REGULAR ARTICLE

"I Feel Abandoned": Exploring School Principals' Professional Development in Kazakhstan

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Abstract The constant challenge of managing uncertainty makes the professional development of school principals increasingly important. School improvement is unlikely to happen without qualified school leaders who continuously work on their professional development. This article explores professional development of school principals in Kazakhstan. Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with thirty school principals from public and private schools. The outcome of the study indicates that professional preparation for school principals is crucial. School leaders do not have any induction courses prior to their service and often absorb everything as they get immersed by working out what needs to be done in process. Furthermore, current professional development programs do not meet the needs of school principals. The conclusion includes recommendations to improve professional development opportunities for school principals in Kazakhstan and a wider community.

Keywords School principals · Educational leadership · Professional development · Education reform in Kazakhstan

Introduction

The issue of professional leadership development is being addressed in various fields today, especially in education.

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According to Panchamia and Thomas (2014), leadership is about understanding the context and domain one is operating in; targeting a particular goal; and bringing about a desired change (p. 4). The main factor that leads to success is the leader's ability to continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their activities, adapt to changes, and see the whole picture in order to keep an eye on the direction to which the community is moving (Etheridge & Thomas, 2015; Kainuma et al., 2018).

With regard to school management, a large amount of literature defines the role of school leaders as vital for the effectiveness of teaching. As a leader, a principal accomplishes goals and has the capacity to regulate, motivate, lead, drive, and listen (Harris, 2013). It is believed that the performance of a well-educated school principal makes a big difference in the efficiency of teachers and the school as a school leader is constantly ready to establish a conducive atmosphere in order to increase the effectiveness of the teaching–learning process and school success (Robinson et al., 2008). Anwar et al. (2022) indicate that the performance of school leaders is substantially correlated with a teacher quality, student outcomes, and educational performance. This demonstrates how important it is for school leaders to continue their professional development.

The significance of professional development (hereinafter, PD) for school leaders has been recognized widely (Jayaweera et al., 2021; Mathibe, 2007; Pashiardis & Brauckmann, 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Rowland, 2017). School directors, according to Earley and Weindling (2007), need continuous PD since their requirements vary due to the diversity of issues that arise on a daily basis in the life of school principals. Woods et al. (2009) point out that school progress is impossible unless school leaders improve their skills continuously.

Moreover, the pandemic demonstrated the importance of PD for school principals. Hatami et al. (2020) called coronavirus pandemic as 'the toughest leadership test' (unpaged). Additionally, Sum (2022) states that global pandemic created VUCA,(Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) for school leaders as it unfolded globally in early 2020. Harris and Jones (2020, p. 246) highlight "unpredictability and uncertainty are now the watchwords of all those leading schools." The reactions of policymakers, policy consultants such as UNICEF and the OECD, as well as school leaders to COVID-19 led to general confusion at that time.

Ambiguity and unpredictability prevent school principals from directing and forecasting future events based on previous experience. Therefore, the professional development of school principals can be facilitated by the improvement of the appropriate preparation system and their own continuous growth. Principals of schools should be prepared for this period of new normal, particularly to deal with unanticipated events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and other uncertainties that have an influence on current management and future prospects (Baskoro, 2021).

Similarly, in Kazakhstan, there are a variety of issues regarding training of school principals. The purpose of this research is to explore the views of school principals regarding professional development in light of their individual PD needs as well as the Kazakhstani educational contexts.

Educational Context

In Kazakhstan, school principals are called 'directors' and hence, we adopt this term throughout this article. In Kazakhstan, school directors are legally liable for implementation of state instructional guidelines and regulations, managing and facilitating school operations by providing the appropriate school environment, including instructors, employees, and students. Apart from that, the director is allowed to represent the school, to take action and to make decisions on behalf of the school, and to sign official papers with individuals and organizations (MoES, 2009). The school director is accountable for the well-being and safety of students and is responsible for the preservation of buildings as well (MoES, 2009; Mukhtarova & Medeni, 2013; Nurmukhanova, 2020). Additionally, the director's work as a public servant is clearly regulated by state standards (MoES, 2009). They are accountable to local authorities known as the Regional Educational Department.

