

## EDUCATING IN TRUST AND FOR TRUST: THE IMPORTANCE OF (SCHOOL) LEADERSHIP

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### Abstract

Equity, quality and inclusion are essential aims of the education agenda. Education leadership can support their achievement but needs trust as the essential ingredient for effective leaders. Trust, is the belief that others will act with integrity and in others' best interest. It is the foundation of successful organizations, including schools. Leaders must be taught both how to trust, and how to be trusted. They need to be taught how to manage 'relation risks' to create bonds between people and achieve common goals. This paper explores the connections between school leadership and trust looking also at some specific education actors.

Keywords: leadership, education, trust, non-state actors, SDG 4

JEL codes: A10, I21

### Introduction

Education is changing rapidly at local, national and international level. The change of education systems has accelerated during COVID pandemic. And in many countries technology is changing teaching and learning creating new issues and challenges (UNESCO, 2023). Despite there are multiple justifications to state interventions in education (some of which are market failures and equity reasons; ensuring compliance with standards, efficiency and effectiveness; UNESCO, 2021) diverse factors have also created opportunities and space for increasing non-state interventions in education over time (Box 1).

SDG 4, the sustainable development goal on education in the Agenda 2030, came to life in a landscape characterized by the continued expansion and complexification of education structures,

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forms (including online) and modes of delivery. And equity, quality and inclusion, the essential aims of the education agenda, require many efforts to be fulfilled by 2030 (UNESCO, 2023).

The capacity of school leaders to build a thriving learning environment shaping and fostering inclusive school climate and ethos (UNESCO, 2020), the ability of teachers and education staff to work for common goals, such as equitable and quality learning and education, are critical elements to these ends. And leadership and trust are crucial in this respect. Without them communication, collaboration, innovation and transformation cannot exist or will suffer.

Trust, the belief that others will act with integrity and in others' best interest, is the foundation of successful organizations, including schools. Leaders must be taught both how to trust, and how to be trusted. They need to be taught how to manage 'relation risks' to create bonds between people, achieve common goals and build effective leadership. For example, leaders and staff at London schools that substantially improved outcomes for disadvantaged students shared common motivations and had strong convictions that they could have a positive impact on these students (Baars et al., 2018). Without trust, schools could become dysfunctional and unproductive, with teachers and administrators constantly at odds and where students suffer as a result.

This short paper will discuss educational leadership and trust looking also at some specific education actors. Recognizing the lack of a universal definition of leader and the presence of specific ethical and moral aspects along with pedagogical and relational issues, it will address questions related to the meaning and specificity of the terms "leader" and "leadership" in education and to how effective school leaders can fulfil the ambition of building an inclusive learning environment based on trust.

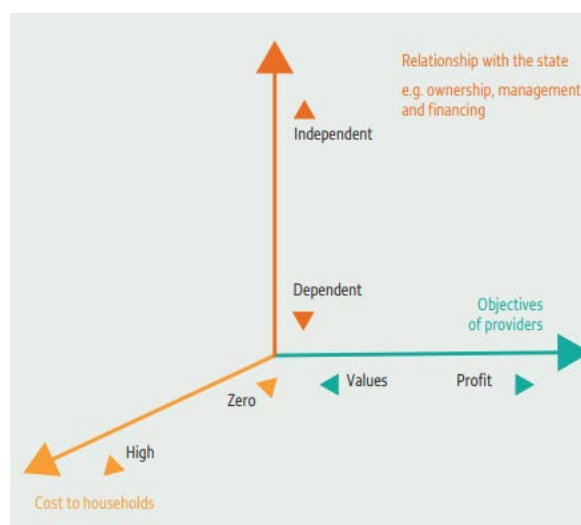
#### **Box 1: there are different actors in education**

As the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2021/2 (UNESCO, 2021) has highlighted, there are different types of actors in education and a related myth is that the extent of non-state participation is known. Non-state actors educate 350 million children. But their involvement comes in many forms and sizes with potential consequences on quality and inclusion. For example, parents base school choice on different reasons, but often solid quality information is not part of them (UNESCO, 2021). In Nepal, choosing a public school has negative ramifications on social status.

