Reimagining the School Leadership Paradigm in a Postsocialist Context

Although Azerbaijan’s education sector has experienced intermittent democratization efforts since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, school leadership has remained untouched. This article argues that while Anglo-American models such as transformational and distributed leadership could benefit the schools, based on interview and self-assessment data from a select group of principals in Azerbaijan, such foreign models of leadership may not be readily acceptable in the cultural context of Azerbaijan. Principals in Azerbaijan are well skilled in task management and place lower priority on relationship building and developing visions or strategic plans for their schools, both unsurprising given the legacy of centralized decision making in Soviet times. The article concludes that local principals, in coordination with the Ministry of Education, will need to consider the current strengths and needs of principals in Azerbaijan and the future direction of schooling in Azerbaijan as they develop locally relevant school leadership policy and a first-ever principal preparation program in a country struggling to move toward public-sector accountability and transparency.

Azerbaijan achieved independence in 1991, ending nearly eighty years of domination by the Soviet Union. Since independence, the country has been transitioning from authoritarian to democratic systems of governance across social sectors from health care to law to education. Such a period of transition offers new opportunities for sociopolitical change and role transformation for actors within various social sector institutions (Silova & Magno, 2004) and it is important to document the various processes of transformation occurring, as they may not be as coherent or linear as some scholars of transitology have suggested (McLeish, 1998). Rather, the processes might be quite effective in some areas while leaving gaps in others.

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This is precisely the case in the education sector in Azerbaijan, where intermittent democratic approaches to teaching and learning at the classroom level have taken precedence over changes in school governance, exposing a lack of stable democratic practices at the school leadership level.

This article suggests that transformational and distributed leadership practices, both dominant approaches in Anglo-American–based, democratic-oriented literature on leadership, should be considered as appropriate models for systemic school reform to be successful in the transition country of Azerbaijan. Transformational leadership, as both a means and an end goal, offers a method of increasing school principals’ orientation toward change, innovation, and individual and organizational development. Distributed leadership invites wide participation and maximizes talent within the school. Taken together, these leadership approaches have the potential to guide the transitional education system in Azerbaijan to more open, transparent, accountable, and democratic practice. Indeed, these models are being utilized in other postsocialist countries, such as Slovenia, which are establishing new principal training programs (Sentočnik & Rupar, 2009, this issue). This argument as applied to Azerbaijan is based on a review of literature and data collected from aspiring and sitting school principals who are now embarking on a major restructuring initiative, supported by the Ministry of Education, to develop leadership preparation and performance criteria for the first time in that country. The article also considers whether the borrowing of “foreign” models reflects either cross-national convergence (or “universality”) of thinking and practice in school leadership. Accordingly, the central questions guiding this study are: Why is there a need to institute school leader preparation in Azerbaijan? To what extent does current practice among educational leaders in Azerbaijan evidence transformational and distributed leadership? And how does the implementation of a school leader preparation program in Azerbaijan reflect international trends in school leader preparation?

**Background: Educational leadership in Azerbaijan**

In Azerbaijan, the education sector has experienced a series of innovations in the past fifteen years, nearly all at the teacher and classroom levels (e.g., student-centered teaching, critical thinking in classrooms, curriculum reform, textbook revisions). Such pedagogical advancements are key to instilling democratic values and practices in students and in teachers as individual practitioners. However, these efforts tend to be fragmented and tenuous. They depend on committed teachers who may or may not have ongoing support of principals, other teachers in their respective schools, or even the Ministry of Education. They rarely have recurring mentoring or feedback mechanisms for continual improvement and refinement. Such ongoing support is necessary for deep and lasting change in schools (Fullan, 2001; Schmoker, 2006). These efforts should continue as necessary but not sufficient elements in ensuring school reform. In order to create sustainable change
toward democratic schooling, systemic reform is required, and school leadership stands poised as the catalyst of this change.

The pathway of advancement to the principalship in Azerbaijan today reflects the authoritarian system of governance typical during the Soviet period. In those years, school governance was very centralized, with all policies and processes outlined by officials in Moscow, and brought to the national and local level via the Azerbaijani Ministry of Education. The appointment of school principals was made by the local mayor, based on essentially one somewhat loosely enforced requirement: at least five years of “school working” (Interview 5 [I 5]). These five years of experience might include teaching or other responsibilities in the school. One study participant said, “Here principals can be appointed from any industry, based on ‘relationships,’” and another participant agreed: “Formally, the principal must have five years of teaching but informally, it is easy just to say this” (Focus Group 1 [FG 1]). This system made it possible for local mayors to appoint school directors with little to no understanding of instruction and learning outcomes, let alone leadership experience, knowledge or qualifications.

