leading and managing is a complex and responsible task, demanding thorough theoretical knowledge, a lot of skills, tact and abilities to foresee the consequences of decisions and changes. A good school leader should keep asking himself/herself questions about how to manage the school effectively. When we talk about an effective school we mean one which is:

- Autonomic
- Friendly and safe
- Self-reforming
- Flexible
- Open to social needs
- Cooperative – where all engaged parties cooperate.

In this vision of an effective school a head teacher is a coordinator. In order to play this role he/she needs extensive competences. Sufficient qualifications cannot be acquired only during pre-service education, but they are the result of everyday practice and school problem solving. The head teacher who wants to lead his/her school efficiently should begin with his/her personal development and strive for self – knowledge and self-perfection. Quite often changing the post from teacher to head teacher causes problems because the new head teacher suddenly sees the school from a new perspective. A newly promoted head teacher must get used to and accept numerous changes:

- New perception of school problems
- More managing, less teaching
- Interpersonal relations – the necessity of being in contact with administration, local authorities, parents, and less contact with pupils

- Becoming a public person
- The burden of responsibility
- New duties: negotiations, seeking sponsors, etc.

Among the competences indispensable for leading the school we can point to three sets of crucial competences. Self-development competences are the kind of personal competences which help the headmaster to adapt to the change of the post and load of duties. They are comprised of: planning self-development, self-motivation for work and achievement, managing one's own emotions, dealing with the stress which is caused by the numerous new responsibilities. Moreover, it is essential to mention abilities connected with organization of work and meeting deadlines. The next group of competences – team building – consists of interpersonal, communicative competences and abilities to resolve conflicts, negotiate, motivate people for work and cooperation, along with abilities to appraise people's achievement. Such abilities enable them to work out their own leadership style and way of managing a group of people.

The last group of competences provides the headmaster with a holistic view of the organization, the ability to create and build their vision of the organization and to realize it. Planning the development of an institution, managing changes, knowledge of the law, especially educational matters, along with marketing procedures are pragmatic and useful competences. It is also important for an efficient headmaster to cooperate with other institutions like local authorities, schools, organizations educating teachers and other cultural and financial organizations.

The above-mentioned competences are interconnected. The most effective school leader behaviour is strong in both initiating structure and consideration.

According to the research carried out on a sample of postgraduate students of educational management (cf. Plewka, 2000, p. 428), being a headmaster is connected with some particular skills. For example, more than 50% of the respondents indicated leadership skills as the most important. Implementing changes and managing a school were mentioned by every third student. 1/5 of the respondents considered school promotion, creating the image of the school and decision-making as the most important. The least mentioned skills were: seeking a sponsor and a sense of responsibility.

In the same research the respondents defined the necessary features of an effective head teacher. The most commonly mentioned features were: competent, professional, open to change, creative, innovative, enterprising, stress-resistant, self-developing, tolerant, motivated, flexible, patient, helpful, kind, good at negotiating (Plewka, 2000, p. 60).

Moreover, leaders make a difference when we consider promoting and implementing changes. In educational organizations there is an assumption that leaders

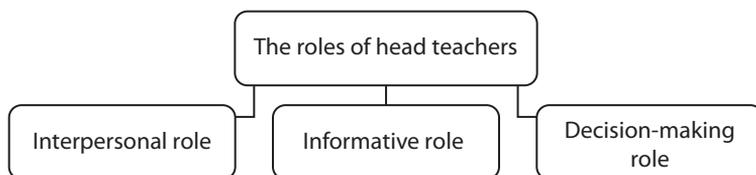
of educational change should be both leaders and managers. There are abilities and features that enable them to change the school or other education institution. Recently, educational reforms in Poland have increased the head master's independence in the decision-making process concerning various aspects of school administration and implementing changes. Both educational authorities and parents expect the head master to initiate and implement changes improving the school as a formal and interpersonal structure

The leaders who guide or provoke their organizations to change must have a vision and develop it with their co-workers, forge a shared vision. According to research (Ekiert-Grabowska, 1997) the effective leaders who managed to change their school or other institution are proactive and ready to take risk. They are capable of assessing the needs of their clientele, anticipate the need to change and advance the school organization. They begin with a personal vision, too. Their communication of the vision is such that it empowers people to act. According to Ekiert – Grabowska (1997) visionary leadership is dynamic and involves three steps:

1. having a vision
2. sharing it with others
3. empowering them to put the vision into practice.