Applicants for the position of a school director must have a degree in education, a related teaching qualification, and at least five years of teaching experience, including at least two years of consistent teaching experience and at least one year in a senior position (MoES, 2009). In addition to knowing the fundamentals of pedagogy and psychology, applicants

are also expected to test their knowledge of the Constitution, Labour Code, the Law on Education, the Law on the Status of Teachers, and the Anti-Corruption Law (MoES, 2012). One of the key problems, according to the international studies, is that school directors are selected based on their professional background and work experience rather than their leadership abilities (Pons et al., 2015).

It is important to highlight the fact that directors would naturally deal with routine administrative issues; however, the multitude of checks, inspectors, documents, and inquiries from educational, cultural, and sports divisions in local governments place a tremendous workload on the directors (Frost et al., 2014). As these criteria indicate, a large part of the role of the director is to ensure consistent satisfaction with state expectations rather than to rely on strategic school leadership.

In the early 2000s, a systematic education reform started in Kazakhstan, focused on the highest international standards, and involving international experts (Yakavets & Dzhadrina, 2014). The modernization of secondary education continued with a shift to updated educational materials; the transition to trilingual education; improvements to the student testing system; the implementation of 12-year education etc. (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021; Karabassova, 2020, 2021; Nurmukhanova, 2020; Sarmurzin et al., 2021; Yakavets et al., 2017). What is lacking is the restructuring of school leadership at a national level. Currently school management training is mostly confined to refresher courses. Interestingly, the international experts highlight the importance of increasing the level of education leadership in Kazakhstan and expanding the director's degree of autonomy (Frost et al., 2014; Qanay & Frost, 2020; Qanay et al., 2021; Yakavets et al., 2017; OECD, 2014; World Bank, 2015).

Literature Review

According to OECD research, 25% of school leaders attended a program or course in school management or preparation for leaders, and 25% completed an education leadership training program or course before taking up their place as directors (OECD, 2019). However, there is no preparation system of school directors before their appointment to senior position. This means that the state still does not have a comprehensive approach to training of school leadership (Mukhtarova & Medeni, 2013). Pons et al. (2015) state that a lack of professional growth opportunities is a cause for worry, since many have been in the system for decades and may struggle to keep up with contemporary trends. As such, the current training of directors does not produce the desired results. There is little support from the directors and no sense of improvement in school management

and Mukhtarova and Medeni ([2013](#)) question the quality of director training courses.

School principals have a great responsibility in the current environment of lofty expectations for each nation's educational system (Mulford, [2003](#)). It is understandable that the "school improvement movement of the past 20 years has put a great emphasis on the role of leaders" (OECD, [2001](#), p. 32). Thus, Fullan ([2002](#), p. 15) states that "effective school leaders are key to large-scale, sustainable education reform." The creation of school leadership capabilities is, therefore, seen as central to the progress of reform initiatives (Yakavets et al., [2017](#)). Concurrently, an unforeseen pandemic affected the working activities of school principals and revealed a number of weaknesses in school leadership.

The suddenness and intricacy of the COVID-19 ramifications caused a worldwide reaction in the field of education. Supra-national organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) first addressed the international solution to education by closing schools, interruptions to study, and encouragement of distance classes. UNESCO estimated that school closures affected approximately 1.5 billion learners in 188 countries throughout the first quarter of 2020 (UNESCO, [2020](#)). According to OECD analysts, closing schools for a week would result in a massive waste of human capital development, with substantial long-term social and economic impacts (OECD, [2020](#)). Throughout initial phases of the pandemic, the role of school leaders was unclear and ignored, being neglected on the path from global goals to school interventions (Sum, [2022](#)).