This *prima inter pares* (“first among peers”) approach, in which excellent teachers are appointed as principals, has been common in other regions, notably the German, Austrian, and Swiss education systems in Europe (Schratz, 2003) and Nigeria and Botswana, for example, in Africa (Chapman & Burchfield, 1994; Uwazurike, 1991). It sees the principalship as an extension of teaching rather than a position requiring a specific and discrete set of preparatory skills, attitudes, and competencies. In the best-case scenario, the teacher-turned-principal places emphasis on instruction, mentoring, and monitoring of student achievement. However, there is often a political effect in which appointments are made based on connections rather than competence. Also, there is rarely if ever training or support for these functions and therefore new principals in this system, even if they were highly qualified teachers, tend to become managerial functionaries rather than inspirational instructional leaders (Oplatka, 2004). Further, the duties of a principal must include but go beyond instructional leadership. In recent decades, school leadership literature has expounded on the important skills and knowledge that principals need to be effective in addition to pedagogical expertise (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1996). This has received some agreement in postsocialist contexts, with one Russian regional education official noting, “We don’t have a principals’ pre-service system. [But] being manager means possessing definite competence . . . in the case of leading a school the ‘manager’ should have some additional knowledge about education and schooling” (Fishman, 1999, p. 374).

It is crucial that school systems, as public institutions, both function with integrity and are open to scrutiny. Particularly relevant in the case of Azerbaijan is the fact that school principal appointments have not been immune from trends of corruption that have affected other sectors of Azeri society. Indeed, the environment is highly susceptible to corruption with little accountability or transparency (World Bank, 2006). At the center of accountability in any democratically run school is the
school principal. However, few countries outside the United States have developed a systematic preparation for school leaders that focuses on leading, rather than simply managing or administering a school (Brundrett & Dering, 2006). The lack of any particular preparation for school leadership severely limits the capacity of schools to serve as truly democratic, efficient, and self-reflective institutions. It is possible, but very unusual, for a school principal in the current environment to value transparency, accountability, and participation to the extent required for the institution to be considered truly democratic.

In August 2008, the minister of education announced his intention to support the country’s first effort to prepare school principals using a set of performance criteria based on internationally recognized standards. Facilitated by a local educational nongovernmental organization (NGO) and myself as an international consultant, the process of identifying principal skills, knowledge, and training needs began, as a first step toward developing locally relevant leadership standards on which policy would be based. To that end, this research seeks to document the early stages of policy development in this area. The purpose is to uncover opportunities and challenges to instituting a credentialing process for school principals in Azerbaijan, to assess principals’ leadership skills and knowledge, and to detail aspiring leaders’ beliefs and values about the changing nature of schools and school principalship in the Azeri context.

Transformational and distributed school leadership

The literature on school leadership for the twenty-first century is differentiated from school management and administration. In the past, school principals were primarily responsible for plant operations, including budgeting, staffing, organizing, and reporting. Principals were concerned with safety, regulations, and the implementation of policy. This is referred to in the literature as school management (Kotter, 1990). In a management approach, principals took unidirectional authority, were reactive rather than proactive, and had low emotional involvement (Zaleznik, 1977). Now, in addition to being able to maintain order and consistency in operations, principals are expected to be leaders in a broader sense. These leaders produce change and movement, they have multidirectional influence, shape and introduce ideas, change the way people think about what is possible, expand options, and are emotionally involved and active (Kotter, 1990; Zaleznik, 1977). School leaders who wish to be effective in not simply maintaining but improving education must be able to both manage school programs and personnel and be visionaries, risk-takers, innovators, and enablers (Kouzes, Posner & Peters, 2002; Tichy & Devanna, 1990). Transformational leadership is premised on the notion that organizations, and in this case schools, should not remain static and monolithic. Rather, continual transformation on both individual and systemwide levels drives the forward-looking, success-oriented participants, relevant in the current era of
international benchmarking, globalization, and school reform. This leadership approach is adhered to by many well-known effective leaders across sectors such as business, government, and education.

This is especially necessary in a transition country such as Azerbaijan, where incremental change is happening daily. This change happens in sporadic programs and projects as a result of a teacher attending a national or international conference, for example, but is not always purposefully channeled toward schoolwide improvement and comprehensive student achievement. Further, classroom-level changes often result from intervention on the part of NGOs or intergovernmental organizations (e.g., UNICEF), or when a particular principal or teacher seeks connection with an external partner (e.g., international exchange programs, corporate sponsorships). While small projects are exciting and exhibit movement toward change, transformational school leadership, in contrast, would provide a structured, strategic, and measurable approach to internally generated school reform that would involve and impact every member of the school community.