Competences are the source of the headmaster's main roles:

Scheme 1. Head teacher's basic roles.



Source: based on Plewka (2000, p. 65)

The interpersonal role is a formal duty to represent the organization. It is connected with creating interpersonal relations in the institution and inspiring employees to undertake challenges. The head teacher is a kind of link among particular organizational units within the institution.

The informative role concerns the flow of information in the institution and the head teacher is perceived as the source and transferer of important information so he/she manages the information flow in the institution and with outside organizations.

The decisive roles are very complex and indispensable in every action as they demand decisions. Of course, some decisions are more important, others less so and some are strategic.

In theory there is an abundance of concepts regarding a head teacher's competences and most often there is a congruence among them. According to us it is possible to divide the competences into two groups:

1. internal (planning, controlling, managing, organizing, employer duties)
2. external (representing the school, cooperating with other organizations, building the image of the school or institution).

Summing up, it is worth mentioning that in the majority of cases the headmaster remains a teacher. In order to cope with the duties he/she must possess a lot of organizational competences, must be highly motivated, creative and ready to cooperate.

Normative regulations for being a head teacher

Appointing the head teacher

The legal status of the headmaster, in accordance with The Educational System Act of 1991 (with amendments), is based on his/ her roles:

- an administrator in public education – a civil servant
- the leader of a school (public educational institution)
- the manager of an institution – an employer of the teaching and non-teaching staff
- an employee of a school – a teacher.

Before the roles are conferred, the question of who can be a school head teacher should be answered. The requirements are set by the Minister of Education, except for the post in art schools, which is supervised by the Minister of Culture. Referring once more to The Educational System Act, The Regulation by The Minister of National Education (2001) and The Teacher's Charter, a person aspiring for the post of the head teacher must meet some standards:

- if he/she is a teacher and is employed as a teacher – all qualifications demanded to be a teacher (a master's degree in education)
- has completed postgraduate studies in educational management
- at least 5 years of work as a teacher or high school teacher
- positive appraisal of his/her work during the previous 5 years of work
- good physical condition.

Legal acts, mainly The Act Educational System, enable not only teachers to be appointed to the post of head teacher. It reflects the attempt to create a post

of school manager rather than head teacher. Consequently, apart from working teachers, teachers who are not employed and other candidates, who meet the above standards, can apply for the post.

The head teacher is appointed by the body running the school (usually the government) in accordance with open competition rules. The body running the school announces a competition. A competition commission considers the applications and candidates' professional achievements. It consists of:

- 2 representatives of the body running the school
- 2 representatives of the educational authority (who are responsible for educational standards)
- 2 representatives of the teachers' council at the school at which a head teacher is needed
- 2 representatives of the parents' council.

The body running a school employs the head teacher for a 5 – year tenure. In some cases the post can be occupied for minimum 1 year, but with the agreement of the regional superintendent.

A head teacher is obliged to appoint his/her deputy and executive staff after consultation with the body running the school, the school council (if envisaged in the school statute) and the pedagogical council.