Commitments to expand education provision and to enhance quality as set in international agenda often represent a challenge for countries with limited resources or capacity. But the increasing role of non-state in education does not lead necessarily to better education systems,

There are different ways to categorize education providers (Figure 1). Yet, related discussions typically involve a simple classification between public and private one. In practice, the landscape is more complex, and distinctions are far less clear-cut. In this respect, the Global Education Monitoring Report 2021/2 (UNESCO, 2021) has defined a non-state actor ‘any actor that does not represent the state’ an actor then ‘with a voice and stake in education, from impoverished parents spending money on education to corporations whose market dominance can shape education systems’. This paper will use this definition to discuss non-state actors.

Figure 1. There are different ways to categorise education providers



Source: UNESCO (2021)

Based on the analysis of policies and legislation described in the PEER profiles (PEER GEM Report, 2021), it has been possible to depict a very heterogeneous landscape demonstrating the extent to which non-state actors engage in multiple activities in education, and can take multiple forms (UNESCO, 2021). That analysis also suggested that distinction can be blurred as non-state actors enter the education sector for diverse reasons related to ideas, values, beliefs and interests. Using criteria based on ownership, financing and management different configurations emerged. The analysis of the GEM Report PEER profiles on non-state actors has suggested that government-aided non-state schools exist in 171 out of 204 countries. These include private schools in 115 countries, denominational schools in 120 countries; and NGOs and community schools in 81 countries. There can be public schools managed by non-state actors. For example in Botswana, financing of public education is provided by the State and by families, other legal entities and individuals in the forms and limits defined in Law No. 96/AN/00/4e which specifies that these actors do that in partnership with the State and public authorities”. In Angola, the Lei de Bases do Sistema de Educação establishes in its article 57 related to financing that the State may co-finance private institutions, as long as this is relevant from a public or strategic interest.

One dimension of non-state provision that is generally not captured in the data concerns non-state actors running state-owned schools. The analysis for the UNESCO GEM Report 2021/2 revealed that this concerns private actors in 29 out of 96 countries; faith-based actors in 17 out of 83 countries and other non-state actors in 19 of the 81 countries.

**Many school systems have their roots in religious or community education.**

Religion, ethnicity and culture often matter in parenting choice. For example, in Malaysia, location and ethnicity determine parenting decisions. In seven countries in sub-Saharan Africa, parent satisfaction rates were higher for denominational schools than for public schools. As a matter of fact, denominational schools continue to be important in much of the world. The analysis conducted for the GEM Report 2021/2 on non-state actors (UNESCO, 2021) found them in 124 out of 196 countries.□

Catholic schools, in particular, aim to provide a holistic education that forms students not only academically but also morally, spiritually, and socially. This requires strong leadership and trust, and effective school leaders that create an environment where teachers and students feel safe and supported in their learning journey, and where the Catholic faith is integrated into the curriculum in a meaningful way as well.

Global enrolment in Catholic primary and secondary schools is estimated to have increased by 43% between 1995 and 2016 (Wodon, 2019). Enrolment in Catholic higher education reached 6.5 million in 2018, up from 1.1 million in 197. In 2018, 35 million of children attended Catholic primary schools, the majority in English-speaking East Africa. One in six primary and secondary schools is run by Christian denominations in Cameroon, Madagascar and the United Republic of Tanzania, and more than one in two in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. □About 19 million were enrolled in Catholic high schools, some public and some private (Wodon, 2021).□India has the highest enrollment in K12 Catholic schools, followed by four countries in sub-Saharan Africa: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Kenya and Malawi. □Fifteen countries accounted for about 2/3 of global enrollment in Catholic schools.