A second important trend in the school leadership literature rests on distributed leadership. This approach is grounded in theories of distributed cognition, which emphasize the need for people to collaborate in order to accomplish complex tasks (Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Pea, 1993). Both ways of knowing and what people know do not simply burst into existence, but are created through webs of facts, feelings, and interactions. These ways of knowing are ever-evolving and develop with each new interpersonal or intergroup encounter. Applied to organizations, distributed cognition (and its behavioral arm, distributed leadership) consists of shared contexts for learning and developing capacity and offers multiple sources of guidance and direction (Elmore, 2000). Distributed leadership is distinctive because it involves emergent shared roles within an “implicit framework of understanding” so that relationships “coalesce” to complete tasks in “concertive action” (Gronn, 2000). The net of leaders is thereby widened and varieties of leadership are distributed across the many, not the few. Concertive action causes an additional dynamic to conjoint activity; that is, when people pool their initiative and expertise, the outcome is a product or energy greater than the sum of their individual actions (Fuller, 1981; Gronn, 2000; Wheatley, 2006). For the school principal, distributed leadership does not mean simply delegating tasks, but rather practicing governance as intellect stretched over the school’s social and situational contexts (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). It relies on a key central belief: cognition and practice are enhanced by the sharing of intellect and opinion. It is a way of acknowledging and maximizing the expertise that already exists in the school building. Teachers are experts in instruction and they know the students and curriculum the best. They should therefore be tapped for their insights and assistance for planning, assessment, and decision making (Schmoker, 2006). Furthermore, especially in a context of low resources, all available intellectual capital should be utilized.

An increased effort toward distributed leadership is necessary in Azerbaijan because of the need for more democratic, participatory leadership after decades of
authoritarianism. Societal transitions toward open communications and competitive markets require new behaviors, which include critical thinking and open accountability and responsibility. While this is not articulated in any official documents from the Ministry of Education as yet, the minister has outlined a clear directive to democratize schooling through increased critical thinking, honest analysis of educational achievement, and transparency, as discussed below. Schools are the primary means of social and academic preparation of youth, and as such, should model these new societal mores. An authoritarian style of leadership does not involve concerted action, nor does it require strong interpersonal skills on the part of school principals (i.e., relationship orientation). It only requires that principals administer procedures and enforce policies to accomplish objectives (i.e., task orientation). However, democratic forms of leadership—transformational and distributed—demand both task and relationship competencies.

Leading through change

Both transformational and distributed leadership approaches to school reform require a major shift in school culture in Azerbaijan. Traditionally, schools have typically operated in a pyramid structure, which does not allow for optimal use of human resources or transformation (Sergiovanni, 1996). In contrast to authoritarian hierarchical systems of administration present in most schools around the world, school leaders today must be equipped with skills that will enable them to reinvent lines of authority and responsibility, adjust internal and external relationships, and release a certain amount of positional power to empower others. Systems thinkers critique the Newtonian model of predictability, which held that if we have enough detail and understanding of the organization’s parts, we can determine outcomes like clockwork, in a linear manner (akin to the structural-functionalist theory of modernization and “development”). Instead, the systems approach is related to chaos theory, recognizing complexity, interactivity, unpredictability, and discontinuity in organizations (Wheatley, 2006). When organizations are seen as complex, living systems, we notice the importance of resilience, relationships, trust, internal motivation, transparency, experimentation, and creativity. In such organizations, if they function effectively, all participants actively engage in the construction of meaning and there is collective ownership, in which leadership flows throughout the system. These characteristics define “communities of practice” or what are commonly known as “learning communities” (Fullan, 2005; Senge, 2006; Wheatley, 2006). The change from an authoritarian governance structure to a learning community requires courage, intelligence, clarity of purpose, relationships, and networks of information (Barth, 2001). As challenging as such a change might be, this systems approach to education through transformational leadership is held as the deepest and most effective way to make sustainable change in schools (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2005; Senge, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1996).
In the Azerbaijani education system, the authoritarian legacy has shaped a pyramidal, hierarchical system that is now embedded in a changing society. How the more open and democratic movements in the larger society permeate and/or are reflected in the education sector is the focus of this study. The minister of education now recognizes that as long as school principals remain functionaries of the government, appointed by local mayors without set criteria of qualification or preparation, then democratic change will be stifled. The ministry now faces a challenge of national scope as it promotes an increasingly democratic and accountable structure of schooling. Many school principals are not equipped with the knowledge, skills, or networks necessary to make and sustain systemic change, as evidenced in the data presented below. The goal in recasting educational leadership in Azerbaijan would therefore include documentation of the systemic change process. Currently, principals operate in relatively closed systems of schooling, in which there is very little internal or local decision making (which might include teachers, students, parents, and community members). With an increase in transformational school leaders, schools will be more likely to become more open systems that are accountable to the public and that make decision making and reform processes transparent and open to constructive critique (Evans, 1996). In this sense, transformational leadership can be both a goal of leadership preparation programs and principals’ practice in the future, as well as the means for larger-scale, schoolwide change and change on an ongoing basis.