According to the Australian principal occupational health, safety, and well-being survey, which examined the effect of COVID-19 on school leaders (Riley et al., [2021](#)), one of the most important suggestions was to pay explicit attention to professional development of school leaders. Harris and Johnson (2020) claim that the majority of school leadership training and courses in existence before the coronavirus pandemic are insufficient to overcome the current problems confronting school leaders. The uncertainty during the pandemic shows that schools need crisis managers who are able to make more rapid and assertive actions, prepared to accept responsibility for the consequences. Therefore, Sum ([2022](#)) asserts that the VUCA have had an effect on school leaders during the pandemic. The directors of Kazakhstani schools also identified the professional development of leaders as a key link in their professional activities, but this integral part was not given much attention due to more important concerns. However, the coronavirus outbreak emphasized the need for leaders to be prepared for unpredictable circumstances.

The study on the professional development of educational administrators conducted by Jayaweera et al. ([2021](#)) found that officials were less worried with the quality of school leaders' professional development than they were with meeting regulatory obligations. It is stated that the differences and irregularities regarding the scope and content of existing programs are obvious, which certainly underscores the need for a more complex, comprehensive and long-term system of training school leaders in order to improve the effectiveness of school management. It is known that in highly developed countries there are well-established regulations for professional development, as well as practices and institutional development programs for school principals. This demonstrates that professional development is a fundamental and important aspect of inclusive growth in the country and that it should be considered as a priority in the field of education.

According to Davies and Davies ([2006](#)), strategic leadership is essential for the successful growth of schools. To achieve this sustainability, the research suggests that the strategic component of leadership must get increased focus. Davies and Davies ([2006](#)) argue that the conventional view of leadership development proposes that new leaders handle present administrative and management concerns to establish confidence and organizational capabilities before proceeding on to strategic and future-oriented initiatives. Scholars suggest that schools require a simultaneous or parallel vision of leadership training in which school leaders concentrate not just on the 'now' of school reform, but also equally on building strategic competence inside the school.

Additionally, Woods et al. ([2009](#)) found that school heads were most inclined to consider a need for professional development in the following aspects: distributing leadership (autonomy, mentoring, and developing leadership abilities); managerial skills regarding underperforming staff and pedagogical practices; time for reflection. The desire for greater time and opportunity for thought permeated the comments of headteachers, with intellectual, technical, emotional, moral, and spiritual needs of contemplation. New principals emphasized the technical difficulties of the position, the enhancement of knowledge and understanding of leadership, the maintenance or restoration of trust, and the enhancement of help and guidance. In addition to experience and understanding what leading entails, experienced principals emphasized the need of vacations, work placements, and time to reflect.

A review of the academic literature shows that there has been limited research on the relevance of PD for Kazakh school directors in recent years. However, the professional development of school directors is important in the light of high expectations of academic achievements of the educational institution entrusted to them. As a result, directors deserve the same level of qualification improvement as teachers, which should be adapted to their particular requirements (Bottoms & Fry, [2009](#); Hitt & Tucker, [2016](#); Rodriguez et al., [2021](#)).

Overall, it can be argued that the director's obligations are numerous and diverse in scope. Starr (2009) states that the directors' functions have evolved into that of a corporate chief executive officer (CEO), who is responsible for strategic development, budgeting, handling labor, marketing and public relations, as well as buying resources. There is a genuine professional development gap among educational leaders, which requires major expansion and conceptualization as a necessary component of Kazakhstan's education system.
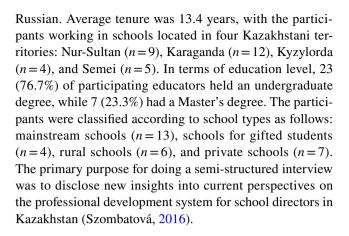
Research Methodology

The research was conducted in Kazakhstan in June 2021. The purpose of this research is to explore school principals' views on professional development in light of their individual PD needs as well as the Kazakhstani educational contexts. This study intends to answer the following question: "In which ways does the professional development of school leaders take place in Kazakhstan, and how could it be possible to improve the quality of professional development of school leaders?" The key research methods include document analysis and semi-structured online interviews. We explain each of them in detail below.