In higher education, most of the growth has occurred in the Americas, Asia, and Europe. However, in relative terms Africa recorded the highest growth (Wodon, 2021).

Often denominational schools serve the most vulnerable. In Colombia, UNIMINUTO, a faith-based university with approximately 100,000 students, provides access to those living in informal settlements, small towns, and rural areas (Casanova et al., 2015; UNIMINUTO, 2020). Building on this initiative, the government has encouraged the creation of more than 200 regional centres

called CERES, which are partnerships between higher education institutions, local governments, and private companies. In Sri Lanka, the Don Bosco Network, a Catholic programme, runs 17 centres providing training for low-income boys (UNESCO, 2020).

Denominational schools have been vital for girls' education for long. Christian missionaries and Catholic orders were instrumental in spreading women's education in the 1800s and early 1900s. In many countries, for example, they are the primary providers of care and education for children under 3 years of age. In Germany, of the 73% of enrolments in private institutions in 2017, about 1/3 of the providers were Catholic or Protestant.

### **Leadership is central in every area of people's lives**

Leadership has raised interest and reflections in many disciplines, from philosophy and theology to psychology, up to managerial disciplines. Yet the study of leadership in education is relatively recent.

There are many definitions of leadership, and a consensus seems to exist on seeing leadership as something a person does, rather than what a person is. Leadership has been for example defined as “the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (Yukl, 2006 p.8). Or “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2010 p. 3). It is evident that some common elements are embedded in these definitions where leadership is seen as a process, happening within a group, involving the ability of influencing others' actions and attitudes to achieve some shared goals using ‘compromise and social skills to accomplish organisational goals’ (Greenberg and Baron, 2000; Smither, 1998). In this perspective influence of a leader is not associated with power or position or management.

Efforts have been made to define how and why an individual, in a specific context and time, plays the role of leader (Haslam et al., 2011). For example, social psychology has devoted great attention to how and why the process of defining and set up roles takes place – noting that whoever displays behaviours and attitudes that help the group “to grow” tends to take up quickly a higher status, and is recognized as the leader (Platow et al., 2015). “Through leader fairness, respect, and other rhetorical behaviors, leaders become entrepreneurs of identity, creating a shared sense of “us.” (Platow et al., 2015) .

Leaders' roles today seem to go beyond responding to social dynamics and organizational needs as they have to manage complexity not just in terms of strategic and structural consequences, but also in terms of the impact at an individual level and beyond. Uncertainties, complexity and social

fragility put pressure on people threatening self-confidence and orientation. Leaders then become builders of connections between different elements including collective choices and individual actions, helping members of a group to understand the present to take greater control over it while also fostering the ability to adapt and tackle the future. Leadership serves therefore all efforts to manage and develop people through open communication, setting agreed target outcomes, and developing organizational systems highlighting some values such as honesty, integrity, trust, care and compassion (Brown and Townsend 1997, McEwen and Salters 1997).

In several studies conducted over the last decade in a variety of cultures and contexts, leaders were asked to identify the factors and characteristics of effective leadership. In psychology, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, adaptability, vision, and resilience are some of these. Effective leaders also understand how to influence and persuade, empower and delegate, prioritize the well-being of their team while continuing to learn and adapt easily. In health, some studies indicate prioritizing interpersonal relationships and networking, use intentional actions to maintain and grow the latter, take decisions based on the perceptions of people and recognizing them as experts (Ledlow and Coppola, 2014, Ledlow and al. 2024).