Questioning the universality of leadership preparation

The United States has a relatively long history with the discrete preparation of school principals. Its origins date back to the nineteenth century, when universities first initiated programs on the subject (Brundrett, 2001). Since that time, a vibrant intellectual community has developed certifications, standards, and theories related to the preparation of educational leaders as unique figures in school governance. Until the last decade, few other countries had pursued a method of school leader preparation as distinct from teacher preparation (Brundrett & Dering, 2006). However, recent global trends such as site-based management and decentralization have awakened interest in the contribution specialized leader preparation could make to effective schools (Brundrett & Dering, 2006). Countries adopting leadership preparation models within the past ten to fifteen years include countries as varied as the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and New Zealand (Brundrett & Dering, 2006), and many developing countries are in the midst of considering adopting leadership preparation models (Oplatka, 2004).

In reviewing this growing commitment to the specialized preparation of school leaders, we might be tempted to believe that there is convergence of thought and belief on the subject. This view would be supported by comparative education scholars who emphasize institutional isomorphism and growing transnational simi-
larity based on aspects of rational bureaucracy and global cultural processes such as marketization and individualization (LeTendre, Baker, Akiba, Goesling & Wiseman, 2001). However, the literature and theory on which these new preparation programs are based is predominantly Anglo-American, and recent comparative studies have shown disparate trajectories followed by various countries, with differences in program content, teaching approaches, institutional involvement, and government participation (Brundrett, 2001). Documenting the policy adoption process from its inception in Azerbaijan reveals a good deal of local interpretation, perspective, and adaptation of competency priorities to the specific country and culture context. Here, the process of policy adoption is affected by the actors involved and processes followed (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), necessitating inquiry into the particular cultural and social constructions and constraints involved in “attracting” and implementing new policy and practice (Anderson-Levitt, 2003, 2004; Bartlett, 2003). This study reveals the early efforts of the education community in Azerbaijan to reimagine a school leadership paradigm in which the competencies of school leaders must be purposefully taught in locally particular ways and set in policy in an effort to make sustainable, systemic, and democratic change in Azerbaijani schools.

Methods

The author, in collaboration with a local NGO and with the support of the minister of education, conducted three leadership seminars, one in January 2007, one in August 2008, and one in February 2009, to gauge the current knowledge and skill levels of school principals who have been selected as the most “successful” or the most “curious” principals in Azerbaijan (Interview 5). Three methods of data collection were used: focus groups (during all three seminars), leadership skills surveys (during the last seminar only), and individual interviews with five local experts (school principals and education experts). During each seminar, focus group questions were asked in order to determine school and principal needs, to collect opinions about school leadership, and to discuss potential topics for school principal preparation. The questions were asked at varying times during the seminars, each running over three consecutive days, and therefore were semistructured and flexible. The data collection was emergent, as the discussions were wide-ranging and touched on both expected and unexpected subjects of concern to the participants. Also, it is important to note that these were the first meetings of their kind in Azerbaijan in which principals were brought together to discuss their profession and were free to debate issues of leadership and school improvement. Therefore, much of these early meetings centered on job definition at the most basic level, that is, what constitutes leadership, what should be the responsibilities of the school principal and what are the most important characteristics of school principals. A total of fifty participants attended the three seminars (n = 11 in FG 1, n = 16 in FG 2, n = 26 in FG 3; three participants attended more than one seminar) and of
that total thirty-five were principals and fifteen were deputies. Approximately 60 percent were female and 40 percent were male. Nearly all participants were from urban school districts. Only two spoke English (they were English teachers in their schools); an interpreter was contracted for each seminar.\(^5\) It should be noted that for the second and third seminars, principals were selected and invited to participate by the minister of education.

The surveys were administered during the third seminar only, and the \(N\) varies based on some variation in attendance at the time the inventories were distributed. The survey results should be considered descriptive rather than statistically significant both because the number of participants was relatively small in all cases and because these principals should not be considered typical but rather exceptional. The surveys included: the Leadership Skills Inventory (Northouse, 2003), the Leadership Style Inventory (Northouse, 2003), the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes & Posner, 1997), and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) Form 6S (Northouse, 2003). Results were tallied by hand, recorded by the researcher, and reported back to the participants individually and in the aggregate as a basis for further group discussion during the seminars.

