

Educational Leadership development for Liberation and Transformation: Insights into the demands on Leaders in Education in Ukraine.

Gwen van der Velden, Inca Hide-Wright

University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper explores the role of professional development of educational leaders noting demands of liberation, empowerment and reconstruction interests in Ukraine.

Based on ongoing collaboration with Ukrainian Education Leaders, the authors provide an insight into the challenges these leaders face in relation to sectoral change demands, the pressures on education during war, trauma informed leadership and pedagogy, the need to deliver alternative routes to education and other aspects. The research specifically reflects on the nature of the current educational leadership cohort itself, with many leaders being relatively newly appointed, whilst educational leadership development provision is scarce. Leaders are focused on establishing a liberated social and cultural identity for education, against a legacy of soviet based systems and structures, and within the daily context of war. Educational innovation is seen as a form of liberation from the Soviet era whilst empowering both resistance to the aggressor and reconstruction of Ukraine.

Full paper

Research methodology: Insights reflected in this paper were drawn from the work of 40 Ukrainian Educational Leaders taking part in two residential Master's level modules at the University of Warwick. Participants are all educational leaders from secondary and higher education, NGOs, civil service and public administration in Ukraine. In all, 17 group presentations and 46 written individual assignments, all with substantial elements of reflection on leadership challenges were analysed. From this, qualitative insights have been drawn which were further explored in discussions with participants. Whilst offering new insights, the research cannot be taken as exhaustively representative, not least due to the considerable policy or war driven changes in practice in Ukrainian Higher Education. This research is therefore explorative in nature, and will be enriched over the coming years, whilst the educational leadership programme at Warwick continues (Van der Velden, 2024).

Findings: Challenges for educational leadership in Ukraine are exceptional in nature across the entire education sector (Gresham et al, 2019). Since the full invasion by russia, by August 2023, 4 Universities and 9 professional education institutions had been entirely destroyed and 214 such institutions were damaged (MOES, 2023b). Students and staff have been displaced, both in occupied areas as well as elsewhere in the country. Others have joined the military effort and there are further losses of staff and students due to the occupation of territories and lethal attacks from the Russian federation. At the

same time, all levels of education are undergoing transformation, moving away from Soviet legacy and structures, towards new approaches relevant to Ukraine's longer term future (including EU accession) (MOES 2023a). For universities further change is taking place through legal and statutory reform, with an emphasis on autonomy of institutions, funding changes to advance student choice, the consolidation of the sector, greater quality control (Wynnyckyj, 2024) and the eradication of corruption (Osipian, 2017).

The leadership cadre is itself also changing fast. The complexities of displacement, military duties, and the effect of war on individual circumstances are compounded by the 'de-russification' of many public sector structures. Many long established leaders have been replaced and a new generation of leaders have been established to innovate and modernise, and found authentic Ukrainian structures and systems, with alignment to EU expectations for accession. As a consequence, the challenges for new leaders are even more substantial, seeking liberation from Soviet legacy and oppressive didactic approaches through critical independent thinking (Freire, 1996).

Programme participants showed a propensity to developing 'initiatives' with ample enthusiasm and presence, whilst holding a lesser focus on building sustainable structures and systems for educational change. In relation to finding solutions for complex problems, expertise and research is referred to initially as sources for practical answers and solutions, but with time and engagement with professional development, their focus shifted towards research and expertise as a source for direction, principles, and inspiration. Recognising own strengths and the value of structured working with peers to establish structural change was also seen as a considerable learning gain from professional development by the participants in this study. Participant remarks including '*I didn't think of myself as a leader*' and '*Maybe leadership comes from thinking instead of doing*' illustrate the nature of the change professional development has taken these leaders through.

One of the participants undertook rigorous analysis of educational leadership development in Ukraine as the focus of their assignment and concluded that there is a focus on management, but not leadership. They found it remarkable that whilst leadership is identified as key to national strategy planning in Ukraine as a facilitator, it is not seen in itself as an area for development. The same participant also noted the student-centred nature of professional development for education in the UK: '*in Ukrainian educational concepts one of the main priorities is declared as "opportunities for continuous professional development for educators, teachers, lecturers, and scientists" without further linkage to students' success, or improved teaching and learning practices, [whilst in] the UK system [...] "direct professional development" of educators is explicitly aimed at further improved practice and improved pupil outcomes.*'

Beyond the work of the participants, a further finding came unexpected. The participants shared their experience of 'learning to lead' widely in Ukraine, leading to requests for leadership development in other sectors beyond Education also. There is therefore some indication that leadership development is a topic of wider interest and could be a way in which UK institutions can continue to support Ukraine in the coming years.

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