Document Analysis

Document analysis aimed at eliciting meaning, acquiring knowledge, and creating empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rapley, 2007). We found the process of document review invaluable, because it allowed us to design interview questions, which in turn, helped us to make our research instruments thorough and useful. We analyzed key policy papers, including the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan 'On Status of Teacher' (2019), the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "About education" (2007), the MoES Decree, other media materials and international policy reports.

Interviews

The interview questionnaire was compiled in such a way that school principals could express their opinion about the experience of professional development courses completion, as well as to formulate their needs, interests and obstacles to participation in advanced training. The objective was to select the applicants in order to find directors from various backgrounds. A total of 30 interviews were completed with 11 newly appointed headmasters of the schools (36.7%) and 19 experienced (63.3%) specialists. In terms of gender, out of 30 participants, 8 were women (26.7%) and twenty-two were men (73.3%). 24 respondents (80%) chose to interact in Kazakh, whereas 6 respondents (20%) chose to speak in

Russian. Average tenure was 13.4 years, with the participants working in schools located in four Kazakhstani territories: Nur-Sultan ($n=9$), Karaganda ($n=12$), Kyzylorda ($n=4$), and Semei ($n=5$). In terms of education level, 23 (76.7%) of participating educators held an undergraduate degree, while 7 (23.3%) had a Master's degree. The participants were classified according to school types as follows: mainstream schools ($n=13$), schools for gifted students ($n=4$), rural schools ($n=6$), and private schools ($n=7$). The primary purpose for doing a semi-structured interview was to disclose new insights into current perspectives on the professional development system for school directors in Kazakhstan (Szombatová, 2016).

Data analysis

The thematic analysis was adopted in terms of data analysis. The simplicity and utility of this approach make it important in the social sciences (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The thematic analysis identifies underlying statements and distinct concepts in the data (Guest et al., 2012). A helpful six-phase approach was presented by Braun and Clarke (2013) for conducting this type of study. The six steps consist of familiarizing with the data, creating initial codes, exploring for themes, examining themes, defining and labeling themes, and creating the report.

Comprehensive data coding and theme identification procedures were done on the interview transcript and document analysis data. The process of coding started with the selection of relevant transcript extracts and the creation of the first codes. As its name suggests, a data extract is a portion of data that has the potential to be relevant and divulge information that is most likely worthy of investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To guarantee that the implications associated with the list of codes are sent to the reader in a clear manner, it was essential, during the construction of the code list, to study relevant code labels and to produce extensive descriptions of the codes (Peel, 2020). During the next phase of the research, the codes were reduced and code categories were formed to facilitate the organization of the data.

Ethical Considerations

Our research involved a close connection with the participants. Hesse-Biber (2017) believes that it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the rights of those involved in the study are honored while simultaneously fostering an atmosphere of mutual trust. Thus, the researchers adhered closely to the researchers' code of ethics. The three primary ethical considerations, such as agreement, privacy, and anonymity are strictly observed. In order to make an informed decision about whether to engage in the research, potential participants have received an information sheet outlining the

study's specifics (e.g., who is enrolled, the study's nature, and how to opt out) (Ritchie et al., 2013). The participants filled in a Consent Form before the interview. According to the Code of Ethics for Educational Researchers in Kazakhstan, when designing research in more than one language, the effect of translation and interpretation on participants' comprehension of the subject should be considered (KERA, 2020). Thus, all information was provided in two languages, Kazakh and Russian, to ensure its accuracy and accessibility. In order to ensure anonymity to research participants, researchers extracted participants' names and other personally identifiable information from audio recordings and transcripts and stored them in a separate, password-protected file. It was agreed to use pseudonyms when analyzing, interpreting, and storing the data.

