

Teacher Leadership for School Improvement

A Distributed Leadership Perspective

Dr. Özgür Bolat



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Özgür Bolat, çok sayıda sosyal sorumluluk projeleri yapmaktadır. Dove Özgüven Projesini, Google Dijital Ebeveynlik Projesini, Youtube Kids Projesini, Banvit Akıllı Çocuk Sofrası Projesini, Sudakrem Güvenli Bağlanma Projesini ve Hepsiburada Mutlu Aile Akademisi Projesini yürütmektedir. Beni Ödülle Cezalandırma, Sorularla Büyüyoruz, Ters Yüz Öğrenme ve Eğitimin Özü adlı dört kitabı bulunmaktadır. Türk Eğitim Vakfında, Boğaziçi Mezunlar Derneği'nde ve HelpZone Derneği'nde yönetim kurulu üyesidir.

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FOREWORD

I had the privilege of being the supervisor when Ozgur Bolat undertook his doctoral study at the University of Cambridge. Ozgur initiated a dialogue with me on the topic of distributed leadership when I was a member of the Faculty of Education at Cambridge. This eventually led to a remarkable project in which he was determined to make a difference to the teaching profession in Turkey. Ozgur chose a challenging route to achieving a PhD. An action-based study was unusual and difficult to defend in academic contexts such as Cambridge. It was also challenging because the practical development dimension of such a project carries with it significant risk. What if you are unable to find willing collaborators? What if the action does not unfold as you had planned? These are just two examples of the hazards involved in such a study.

The project was in fact very successful which I attribute to Ozgur's strong sense of moral purpose, his considerable social skills and his ability to adapt to events as they occur. He managed to secure a number of schools in which to run a programme to support non-positional teacher leadership. He also attracted the support of the governor of one of Istanbul's administrative districts which led to a large number of schools and teachers being touched by this project. For many of them, the experience was transformative. Through Ozgur's work they discovered the value of reflecting on their own professional concerns and values: they were empowered and enabled to act on these, exercising leadership for change in their classrooms and schools. The project has an important legacy in this regard. Teachers who have had such transformational experiences invariably go on to offer similar opportunities to others whether that be their students or their colleagues. I love to quote from the final words in this publication when Ozgur quotes a teacher who said: "The arrow has been released. There is no turning back!" Ozgur then declared that: "We need to let every teacher shoot his/her arrow. Only then can we reform schools."

Ozgur's research had demonstrated that educational reform can be taken forward by mobilising the energy and creativity of teachers, and by enabling them to lead processes of innovation and development in their schools. I'm delighted that Ozgur has transformed his doctoral dissertation into a book, broadening the reach of distributed leadership and teacher leadership concepts to a wider audience of educators and researchers. I hope that policy makers in Turkey and elsewhere are receiving this salient message, loud and clear.

Dr. David Frost

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Note: “This book is produced from Özgür Bolat’s doctoral thesis titled “A non-positional teacher leadership approach to school improvement: an action research study in Turkey”, with the approval and foreword of the thesis advisor, Dr. David Frost.”

Not: Bu kitap Özgür Bolat’ın “A non-positional teacher leadership approach to school improvement: an action research study in Turkey” isimli doktora tezin-den, tez danışmanı Dr. David Frost’un onayı ve ön sözü ile üretilmiştir.

CONTENTS

Foreword.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: School Improvement: A Conceptual Framework.....	5
Chapter 2: The Methodology	25
Chapter 3: The Reconnaissance Stage	45
Chapter 4: The Design and Principles of The Programme	59
Chapter 5: An Account of The Implementation of The Programme	71
Chapter 6: The Contribution of The Programme to School Improvement	105
Chapter 7: A Re-Conceptualisation of The School Improvement Framework	163
References.....	185

INTRODUCTION

I became interested in teacher leadership and school improvement during my professional years as a teacher trainer between 2004 and 2006. I worked as a technology coordinator and a teacher at a high school in a rural area in Turkey. My job at this school entailed 'training' teachers to integrate technology into their teaching. Although I regarded myself knowledgeable about theories on learning and technology integration and shared these theories with my colleagues, they were making little or no change in their teaching practice. As a response to this challenge, I offered them one-to-one trainings as well as more frequent group trainings, and worked with each of them individually on their efforts to integrate technology. I also launched an online environment (www.tappedin.org) to enable them to discuss their problems, exchange opinions and share materials. Thanks to these efforts, some teachers started to integrate technology into their classes, but only sporadically. Even in these cases, the core of their teaching practice did not change much. I was feeling frustrated. What is worse, I was blaming teachers for not changing their practice.

