School Leadership and Education Diplomacy

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Introduction

Fostering and developing effective school leaders has become an important part of education reforms worldwide (Schleicher, 2012). A critical element of effective school leadership is the ability to forge and maintain collaborative working relationships within schools as well as across the wider community. This requires both an intellectual approach to positioning school leaders within the broader policy setting for education and development and a practical effort to develop and strengthen partnerships.

While the renewed focus on the need to support school leaders with training programs, at both pre-service and in-service levels, that incorporate coaching and mentoring (Bush & Jackson, 2002) is commendable, increased attention should also be directed to the content of these training programs. Are school leaders being provided with intellectual and practical guidance that will help them understand and execute their roles in the education and development system? When designed correctly, school leadership training programs can enhance the effective practices of leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Education Diplomacy, a concept developed by the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), provides both a conceptual and practical framework for helping school leaders understand and develop the collaborative competencies to more effectively complete their work.

This paper recognizes school leaders as critical stakeholders for development and proposes that Education Diplomacy is a useful approach for understanding as well as facilitating school leadership within the paradigm of global sustainable development. Education Diplomacy is an innovative approach to education sector advancement that has two key goals: 1) promoting and positioning education as having key intrinsic and instrumental value, and 2) fostering effective and efficient cooperation, coordination, and collaboration for managing and solving education challenges. Education Diplomacy’s focus on collaboration as a key strategy for achieving education outcomes matches the imperative for school leadership to embrace collaborative approaches, particularly in a development setting that emphasizes partnerships and engagement within and beyond the education sector.

Sustainable Development and Education Leadership

Education Diplomacy played an important role in placing education as a key component of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the inclusion of Education SDG 4,
which identifies a set of targets for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning. Adopted by world leaders in 2015, the SDG agenda is a broad and comprehensive framework that attempts to structure the multiple and interconnected elements that contribute to a better quality of life for all. The new agenda calls for balance among the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development and asserts that they should be jointly considered and pursued in all initiatives. Education SDG 4 has 10 targets covering different aspects of education, and education is also mentioned in the context of health (SDG 3), economic growth and employment (SDG 8), and climate change (SDG 13). Although not explicitly mentioned in the other SDGs, education is also central to the alleviation of poverty and achieving gender equality, reduced inequalities, and peace and justice.

A key feature of the SDG agenda is its emphasis on viewing development as a holistic undertaking that requires input and involvement from all stakeholders and sectors. This perspective reflects a rejection of the single-sector or “siloed” approaches to development that characterized the framework of the Millennium Development Goals, the development agenda that preceded the SDGs from 2000-2015. Such approaches were deemed to be ineffective, as they did not account for the impact one area of policy has on other policy sectors, they did not involve the full range of stakeholders necessary to build a complete picture of the development problem and craft an appropriate and feasible solution, and they did not fully account for the ways in which actions taken at one level of governance are shaped by other levels.

In contrast, the 2030 SDG framework emphasizes that the goals, targets, and means of implementation are “universal, indivisible and interlinked” (Article 71). The new agenda enshrines this indivisibility through a specific goal for partnerships at all levels and across all sectors (SDG 17). This has renewed consideration of which actors need to work with whom, and in what ways, to successfully achieve the vision of the agenda. It also invites consideration of new and different spaces and opportunities for interaction and collaboration.

In response to the integrated imperative of the new sustainable development agenda, it is proposed that education leaders understand an “integrated planning” approach to education and development (Persaud, 2017). In this framework, integration can be viewed “horizontally,” meaning how different policy sectors work together (e.g., education, health, and social protection); “vertically,” meaning how different levels of government are coordinated (e.g., national level actors with district-level and school-level actors); and “laterally,” meaning how different types of stakeholders collaborate (e.g., state and non-state actors, or schools with private, business, or community-based entities). An integrated planning approach prompts consideration of how all three dimensions of integration – horizontal, vertical, and lateral – interact, and invites education stakeholders to consider their roles and positions within this integrated platform.
From the perspective of education leadership, each of us, in our different capacities within the education sector, must consider how we can work together to contribute to this joint project of sustainable development. As we do so, we will need to develop the appropriate skills and competencies to reach across boundaries and sectors and forge effective relationships and partnerships as we pursue joint approaches.