To be an effective leader, technical and conceptual skills (expertise and problem-solving abilities) are not enough. Interpersonal skills (including the ability to persuade others, to build trust and feeling of belonging, and to develop productive and harmonious relationships) are needed. The search for spontaneity, or authenticity, integrity and trust within relationships between members of a group is essential (Bhindi and Duignan 1997, Rubin 2007). These principles are also those that leaders should uphold (Bezzina 2012a, Bezzina 2012b, Kouzes and Posner 1991), along with a commitment to ethical and moral values (Manz 1998, Bezzina and Bufalino, 2013). Commenting the behaviour of Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*, Brown and Townsend (1997) highlighted the lack of "an ethical framework with a value system that would have enabled him not just to do things right, but to do the right things" (Brown and Townsend, 1997; Schueller, 2005) –appearing as an “essential quality of effective leadership” (Schueller, 2005).

**School leadership and trust are both essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling for creating a successful and thriving learning environment.**

In such context of rapid transformations school leadership is increasingly prioritized. Education policy agendas tend to look at it to enhance school outcomes through its effect on the teachers' motivations and abilities, school ethos and climate. Some estimates suggests that the effect of school leadership on students' achievement is large and significant, accounting for over one-quarter of the difference in student learning across schools that is attributable to school-level variables (Leithwood et al., 2004). But system-specific factors can divert school leaders' efforts to create an

inclusive learning environment. For instance, schools that are evaluated on test-based student performance standards may have incentives to screen out marginalized students (UNESCO, 2017).

The range of school leader tasks has become increasingly complex which has made evident that a team approach is needed (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). School leaders are often asked to combine functions of managers and leaders covering vision, strategic thinking, learning focus, resource management, communication, problem solving and pedagogical leadership and this raises issues related, for example, to workloads, training and preparedness, and career prospects. Students and teacher population are becoming more diverse, and the increasing diversity needs extra steps to achieve inclusion. In some countries schools have become more autonomous but accountability concerns have increased the pressures to enhance students' performance and outcome moving towards narrower curricula, standardized assessment with both risks and opportunities (UNESCO, 2017).

Effective school leaders cultivate a culture of trust showing their trustworthiness, being open and transparent in their communication, and empowering their staff to make decisions and take ownership of their work. They also create opportunities for collaboration and shared decision-making, which fosters a sense of community and shared purpose. Ethical leaders take responsibility for their actions and decisions. If a mistake is made, they acknowledge it, take corrective measures, and learn from it. By showing accountability, leaders uphold their integrity, which fosters trust among their team, students, and the wider educational community.

Studies have confirmed that leadership is culturally embedded and socially constructed (Sahin, 2011; Karada and Ötzeğin, 2018) and that school leadership practices are rooted in the values, norms and traditions that contribute to 'shape organizational culture within schools' (Hallinger and Leithwood, 1998). Education leadership is thus closely related to cultural literacy –i.e., the ability to understand and appreciate different cultures, customs, and perspectives. Both contribute to create a positive and inclusive learning environment for students.

School leaders can foster cultural literacy in their schools and classrooms, for instance where they create an inclusive environment respectful of all cultures and provide opportunities for students to learn about different cultures through the curriculum, guest speakers, and cultural events (Victoria State Government Education and Training, 2021) . They can also lead by example, by being culturally responsive themselves, modeling the behaviors and attitudes that promote cultural literacy. Building a diverse workforce in the school will also have a positive impact on the cultural literacy of the school community.

Cultural literacy helps students to understand and appreciate the diversity within their own community and the world around them (Assessment and Reporting Authority, Australian Curriculum, n.d.). It also helps them to develop the skills necessary to communicate and interact effectively with people from different backgrounds.

Supportive school leadership is instrumental (though not sufficient) in building successful and thriving learning environment. Schools with inclusive cultures are more likely to be characterized by a leadership style that encourages participation in these functions, along with democratic decision making.

### **Leaders need to be trained to educate in and for trust**

Recent studies highlight that preparation on the three drivers of trust (authenticity, logic, and empathy) are required to build a transformational 'leadership capital' (Frei and Morris, 2020). It's therefore important to continue investing in leadership development to build trust and understand why this matters. This implies giving school leaders the skills and tools they need, while ensuring there is enough time to meet regularly with staff to foster communication, collaboration and innovation which can eventually improve staff engagement and performance.

