



The Role of Pedagogical Leadership in Managing Public–Private Partnerships in Schools: A Case Study of North Macedonia

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ABSTRACT

In mixed economies like North Macedonia, public-private partnerships, or PPPs, are becoming a more prevalent aspect of educational systems. The role of pedagogical leadership in overseeing PPPs in public schools is examined in this study, with particular attention paid to how school administrators uphold autonomy, negotiate educational principles, and guarantee equal results. School leaders perform a critical mediating role, striking a balance between innovation and resource benefits and the maintenance of pedagogical integrity, according to the research, which is based on qualitative data from three case study schools participating in PPPs. The results advance a more sophisticated understanding of how educational leadership influences PPPs' trajectory and performance in transitional education systems.

Keywords: education, North Macedonia, school administration, mixed economy, pedagogical leadership, and public-private partnerships

1. Introduction

In the face of global economic developments and mounting pressure on public finances, public-private partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as a popular paradigm for education reform in many countries. In mixed economies such as North Macedonia, where state and market systems coexist, PPPs are supported as a tool for improving educational infrastructure, improving digital capabilities, and introducing innovative teaching approaches. These collaborations are frequently characterized as a response to budget constraints, limited capacity in the public education sector, and an increasing demand for pedagogical and school facility modernization. The European Commission's 2021 Country Progress Report stressed the importance of structural investments in North Macedonia's educational system and advocated the establishment of effective public-private partnerships as part of the national education policy.

However, these collaborations bring up significant issues regarding accountability, governance, and educational autonomy. PPPs may inadvertently tip the scales in favor of market-oriented reasoning, according to critics, undermining the public purpose of education. In developing democracies and economies in transition, like North Macedonia, where public institutions are still establishing their operational capabilities, others warn about the absence of regulatory clarity. Because of this, school administrators play a particularly important role in making sure that outside collaborations don't erode educational integrity or exacerbate inequality.

This research investigates the importance of educational leadership in managing public-private partnerships in North Macedonia's public schools. It focuses on how school administrators handle the contradictions between public principles and private interests, and how this influences the outcomes of such collaborations. The study focuses on three schools that took engaged in PPP projects including infrastructure, digital education, and curriculum development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Private-Public

Collaborations in Education PPPs are cooperative agreements between public and private sector entities with the goal of providing infrastructure or public services (Patrinos et al., 2009). PPPs in education sometimes entail the private supply of buildings, curriculum input, teacher training, or technology, with the state maintaining control and supervision.

While detractors caution about the dangers of commercialization, unfairness, and a loss of public responsibility, supporters contend that PPPs provide innovation, efficiency, and investment (LaRocque, 2008). (Robertson et al., 2012).

2.2. Pedagogical Leadership

The main goals of pedagogical leadership are to promote teacher development, encourage student-centered practices, and direct the teaching and learning processes (Bush, 2008). It addresses curricular vision, instructional excellence, and educational ethics in addition to administrative duties. Pedagogical leaders must protect educational ideals while mediating outside pressures in the framework of PPPs (Male & Palaologou, 2012).

2.3. Education in North Macedonia

Significant changes are being made to North Macedonia's educational system as a result of decentralization, digitization, and EU integration procedures. These changes are a part of larger initiatives to bring education in line with European standards for quality and inclusivity. To close financial and infrastructure deficiencies, the Ministry of Education has implemented a number of initiatives that prioritize working with private organizations. PPPs have been urged by the government to upgrade digital resources and school infrastructure (Ministry of Education and Science, 2022), particularly in places where public funding is insufficient to satisfy modernization demands.

Notable obstacles still exist in spite of these efforts. Differences between well-funded and underfunded institutions, as well as between urban and rural schools, continue to be a reflection of larger socioeconomic divisions. Inequalities in infrastructure, technology, and teacher development are made worse by the fact that rural schools frequently lack access to private networks and resources that may allow them to take advantage of PPPs. Although PPPs in North Macedonia have resulted in better ICT access, refurbished buildings, and improved learning environments, the implementation has lacked consistent policy direction, according to the USAID Education Performance Report (2021) and the OECD Education Policy Outlook (2020). School administrators are therefore mostly responsible for negotiating, carrying out, and assessing these partnerships, and many of them express a sense of inadequacy or lack of assistance in efficiently handling such duties.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative case study technique was utilized to investigate school leaders' lived experiences with PPPs. This strategy offers a thorough comprehension of complicated events in specific circumstances (Yin, 2018).

3.2. Case Selection

Three public schools in North Macedonia were selected based on their involvement in different types of PPPs:

- **School A:** A rural school partnered with a local tech company for digital equipment.
- **School B:** An urban school involved in a curriculum development project with an international NGO.
- **School C:** A suburban school engaged in a public-private infrastructure renovation initiative.

3.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, and partner representatives (N=12). Policy documents, partnership agreements, and school reports were also analyzed.