As a teacher trainer, I knew a lot about theories of learning and teaching, but I was failing to help teachers to make use of these theories to improve their practice. I questioned two things at that time. First, I was questioning how relevant the theories produced by the faculties of education were to the practice in schools. Secondly, I was questioning my strategy to enable teachers to improve their practice. In other words, were theories inapplicable to school settings or was my strategy of enabling teachers to make use of these theories ineffective? It was a big contradiction in my professional life. In retrospect, I believe that the problem was mainly with my strategy, although there is argument in the literature that knowledge created by researchers could be irrelevant to teachers (Wideen *et al.*, 1998; Smith, 2000; Hiebert *et al.*, 2002). I treated teachers as the recipients of innovation rather than the creators. I did not create a learning environment in which teachers can authenticate and critically evaluate these theories within their own experience and self-reflection (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). I also did not encourage teachers to theorise and problematise their own practice to generate authentic personal and professional knowledge (Elliott, 1991). I solely depended on a delivery method of training rather than building their capacity to improve themselves because it is mostly the accepted model of professional development.

There was another obstacle to the development of classroom practice in my school. I regarded myself successful at integrating technology into my own class. There were other teachers who were quite successful as well. However, it was difficult to share our practices with each other. I remember inviting a few teachers to my classroom, but they were unwilling to come on the account that they were too busy. We were suffering from a lack of a formal system or a culture that enables teachers to discuss teaching or observe each other (Darling-Hammond, 1995). The isolated culture of the school was a barrier to knowledge sharing (Lortie, 1975; Hargreaves, 1999). I realised we could improve as a whole when there was a critical mass of teachers working collaboratively. We needed a school culture conducive to collective learning, knowledge building, experimentation, and inquiry so that education in all classrooms improves all together. In retrospect, I think I was taking this constraint of the isolationist culture for granted. It did not occur to me that as a teacher or a trainer, I could bring teachers together and enable them to engage in collective reflection and group learning and thereby shape the organisational culture. It could have been my strategy to improve the school. However, it did not occur to me at that time, as leading this kind of change was not part of my professional role as a teacher (Frost and Harris, 2002).

During my M.Phil degree at the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge, I witnessed that some teachers in the UK work in a school culture that enables them to collectively experiment with practice, lead innovation and change, and shape their school culture (Frost *et al.*, 2000). I started to contemplate on how I, as an academician or in Stenhouse's (1975) term 'a practitioner of research', could help Turkish teachers develop their capacity so that they can do the same thing in their own school. School improvement is not about telling teachers what to do or updating their professional knowledge, but enabling them to take responsibility for their own learning and school improvement. It is about teachers, any ordinary teacher, exercising leadership to make a difference to their professional development and school improvement.

In sum, my main argument is that school improvement could be achieved through a strategy, which empowers teachers to take responsibility for their own professional development, to influence colleagues for school improvement and lead change in a collaborative culture. I call such as strategy 'a non-positional teacher leadership approach' to school improvement. In my study, I developed and implemented a programme, which adopts a non-positional teacher leadership approach, with 35 teachers in 6 Turkish schools. By documenting the process, I aimed to contribute to a general knowledge base and also affect educational reform in Turkey. My commitment to practical outcomes, as well as a contribution

to the knowledge base, characterised my study as ‘action research’. My concern can be expressed in the form of the following question:

How can I *develop* and *evaluate* a strategy for school improvement that rests on teachers’ capacity to exercise leadership in order to make a difference to their professional culture, classroom practice and student learning in Turkey?

In this book I give an account of the development and evaluation of this teacher leadership programme and the accompanying action research process that I undertook during my PhD under the supervision of David Frost.