Individual interviews were semistructured and remained open to following the interviewee’s interests and priorities. Interview questions were intended to elicit these “model” principals’ leadership styles, beliefs about schooling, challenges and opportunities, and experiences of educational change in the post-Soviet period. They took place in the interviewees’ schools. Interestingly, these “expert” principals, who direct the most prestigious and successful schools in the country, were all female.

In addition to the data collected through the methods described above, the researcher toured three schools (two in Baku and one in Sumgait), observed a class, and participated in another class. While not considered to be part of the study data, these experiences informed the researcher as to the culture and climate of the school, as well as the pedagogy, facilities, and resources utilized and available in each school.

Discussion of results

Local understanding of “leadership” inconsistent with Western literature’s use of the term

At our first discussions about what constitutes leadership, participants were wary first about the distinction between leadership and management. They felt strongly that the principal’s first priority is management and they felt secure in their abilities in this role. When I mentioned the process of creating visions for their schools, many became resistant, insisting that it was unnecessary because the purpose of schools was clearly set by the Ministry of Education. They all had some difficulty
comprehending what a vision is and why it would be important. This can certainly be attributed to the centralized system of decision making they inherited, as there has never been an opportunity for local principals to innovate or imagine an alternate system. It became clear that imagining is a skill in itself, and that this needs to be explored further and practiced prior to expecting participants to engage in developing a collaborative vision at their schools. The inclusion of local expert principals in the third seminar was extremely helpful in this regard, as they were able to give local examples of how they personally imagined change and made it happen in their own way. For example, one local expert mentioned that she wanted to beautify the entrance to the school and decided to plant flowers. Teachers and parents were resistant, insisting that it would not work because the children would destroy the plantings. She did it anyway, and it has been a tremendous success, even with students tending the flowerbed.

In addition to the challenge of imagination, school principals found it difficult to agree with the concept of leadership as it is represented in literature, particularly as it is juxtaposed with management. On one hand, they opposed the idea that they could be “leader” as “there is only one leader, President Ilham Aliyev is the leader. I am just the school principal” (FG 3). In consultation with NGO staff and the interpreters, we determined that there could be a connotation problem with the translation of the term “leader” in Azeri. The direct translation of leader means one of elevated status in society and is reserved for the true national leader. We used instead the term “director,” the term historically associated with the principalship; however, its meaning in English conveys an authoritarian approach, the opposite of what the literature suggests. On the other hand, many did not feel they could share leadership in a distributed model, saying, “I am the leader, there can only be one leader in the school, otherwise it is chaos” (FG 1). A few principals were open to the idea of distributed leadership and had already begun to include other teachers in decision-making activities. These principals served as the local experts, and are certainly atypical of school principals in Azerbaijan (Interview 4). Further investigation of the term, its translation and definition, is imperative prior to full discussion of school principals as leaders in the sense portrayed in Western literature on both transformational and distributed leadership (i.e., as risk-takers, visionaries, and enablers). Comparative research must also keep in mind that some concepts, such as “principal leadership” may not be coherently identified or understood cross-culturally (Heck, 1998), and new terminology might be needed.

Assessment of current principals’ leadership competencies
Azeri school principals have higher technical than human or conceptual skills

Results from the Leadership Skills Inventory revealed an average score of 28 for technical skill, 27 for human skill, and 26 for conceptual skill among the principals who took the survey (n = 19). Technical skills are related to hands-on competence
with management and operations, including the ability to teach and manage classrooms, and this score indicates that the principals are comfortable with that aspect of their job. They are less adept at the interpersonal skills necessary for building effective human resources and relationships within the building. These people skills are essential to fostering trust and helping staff members work cooperatively to achieve common goals. In fact, the minister of education mentioned “strong communication skills” and “to build trust and guarantee transparency” as a primary abilities that principals should have (FG 3). Finally, the participants are least proficient with conceptual skills, which include the mental work of shaping the meaning of school policy. Such skills are more abstract, hypothetical, and notional, and are central to creating and articulating a vision and strategic plan. These scores are consistent with the historical responsibilities of school principals as functionaries rather than visionaries.

**Task takes precedence over relationship for school principals in Azerbaijan**

Results from the leadership style survey are analogous to the results from the skills survey. The principals scored an average of 45 for task orientation and 42 for relationship orientation ($n = 19$). Task orientation facilitates goal accomplishment and production while relationship orientation reflects a concern for people and helps subordinates feel comfortable as part of the school and with their colleagues. Leadership theory explicates the importance of both orientations for effective organizational oversight, and suggests that when a person scores higher in one area, he or she should make concerted efforts to increase attention to the area in which he or she scored lower, to achieve a balance. These results, too, are consistent with the historical legacy in Azerbaijan of schooling as a task-oriented enterprise with clear lines of authority and little deviation from mandated policy and practice. When choice is limited, the need for effective relationships among faculty and staff is minimized. However, as schools in Azerbaijan become more democratic and open to change, the relationships cultivated by the principal and among teachers, parents, and community members will become more and more essential to make authentic and transparent improvement.