Findings

The thematic analysis enabled us to develop fifteen codes. Further on, we structured codes into the following four key themes: *inadequate preparation*; *gaps in current professional development system; networking as a professional development tool; pre-service training,* which we discuss in more detail below. Regarding the limited sample size and the quick rate of education reform, we do not make any claims about the generalizability of our findings.

Inadequate Preparation

One of the themes found in the research is that the applicants for the post of the director are insufficiently prepared for this position. All of the respondents indicated that they had not received any training before being appointed to their positions.

It was observed by directors that the expertise gained while working in the position of a deputy director, as well as the refresher courses for deputy directors, provided a framework for them. Director 10 says:

> I worked as a deputy. director for over two years before becoming a director The first years of running the school were very difficult for me. I realized that I didn't have enough preparation. I realized that I lacked training. Overnight everything came crashing down on me: the teaching process, the staff, the students, the maintenance of the building, the accounting, the inspections. I survived thanks to my experience and colleagues. I felt like I was abandoned in the middle of the ocean.

In this regard, it was pointed out that prior experience as a deputy director is insufficient preparation for the position of the director, since the deputy is only responsible for a certain area of work, while the director is accountable for the whole process. The lack of training before becoming a director was also pointed out by Director 3:

> When I was a teacher, I thought it is not so difficult to be a director. Because the director has several deputies and they do all the tasks. I was wrong. In fact, not everything is as easy as it seems. A director is a universal person: a teacher, a psychologist, an accountant, a lawyer, a manager, a strategist, a plumber, a builder. During my work, I realised that I had to take courses in financial and legal literacy, as well as courses in school management, before becoming a director.

The lack of experience before and after taking up leadership responsibilities reduces school leaders' efficiency (OECD/ The World Bank, 2015). When taking up leadership roles, school leaders do not feel prepared to carry out their responsibilities. Admittedly, research from head teachers in OECD countries indicates that as they take up their positions, they do not believe they have the resources and experience to become instructional leaders and handle human and financial capital, despite the fact that the majority of them have teaching experience (OECD, 2008).

It is crucial for directors to undergo appropriate training before being appointed to a position. According to school directors, new hires spend a significant amount of time learning about the workforce during their first year in the position:

> I devoted a significant amount of effort to researching the workplace system. If I had gone through the courses, I would have approached my job in a different manner from the beginning (Director 18).

The school directors noted that the lack of preparation was especially noticeable during the pandemic. The leaders were just at a loss on what to do or say to teachers, parents, and students. The directors were astonished by the ambiguity. When no one responded to their concerns, they believed they were alone and abandoned. No particular instructions were given by the regional education department. Additionally, preparing for uncertain circumstances was emphasized as a critical element of training.

Furthermore, the school principals said that the pandemic added to their workload. In addition to their many obligations, school administrators were responsible for managing and responding to a variety of contingencies, including Internet access, community safety, and hygiene. Harris and Jones (2020) believe that it is vital to adapt school leaders' professional development programs in order to ensure that they completely and appropriately cover the leadership skills, strategies, and activities necessary for the COVID-19 circumstance.

Gaps in Current Professional Development System

The next significant theme that emerged from the study was the current system of professional development for directors, which is discussed in detail below.

There are signs that the current model for directors' professional development does not entirely meet the needs of school leaders. The quantity of professional development is controversial since directors are only allowed to attend training programs outside of school once every five years in compliance with the Law 'On Status of Teacher' (2019).

The directors pointed out that a five-year refresher training cycle is a rather lengthy time period. The directors are certain that a considerable amount will have changed in five years and that their knowledge may become obsolete:

> In order to be effective, directors' courses should be held on an ongoing basis. It is critical to our ability to do our jobs effectively and efficiently (Director1).