The head teacher's responsibilities

The head teacher's responsibilities can be gathered into a few groups:

- Administrative work – the head master is entitled to issue administrative decisions regarding school obligations (deferring it or advancing, fulfilling it in other forms, etc.)
- Managing the school and representing it externally:
 - Employs and dismisses staff
 - Decides on salaries after agreement and approval of the body running the school
 - Can award and discipline staff
 - Decides on vacation schedules
 - Plans the lessons and classes (with a deputy)
 - Arranges and chairs teachers' council meetings
 - Implements the decisions of the school council and teachers' council
 - Cooperates with other school structures
 - Supervises in case he/she is a qualified teacher, otherwise it is the duty of a deputy
 - Assesses teachers' work

- Ensuring conditions for the holistic development of pupils, especially psychological, physical and social
- Managing the finances of the school, responsibility for their proper use
- Organizing teacher training, cooperation with higher schools.

The teacher who is nominated to the post of headmaster is, to some extent, relieved from teaching duties. The binding rule is the bigger the school, the fewer teaching hours the headmaster has. For example, at a school with up to 4 classes the head master is obliged to teach 12 hours a week, in comparison, at a bigger school (17 or more classes) the limit is 3 hours.

The work of a head teacher is supervised and evaluated by the local authorities that run the school (financial, organizational matters) and the local superintendent (pedagogical supervision). Moreover, the school council or parents' councils can assess the work of the head teacher and influence it to some extent.

Professional training and development of head teachers

Being a head teacher in a Polish school is not only a chance to develop leadership competences, it is an obligation. Qualifications can be improved and developed in two forms: postgraduate studies in the area of educational management at universities or academies and leadership courses organized by Provincial In-service Centres. Completing postgraduate studies is compulsory because it gives the necessary qualifications to be a head teacher. The postgraduate studies and leadership courses provide head masters or aspiring head masters with the skills necessary to support the development of a strong leader who can give strategic direction, whilst maintaining accountability. The curricula of studies and courses are based on the assumption that only an effective head master leads an effective school. What do we mean by an effective head master? The head teacher of a modern school should be able to:

- develop managerial skills: manage the people not only the organization
- manage the curricula
- set staff targets and performance indicators, monitor performance and quality assurance procedures – should be creative and innovative and able to motivate people
- understand the impact of technology within the school and ensure that it makes the best use of it
- lead and manage staff within the school and unions
- work with governors, local government, parents and businesses, manage, plan and deliver change within the school.

The idea of self-development and learning by doing is a foundation of postgraduate studies in the area of educational management. Everyday work is perceived as a source of experience which can lead to learning and development. Thanks to the concentration on learners and their self – development , the work of institutions and teams advances.

The process of professional development of headmasters is an indispensable element in school development. The characteristics of good school leaders are vital in creating the characteristics of effective schools. Consequently, an effective school contributes to the efficiency of the entire educational system.

The holistic approach to the process of development in educational management is based on three important elements:

- individual development
- organizational development
- professional development (Ekiert-Grabowska, Oldroyd, 1998, p. 15)

Development in all these areas is the key to educational progress.

Summary

Managing a school is unique and specific because of the group of people the leader works with – pupils and teachers. Thanks to the constant changes in educational policy in Poland and rising social expectations, not to mention financial difficulties, being a headmaster is becoming ever more difficult.

The challenge is to cope with some expectations and obstacles:

- educate and understand people not only lead them
- manage teachers and pupils, which might be the cause of conflicts and require empathy, patience and indulgence
- the organizational structure is not very advanced, burdening the head master with additional responsibilities: marketing, managing finances, recruiting staff or even being a speaker
- Polish teachers seem to be change-resistant, not very adaptable which makes managing them a real challenge.

To sum up various, often staggering changes defy head teachers with new and advanced tasks. Cultural and social transformations trigger off educational changes, as well. In the work of the head teacher three processes, or more precisely the way they are perceived, condition the effectiveness of his/her work:

1. **management** of the school so it is a well-functioning organization
2. **development** – facilitating individual development and team work

3. **leadership** – empowering people to understand the vision and mission of the school (Ekiert-Grabowska, Oldroyd, 1998, pp. 24–25).

Both in theory and practice the assumption is made that only creative, open-minded, self-developing head teachers with organizational skills can effectively manage, develop and lead their organizations.

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