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and leadership strategies across the three cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Balancing Pedagogical Autonomy and External Influence

School administrators were grateful for the resources and possibilities provided by PPPs. However, they were wary about giving private actors too much control over curriculum or teaching. In School B, the principal refused to adopt NGO-designed courses that contradicted national curriculum objectives.

"We welcomed the support, but I had to adapt their content to ensure it fit our context and student needs," (Principal B) says.

This demonstrates a strong sense of pedagogical responsibility and a readiness to negotiate conditions that correspond with key educational principles. This issue is repeated in the National Strategy for Education Development (2020-2025), which prioritizes the preservation of national identity and cultural significance in education, even while collaborating with external partners.

4.2. Strategic Leadership and Stakeholder Mediation

Effective school administrators served as liaisons between governmental authorities, private partners, and instructional personnel. In School A, the principal led training sessions to assist teachers in integrating donated digital tools while ensuring that the technology business did not have excessive influence on teaching techniques.

This mediation job needed not just administrative skills but also educational knowledge, which aligned with Bush's (2008) definition of instructional leadership. The findings are similar with Trpeska et al.'s (2020) research, which found that leadership in North Macedonian schools frequently comprises informal negotiation and trust-building procedures that are not expressly outlined in official policy papers.

4.3. Resource Equity and Social Justice

Although PPPs offered much-needed resources, school administrators were conscious that there was a chance that inequality may worsen. The principal of School C saw that although their building had a PPP renovation, neighboring schools continued to be neglected.

"We are grateful, but I worry about the message this sends to schools without such connections," (Principal B).

As a result, pedagogical directors must weigh the advantages for their school against more general worries about systemic justice. Only 18% of schools outside of Skopje have regular PPP financing or partnerships, according to a 2021 study by the Macedonian Civic Education Center, indicating a regional equality gap.

4.4. Professional Development and Capacity Building

The significance of training and capacity building was emphasized by all three schools. But the type of instruction differed. The NGO focused on participatory teaching methods at School B, while the private partner provided practical seminars in School A. In order to sift and contextualize these information, leaders were essential.

This emphasizes how crucial instructional leadership is to preserving consistency across many and sometimes incompatible professional development programs. The creation of training materials especially designed to assist school administrators in managing collaborations and preserving academic standards has also been suggested by the Agency for Quality and Evaluation in Education (2022).

4.5. Policy Gaps and Local Autonomy

A lack of a national framework or regulatory process for PPPs in education was another important discovery. Regarding long-term goals, accountability procedures, and legal obligations, all three principals voiced a lack of clarity.

"We had to solve the problem ourselves. The Ministry did not provide clear guidance on how to formally implement the agreement (Principal A). Pedagogical leaders are under a lot of strain because of this lack of direction, which can also lead to risk and inconsistency. Jakimovski (2019) points out that while decentralization measures have given local schools more authority, they haven't been accompanied by sufficient leadership development training or assistance.

5. Conclusion

In order to guarantee the efficacy, equality, and sustainability of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in education, pedagogical leadership is essential. School administrators have become key players in overseeing these partnerships in North Macedonia, where decentralization and integration with European standards have an impact on educational reforms. They made sure that these collaborations did not jeopardize fundamental educational principles in addition to serving as intermediaries between public and commercial partners. They assisted in bringing external inputs into line with the national curriculum, equality objectives, and pedagogical standards through strategic negotiation, adaptive leadership, and reflective practice.

This study emphasizes that although PPPs may result in increased infrastructure, financial investments, and technical advancements, their effectiveness mostly rests on the ability of schools to exercise effective leadership. Such partnerships run the danger of straying from their original goal in the absence of strong pedagogical leadership, which might exacerbate school inequities and threaten teacher autonomy. Therefore, maintaining the integrity of public education requires funding for accountability systems, policy consistency, and leadership development.

Future studies should also look at how PPPs affect teacher autonomy, curriculum independence, and student accomplishment over the long run, particularly in post-socialist or transitional environments like North Macedonia. For partnerships to develop inclusive, high-quality education systems and really serve the public interest, it is imperative to comprehend these dynamics.

The suggestions include the following:

A number of important suggestions are put up to improve the efficiency and equality of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the field of education. First, a standardized method for creating, observing, and assessing partnerships would be made available via the establishment of a national PPP framework

with precise, context-specific standards. To avoid mission drift and guarantee long-term results, such a framework should place a high priority on accountability, openness, and consistency with national education goals.

Second, there is a great need to create focused leadership development programs that provide school administrators the tools they need to successfully manage partnerships. In mixed financing situations, these programs ought to emphasize ethical decision-making, negotiation, stakeholder participation, and preserving educational ideals.

Third, to guarantee that all schools, irrespective of geography or socioeconomic background, may profit from PPP projects, equity-based financing methods must be established. Better-resourced schools run the danger of continuing to draw more private investment if such steps are not taken, which would further solidify educational disparities. Together, these suggestions seek to create an education system that is more robust and inclusive.

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