The directors' complaints about certain professional development programs indicate that the content of professional development programs is not of a decent quality across the country. Validity of materials for participants is something that must be considered:

> I have been involved in a variety of courses and have always been disappointed with the content of the training (Director 17).

Director 19 also states that the theoretical knowledge he gained during the refresher courses is not really applicable in real life.

> There are many different courses on the educational market which are really useful. But they are expensive and we have to pay money out of our own pockets. I do not have that kind of money, even if there was money at the time. Do you know that school directors are paid less than teachers? The regional department of education will not let me off the job. And the courses they provide for free are not very effective. We do not have the right to choose. (Director 19).

Additionally, the directors noted that there is an issue with the guidelines, regulations and laws which they believe should be properly examined:

> Recently, there have been many changes to the regulatory framework. Numerous changes are taking place, as well as amendments and updates, as well as new orders being placed. It is very tough to keep up with everything. Occasionally, the documents are unclear or include inconsistencies with regard to other documents (Director 13).

Thus, time management, leadership, emotional intelligence, diversity and inclusion in school, school improvement and efficiency, crisis management—these are the areas in which respondents expressed interest and would like to learn more about. Harris and Jones (2020) point out that crisis and change management are increasingly considered to be critical abilities for school administrators. Respectively, managing a large school in turbulent times includes more than a normal issue resolution and the regular firefighting on campus.

Networking as a Professional Development Tool

One of the themes that came up in the discussion and that the school directors place a high value on is interaction with other directors as a way of advancing their professional development while in their capacity as a leader. For example, one of the participants stated that directors from schools in the same area often meet and share their viewpoints:

> In our neighborhood, there are ten schools. In addition, we are in continuous interaction with one another. Throughout the year, we create a schedule and meet to address a variety of issues that are of importance to us (Director 7).

In many cases, the directors describe an informal interaction as an unequaled opportunity for them to address concerns and challenges with their colleagues while also forming professional connections that frequently last long after the occasion has ended:

> The WhatsApp group is a really useful tool for us. We have a group of all school leaders where we discuss current problems, ask questions, and share our thoughts. It is a fast and efficient way of sharing experiences. We sometimes talk about some problems over a cup of coffee (Director 1).

> Many questions arise during everyday work. Our questions are not usually answered by the education department. They are always busy. So, the assistance of other directors is invaluable (Director 15).

According to Harris (2020), the worldwide reaction to COVID-19 led to the spread of new networks and networking activities. School leaders exerted their influence and exercised leadership through a variety of platforms, discussion forums, and networks.

Pre-service Training

The majority of those interviewed stated that obtaining a Master's degree could be one of the best options for maintaining their professional growth. The directors are

optimistic that a Master's degree program in Leadership in Education and Business Administration will help them to enhance their leadership skills:

> I am thinking of applying for a Master's degree program in the near future. I believe that obtaining a Master's degree will enable me to expand my knowledge and abilities even more (Director 5).

One of the good examples could be Scotland. School leaders in Scotland can choose between a Postgraduate Course in Education Management and Leadership (Scottish Qualification for Headship) and a much more versatile and practice-based curriculum (Flexible Route to Headship), which includes the development of a portfolio, a 360° review, and interactions with a mentor (Taipale, 2012). According to the MoES, there are 129 universities in Kazakhstan, 16 of them are focused only on education and the training of future educators, while 71 universities have a license to prepare future teachers in the field of Education. A careful study of university curricula reveals that only nine universities are training specialists in Education Management or Leadership. It should be noted that seven universities have only been offering this program since 2020. Only Nazarbayev University trains Leaders in the field of education and has the right to assign this qualification.

Thus, particular consideration should be given to the development of pedagogical universities. Universities must change in order to meet the needs of the modern world and provide new training programs. In addition to postgraduate studies, universities could explore offering courses of professional development for school leaders and managers.