**Leadership practices reveal strengths and weaknesses**

Kouzes and Posner (2002) contend that “leadership is everyone’s business” and that leaders are not only managers of organizations but “ordinary people who do extraordinary things.” They created the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) to help individuals assess learnable practices of leadership. The survey questions are designed to capture five behaviors (“practices”) of effective leaders: challenging the process, which is the extent to which a person looks for opportunities to change the status quo; enabling others to act, which supports collaboration and
leadership; encouraging the heart, which means recognizing others’ contributions and celebrating accomplishments; inspiring a shared vision, which includes how a person sees the future and enlists others to contribute to that future; and modeling the way, which requires setting an example for others to follow. Because Kouzes and Posner use a somewhat colloquial language in English to describe the practices, I substituted more straightforward terminology in English that was also negotiated with the participants for accuracy and common understanding when translated into Azeri. Table 1 represents the two versions of practices.

Leadership practices that emerged as strong among the participants were demonstration and innovation. The high demonstration score is not surprising as the school principals in my sample take instructional supervision seriously and enjoy modeling effective teaching for teachers in their school. Further, this is a very technical and task-oriented practice. However, the innovation score, which indicates a level of conceptual thinking about disrupting the norm, is less consistent with their traditional conceptions of principal responsibilities. It might be due to the fact that participants included the most innovative principals in the country and they might have been influenced by my presentations on the importance of change. As well, the participants completed the survey immediately after hearing about local innovations from their colleagues. The lower scores relating to inspiration, collective agreement, and enabling corroborate the other surveys in that these are related to relationship and human resource skills. It should be noted that several principals said that they involve teachers in setting goals for the school; however, they were not able to give concrete examples.

Importantly, based on the results of these three surveys, the relative priority placed on visioning and innovation in the United States and the West might not have a central place in Azerbaijan. This merits further research and further discussion with the participants, to gauge the appropriateness of applying this piece of the leadership model to the Azeri context. Also, the relative lack of relationship/human resource skills evidences the need for training and support in this area, should they wish to pursue distributed leadership models in which relationships are central.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kouzes and Posner term</th>
<th>Simplified term for translation</th>
<th>Average scores (N = 24)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenge the process</td>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enable others to act</td>
<td>Enabling</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage the heart</td>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspire a shared vision</td>
<td>Collective agreement</td>
<td>49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model the way</td>
<td>Demonstration</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
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Principals in Azerbaijan evidence some transformational leadership characteristics

The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), and its abbreviated version (MLQ-6S) developed by Bass and Avolio (1992), measures a leader’s behavior in seven areas. Table 2 describes the areas in English on the left and the Azeri translation offered to study participants on the right. Bryman (1992) and Bass and Avolio (1992) have suggested that the first two factors are the most related to positive leadership effects. The third, fourth, and fifth factors are also important, and the last two factors have been negatively related to outcomes such as satisfaction and effectiveness in organizations.

The high scores on factors 1, 2, and 4 indicate the general strengths of principals in Azerbaijan as they report engendering trust, motivating others, and helping people on an individual basis. They tend not to provide intellectual stimulation or explain how people will be rewarded for achieving successes as much, and they feel these factors are largely out of their control. Interestingly, they scored relatively high on factor 6, which indicates that they tend to maintain the status quo. This contradicts the LPI finding that supported innovation, but it is more aligned with their focus group comments, such as “we cannot make change without resources,” “we do what we are told to do from the ministry” and “what do you expect us to change?” (FG 2, FG 3). Furthermore, the third focus group was held in a brand-new school that received substantial support from a large oil company. The school had state-of-the-art equipment, including Smartboards, and some principals who came from other schools noted that, “it is easy to make change when you have the money; this

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MLQ terminology</th>
<th>Concepts more simply phrased for translation into Azeri</th>
<th>Average scores (N = 24)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor 1 Idealized influence</td>
<td>People trust you</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 2 Inspirational motivation</td>
<td>You inspire people</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 3 Intellectual stimulation</td>
<td>You provide intellectual stimulation</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 4 Individualized consideration</td>
<td>You pay attention to people’s individual needs</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 5 Contingent reward</td>
<td>You explain how people will be rewarded</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 6 Management-by-exception</td>
<td>You try not to change too much in the school</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 7 Laissez-faire behavior</td>
<td>You let others do what they like—no control or direction</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Principals in Azerbaijan evidence some transformational leadership characteristics
school is an elite school” (FG 3). It is encouraging, from a transformational leadership perspective, that factor 7 received a low average score, because this indicates that principals, in general, do not behave in a laissez-faire manner. Rather, they do see themselves as important and influential figures in the school.