**School Leadership and Collaboration**

Within the education ecosystem, school leaders are recognized as critical for ensuring inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning within the institutions they build and shape. While the extent and nature of responsibilities falling to school leaders varies across education systems and contexts, the expectations are immense in any setting. School leaders are tasked in many cases with both system management and instructional leadership. Collaboration is a key element that underpins many of these responsibilities of school leadership.

Within the schools they manage, school leaders are expected to foster collaborative work and relationships among staff, and between staff and students. Creating collaborative frameworks and strong working relationships among staff is considered a key strategy for improving instructional leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Such a relationship requires a common vision and goal for success, and the structures to share resources, ideas, and provide coherent approaches to instruction. This type of collaborative approach and culture has been linked to gains in school effectiveness and student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

School leaders are responsible for setting the tone and vision of the school and are held accountable for student learning and outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). The type of school leadership provided influences the entire organizational culture of the school environment (Teasley, 2017). School leaders are also responsible for overseeing administrative functions and the maintenance upkeep of schools. Models of "collaborative leadership" within schools point to the benefits of expanding the notion of leadership from one focusing on a sole principal or head-teacher to a networked approach that views vice-principals, or deputies, and heads of department and teachers as contributors to a form of “distributed leadership” (Hallinger & Heck, 1999). Collaboration among school leaders in such a way is another indication of the need to work together.

Looking beyond the school, school leaders are expected to view students holistically and, in recognition of the diverse student supports needed, to collaborate with other community stakeholders, including those involved in health, nutrition, and welfare. School leaders forge relationships with many different types of actors, including parents and community organizations or other entities that can help create a system of support around students that extends beyond academics. Working with different stakeholders is also important in fortifying the school’s resource base, building its relationship with the community and
contributing to its sustainability. Building connections between schools and communities has been a key focus of school leadership; with a sustainable development agenda lens, it becomes even more important to consider the school’s linkages to both its local and global environments.

In many countries, decentralization efforts, and associated increases in school autonomy, have augmented the roles and powers of school leaders. In discharging their roles and responsibilities, school leaders operate within varied organizational settings as well as a nested governance framework, with policies and different tiers of government shaping their autonomy, accountability, and access to resources. School leaders navigate relationships with school-level bodies, such as boards and Parent-Teacher Associations, district education authorities, local governments, and national education actors. These various entities and individuals require differentiated strategies and approaches for successful engagement, highlighting the need for school leaders to acquire the appropriate skill set and competencies to forge effective relationships across multiple stakeholders.

The SDG agenda augments this already considerable portfolio of school leaders by opening space for school leaders to renew their consideration of how they work with others to achieve outcomes, and to re-consider their role in supporting the wider agenda of sustainable development. The focus on learning outcomes in the SDG education agenda creates pressure on school leaders to embrace “learning-centered leadership” (Vaillant, 2015) and re-examine their role in creating the conditions that support strong student achievement.

Attention is also being paid to the ways in which the education sector – and schools – can leverage their own resources and those of other policy sectors to create synergies that can improve education delivery and development as a whole. This highlights the need for school leaders to think widely and creatively about potential collaborative stakeholders who may not be part of the traditionally defined “education sector.” For example, schools face the challenge of maximizing use of physical school infrastructure in rapidly urbanizing environments where space is a premium and sustainability is a key consideration (Bartlett et al., 2016). Schools also must accommodate increasing numbers of students, while being mindful of their roles in providing a space for inclusion, cohesion, and engagement with wider sustainability issues in urban settings. These multiple considerations bring schools, and school leaders, into relationships with a number of different sectors and stakeholders, including urban and municipal planners, architects, or environmental interest groups. Clearly, the sphere of school leadership is rapidly expanding within a dynamic and increasingly interconnected development paradigm.

**Influences on the Abilities of School Leaders to Lead**
This paper’s brief consideration of the wide array of school leaders’ important responsibilities supports the contention that an effective school leader must be of superhero status to manage the multiple competing demands for strong direction and leadership.

However, the ability of school leaders to provide effective leadership is mediated by a number of factors, including personal characteristics, political influences, institutional contexts, and socio-cultural settings. The nature of school leadership varies across different social and cultural contexts, and across and within countries. In particular, resource-constrained settings in the global South are often characterized by limited autonomy or autocratic leadership tendencies that can undermine efforts at collaboration (Oplatka, 2004). In such cases, the uncritical transfer of Anglo-centric ideas and concepts may not be useful (Oduro et al., 2007).