Head teachers can develop a shared vision of inclusion, guide inclusive pedagogy, communicate the value of inclusive approaches and plan professional development activities (Ainscow, 2011; Schuelka, 2018). School leaders can learn by sharing expertise. In Hong Kong, China, schools with strong whole-school approaches serve as resource centres for other schools (UNESCO, 2020a). They can also enhance collegial and participative working environments.

School leaders have a responsibility to ensure that all children, especially the most disadvantaged, receive adequate learning support. Head teachers who create and communicate a culture of high expectations without compromising inclusiveness have been a key factor in improving schools in poor areas (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018; Muijs et al., 2010).

The overall promotion of an inclusive culture relies on visionary school leaders. Nearly one-fifth of head teachers in middle-and high-income countries, and as many as half in Croatia, had no instructional leadership training (UNESCO, 2021b). For example, teachers of students with special needs in mainstream schools reported lower professional development needs if they experienced better instructional leadership (Cooc, 2018).

In Viet Nam, a 2007 decision set up the need for teachers and education managers to be trained in inclusive education. Training institutions in Kon Tum and Ninh Thuan provinces developed pre-service modules on inclusive education of children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020b). Yet 60% of



head-teachers in Viet Nam, still reported a high need for professional development in promoting equity and diversity (UNESCO, 2020b).

Ultimately leaders show the way on trust. And that's why training for leadership needs to change. It should no longer be just about the leaders' vision and strategy, their charisma, instincts or talents (Frei and Morris, 2020). Leadership should be more about empowerment or 'create the conditions [for your people] for people to fully realize their own capacity and power', be the leader present or not. And this is strongly dependent on trust.

Countries can play an important role in teachers' preparation as their role and responsibilities are tied to a set of standards. They can prepare and develop their school leaders in different ways, including through pre- service training in-service training and continuous professional development. They can also provide incentives by establish clear career pathway for those who want to assume more responsibilities. Funding, characteristics of institution and duration, content and format of training program with rigorous quality assurance mechanisms are all important for school leadership.

### **Conclusion: School leadership and trust, two concepts closely linked**

When there is trust between school leaders and their staff, there is a greater willingness to take risks, collaborate, and experiment with new ideas. This leads to a more innovative and dynamic learning environment where students are more engaged and motivated to learn. With trust, the learning environment is likely to be more positive and productive, where individuals feel safe to take risks, share ideas, and actively participate in the learning process. In Spain, 76% of teachers report that their school provides staff with opportunities to actively take part in school decisions (OECD average 77%).

As staff need to identify barriers to inclusion and recognize their responsibility for finding solutions, school leaders need to give staff time and space to develop a critical understanding of their own beliefs, assumptions, prejudices and behaviours.

Trust between school leaders, teachers, and students is essential as it allows for open communication and collaboration. When teachers and students trust their school leaders, they are more likely to be engaged in the learning process and to work together to achieve shared goals. Creating a safe environment to learn is the first step to build trust. Feeling of relating and belonging affects learning (Alton-Lee, 2003). Few data on student experiences exist, and outsiders have only limited and irregular opportunities to observe classrooms (Kuper et al., 2018; Price, 2018). A study of dropout in Norway found that '[t]eachers' displays of ignorance, sarcastic remarks and absent leadership are the main topics in the adolescents' statements' (Lund, 2014).

Trust between school leaders and the community is also important as it allows for greater parental involvement, community engagement and support. When the community trusts their school leaders, they are more likely to be involved in the school and to support the school's initiatives, which helps to create a more effective educational system. When parents trust the school leadership, they are more likely to be supportive of their children's education and to be involved in school activities. This creates a positive and supportive learning environment for all students.

In short, educating in trust and educating for trust become essential ingredients for creating a successful and thriving learning environment where everybody feels to belong.

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