**What makes an effective leader?**

When asked about their own role models in leadership, participants mentioned leaders ranging from Ghengis Khan to Mr. Mardanov (the current minister of education) to Mr. Aliyev (the current president) to their own school principals. When asked what they feel makes leaders effective, several principals mentioned “having authority” and “erudition” (e.g., knows many things), and “can overcome difficulties” (FG 2). Others mentioned “tolerance,” “can solve problems,” “finds potential in each person,” “good speaker,” “respectful,” and “energizes the staff and students” (FG 2). Mentioned by only one participant was “supports the team” and “tries innovations” (FG 2). Participants recognized the need for principals to be skilled and competent in many areas to be effective, but they never had the opportunity to organize their opinions into frameworks. Their individual survey results, combined with their experiential knowledge of what makes leaders effective, allowed them to “see where I can grow” and to “keep learning” (FG 3).7

In Azerbaijan, the notion of leaders as authority figures with ultimate positional power is changing, albeit slowly. School principals recognize that “even if we work eighteen hours a day we cannot finish the work” and acknowledge that they “need more deputy directors” (FG 2). This means there is opportunity to interject a model of leadership in which roles and responsibilities are shared among more staff members. This notion was also mentioned by the minister of education, as he suggested that school principals have ability to “create teams and share power” (FG 3). Principals were most proud of high student achievement (via high test scores and olympiad winners) and innovative approaches to teaching in their schools. This might now be the opportune time to transfer such enthusiasm for change at the pedagogical level to an interest in innovation at the leadership and systemic level.

**Conclusions**

**Leadership skill and style gap**

The results of the surveys as reported above indicate that school principals in Azerbaijan would benefit from increased competence in the human relationship and conceptual areas of leadership. Survey results, while not showing a major difference in scores between these two areas and the technical/task areas of leadership, should be read with consideration to the fact that these participants are among the most progressive in the country, therefore, it would be expected that if all Azeri
school principals were surveyed, the gap would probably be much bigger. Such a national survey would assist in clarifying and confirming the knowledge-skill gaps in Azeri school leadership as the country moves in the direction of democratic change. Meanwhile, further in-depth study of local successful principals would help to provide illustrations of what is possible in Azerbaijan, both to provide hope and guidance to newer or more traditional principals and to understand more clearly what motivated them to emerge at the cutting edge of innovative change.

Leadership practices such as inspiring and enabling others, as well as innovating, could be improved among school principals in Azerbaijan. This requires a new image of school culture, moving from a production model to more of a nurturing environment (or a “learning community”) in which support and celebration occur for all staff at all levels. School principals in Azerbaijan have never had the opportunity to create a vision for their schools, have not received any training in how to set goals and develop strategic plans, and have not focused on the importance of diversity and educating all children. New projects in inclusive education have recently opened avenues for inclusion of children with disabilities (FG 3), and school principals would benefit from competency in differentiated instruction, school-community relations, and some aspects of management that are newly available to them such as finance and budgeting. Transformational and distributed leadership models are not in place in Azerbaijan, and moving toward these models would indicate a move toward democratic school culture.

**Elite schools are the exception**

There is a clear need to conduct research with “typical” principals and principals in rural areas. There seems to be a burgeoning gap between more elite schools and schools with fewer resources, which attract more or less qualified, talented teachers. This can become a dangerous pattern and have the effect of widening inequity among schools. It is important to understand the particular challenges in rural schools, perhaps begin a mentoring project among school leaders, and be sure that attention is not focused only on the elite, successful schools. The current principals of these schools however have an important role to play in helping to shape policy around school leadership criteria and preparation programs for new principals.

**Autocracy to democracy**

The type of shift in leadership approach from autocratic to democratic is complex and multitiered. At the level of policy, the first step is for local experts to identify the main criteria against which principal competency can be measured, and then will begin the process of outlining how and when that will take place. School leadership policy will require new vetting procedures for principals to enter the profession, and the institutional capacity to provide new knowledge and skills in competency areas
such as human resource, supervision and evaluation, finance, leadership theory, school improvement processes, and organizational development. On the individual level it will require self-confidence of leaders to surrender to public scrutiny, as well as building a series of new knowledge and skill sets. Finally, the democratization of school governance requires a new view toward power, decision making, ownership, transparency, and accountability inside the school and outside in the community. While distributed and transformational approaches emerge from Anglo-American contexts, and “may describe Western efforts to restructure schools more accurately than [they capture] traditional leadership in villages [elsewhere]” (Heck, 1998, p. 63), they offer a potential theoretical starting point which the Azeri principals can use, adapt, or neglect as they see fit.