School leaders across the world operate in vastly different settings related to policies, budgets, responsibilities, school and student characteristics, expectations, and available resources. The understanding and practice of “leadership” differs in important ways across different cultures and contexts (Dimmock & Walker, 2000).

Research on how to build cohesive systems that support school leadership points to the need for well-coordinated policies and initiatives that address leadership standards, training, and conditions faced by principals (Augustine et al., 2009). Strategies identified that help to build this cohesion include developing trust, creating networks, fostering communication, exerting pressure and influence, promoting quality of leadership policies, building capacity, identifying strong leaders, and connecting to other reform efforts (Augustine et al., 2009).

It is clear that many elements and influences contribute to the outcomes of collaborative ventures, but this paper advances the critical role of the individuals who are part of and lead these processes. The management and leadership skills required of individuals who are increasingly being tasked with moving out of traditionally hierarchical structures to spearhead and manage cross-sector collaborations are complex (Williams, 2002). Focusing on the skill set and competencies that school leaders have for discharging their responsibilities is a critical element in providing effective school leadership.

**Education Diplomacy and Its Value for Supporting School Leaders**

Education Diplomacy, as the name suggests, incorporates perspectives and practices from the field of diplomacy into the advancement of the education sector. The “diplomacy” dimension of Education Diplomacy asserts the need for greater cooperation within the education sector and across the sector, urging consideration of education sector issues as important ideals to be shared, communicated, and promoted. This aligns with a key responsibility of school leaders to promote their schools and the education sector at large.
as important features of development to be valued and supported by external stakeholders within the community. School leaders in many ways act as ambassadors for their schools and students, working to identify how they can advance education priorities and leverage resources through collaboration with other sectors and actors. They understand the need to build partnerships and balance diverse perspectives and needs.

School leaders who currently work within the system to pursue these objectives understand very clearly how challenging it is to build and maintain these partnerships. Many challenges will be encountered during collaboration, including the time it takes, establishing open lines of communication, overcoming inherent and organizationally cultivated territorialism, managing different expectations, navigating varying organizational structures and values, and working with different personalities. Even when collaboration is agreed upon, implementation of a collaborative initiative or working relationship can be stymied by poor decisions related to the collaborative structure, procedures, and practices.

**Integrated Planning and Education Diplomacy**

Working together to achieve outcomes, at the school and other levels, requires a carefully developed approach and skill set. Education Diplomacy is rooted in the study and practice of the diplomatic field and provides a framework within which school leaders can understand and practice collaboration.

Conceptually, it is useful to recall the horizontal, vertical, and lateral dimensions of the integrated planning approach, which school leaders can use to locate the role of school leadership in the wider development setting. Education Diplomacy, then, helps to position school leaders within the integrated framework of sectors and actors working together across various levels. Education Diplomacy prompts education stakeholders to analyze their own positionality, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as to map the opportunities provided from other stakeholders and sectors for collaboration toward common goals. School leaders will find Education Diplomacy to be a helpful guide in creating both an analytical and operational approach to stakeholder engagement.

Further, the Education Diplomacy model provides a practical approach to building the skills and competencies of individual school leaders, enhancing their ability to analyze and solve education challenges that incorporate multi-sector and multi-stakeholder dimensions. The **Education Diplomacy “5L” framework** developed by ACEI provides a comprehensive and process-oriented approach for applying Education Diplomacy principles. Key Education Diplomacy skills and competencies that are embedded into this framework include: communication, building trust and mutual respect, exploring influence and persuasion, managing power dynamics, fostering consensus and compromise, and negotiation techniques. These are some of the most important skills that education practitioners need to effectively solve complex problems and create strong and effective
partnerships with different sectors and multiple stakeholders at local, national, and international levels.

It is not enough to encourage school leaders to forge collaborative relationships without adequate attention to whether or not they have the abilities to effectively do so. Education Diplomacy is built on a recognition of diverse cultures, perspectives, and settings, and is customizable to different contexts. The Education Diplomacy skill set provides a structure for thinking about individual school leadership settings and a skill set for school leaders that facilitates development of unique collaborative approaches to problems.
References