First policy steps: establishing a context-relevant leadership preparation model

In August 2008 and again in February 2009, the minister of education mentioned several challenges facing the school principalship in Azerbaijan. There is a “lack of professional development system, contemporary management skills and knowledge, assessment mechanism, and professional standards” and there are “problems with the principal appointment system, including intervention of local executive administration” (FG 3). The minister recognizes the need for new policy in the area of principal preparation, appointment, and assessment, and is looking to international professional standards for guidance (FG 2). This appears to be an example of “policy attraction,” whereby best practices are sought for local implementation (Ochs & Phillips, 2004). It is in this context of policy attraction that I was invited, as a resource provider, to conduct the seminars for school leaders.

There could very well be cultural assumptions built into the models of transformational and distributed leadership that I brought to the seminars that need exploration and “unwrapping.” The models were provided as resources to guide a starting discussion, not as foreign models to be implemented wholesale. It is clear that more work must be done among the principals in Azerbaijan, in collaboration with the minister, to establish a context-relevant leadership preparation approach in this emerging field of school leadership in Azerbaijan.

This article has documented strengths and weaknesses of school principals in Azerbaijan according to four self-assessment surveys, and as a result, supports the need for increased professional preparation in this area. It is not at all clear what policy language and priorities will emerge in the context of Azerbaijan, and therefore, it is not possible to assume a “universal” or isomorphic perspective on leadership approaches. The evolving process of policy development has just begun, and while external, international policies and persons will influence the future policy, it is clear that Anglo-American models will not be imported wholesale by Azerbaijan. Rather, negotiations of meaning, relative strengths and weakness
of current school principals, and a changing societal context will likely lead to an “adapted” form of leadership policy (Steiner-Khamsi & Quist, 2000). What is clear is the strong, cross-sectoral push for change in school leadership. It is occurring at the level of schools via school principals, civil society through NGO facilitation, and government through the minister of education. What emerges might not constitute a “universal” model but will certainly “lead” the future of education in Azerbaijan.

Notes

1. At one point during the transition period in Azerbaijan, there was a movement to have school principals elected by teachers in the school; however, that initiative failed and they returned to the system of mayoral appointment (Interview 5), which continues to this day.

2. It is important to note that there does not exist a set of “internationally recognized standards” per se. The “internationally recognized standards” used in this case were from the United States, where a national accreditation body has determined standards to which all American leadership preparation programs must adhere (www.ncate.org). They overlap with standards currently being established in the United Kingdom, one of the few other countries to have preliminary policy and standards for educational leadership to date (Consultation on National Standards [n.d.]; Adding Value to School Leadership and Management, 2005).

3. Code numbers were randomly assigned to each seminar focus group (FG 1, FG 2, FG 3) and each individual interview (I 1, I 2, I 3, I 4, I 5), and they appear this way in this article for the purposes of citation.

4. It is important to note my positionality, in dual roles as seminar trainer and researcher. I was asked to provide input and materials regarding “modern” and “democratic” school leadership and to share with participants the current trends in school development from the United States. Some of the material I presented was received well, with participants agreeing with certain principles (such as the importance of school success); however, participants were vocal and uninhibited about sharing disagreement. It is certainly possible that my opinions and suggestions may have shaped responses in some cases. However, because I was there essentially to facilitate their own development of a principal preparation process, I welcomed their comments and encouraged a variety of opinions. At some points, I asked an Azeri colleague who worked for the NGO partner to facilitate discussions, so that I would not influence their process and so that language interpretation would not interrupt the flow of dialogue, debate, and deliberation.

5. The issue of interpretation is a critical one, particularly in sessions in which the core meaning of various terms (e.g., “leadership” or “vision”) was negotiated. There were several instances in which I felt that the interpreters did not fully understand my meaning in order to explain it to participants and/or did not convey the nuances of participants’ comments to me. This is a limitation of the research, and indicates the importance of involving highly competent interpreters.

6. It should be noted that this could be a very atypical result; participants explained that most school principals do not spend time in classrooms or working with teachers to improve pedagogical practice. This echoes findings from other research that principals outside of the Anglo-American context are not comfortable with instructional leadership (Fishman, 1999; Oplatka, 2004).

7. Unfortunately, descriptive statistics (gender, age, number of years teaching, etc.) were not collected. Gender analysis in particular would be interesting because women seem to have had great success in leadership roles since independence.
References


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