Discussion

Bush (2008) characterizes leadership development as a moral commitment that allows professionals to shift from classroom teaching to school administration. Not only are the abilities necessary for successful school leadership acquired via preparation activities focusing on leadership ability, content knowledge, and principalship comprehension, but also by professional opportunities and experiences (Cliffe et al., 2018).

It was found that an undeniable challenge for prospective school directors is to manage their time and duties. They also require education and support. Sackney and Walker (2006, p. 343) state that "beginning principals have a difficult task in the early years of their career without the support systems and leading learning community frameworks necessary to survive in the complex school environment". Jayaweera et al. (2021) note that many countries provide pre-service training programs for headteachers in a variety of ways, as a mandated activity. This program typically begins prior

to the jobs' responsibilities being assumed. In Germany, France, China (Shanghai), and South Korea, this process is adhered, as principals' training begins with induction training (Jayaweera et al., 2021).

Additionally, participants of the study noticed that the establishment of mentorship programs may also be a useful way of assisting young directors in their careers. In addition, the Ministry of Education is establishing a project known as the 'Personnel Reserve.' It intends to promote the most successful and well-prepared individuals to senior positions in the education field, based on their performance and preparation (Sputnik.kz, 2021). There is currently no detailed information available on how the project will be carried out or how the applicants will be chosen. However, we believe that it would be prudent to conduct training sessions for individuals who would be included in the reserve.

Furthermore, it was stated that the frequency of in-service training is not as high as they would like, but that even these rare trainings are popular. Directors are required to take courses every five years. Taking a professional development course every five years in Kazakhstan may be viewed as a Soviet-era relic. Throughout the Soviet Union, teachers and school leaders with the appropriate pedagogical degree and no more than 15 years of experience were required to attend a one-month course at the Institute for Advanced Training once every five years (Pigaleva, 2012).

Even these rare courses do not satisfy the actual demands of school directors. The participants in this survey indicated that the course material must be substantially updated. According to the TALIS survey, Kazakhstani directors were more likely to engage in teaching courses (93%) than in leadership courses (75%) (IAC, 2019). Even though the PD courses do not suit the directors, they are obliged to attend them because the regional department of education decides everything for them. Indeed, the freedom of choice for Kazakhstani school directors when it comes to attending professional development courses is severely curtailed. There are two organizations which provide training for teachers. The National Professional Development Institute 'Orleu,' which is under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Science. The second one is the Centre of Excellence program, which operates as a division of the Autonomous Education Organisation Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools.

In this regard, voucher funding could be considered as a solution to training quality problems. Giving each school director a voucher for professional development so that they can choose the right course based on the needs and vision of the school. In addition, the frequency of courses should be increased to at least one course every three years.

The most surprising aspect of the data is that the majority of school principals surveyed said that social networking is one most useful way of professional

development that they have encountered. According to Davies and Davies (2006), the strategic competence of education leaders can be developed through formal and informal networks. Despite the fact that directors value contact and networking with peers, this kind of integration within the profession may be limited (Crow, 2006). Informal professional development activities are seen to be more useful for the needs of the schools in which they work and more effective in meeting those requirements. Although courses and workshops are essential sources of learning, they are often criticized for not completely allowing participants to be active participants in their own learning (Avalos, 2011; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). Moreover, Harris and Jones (2020) state that school leaders should treat their communities as a valuable resource, since they contain a range of extra experience, understanding, and local power.

As reported by the TALIS 2018 study, 6% of Kazakh directors have obtained a Master's degree, while 0.7% have completed a PhD. These figures are much lower than the OECD average, which shows that 63% of directors have a master's degree and 3.5% hold a doctoral degree (IAC, 2019).

This is particularly important that the Government of Kazakhstan annually allocates funds for postgraduate students. Thus, for the academic year 2021–2022, almost 13,000 state scholarships are allocated for Master's programs, 3642 of which are for pedagogical disciplines (see Table 1). 1890 educational scholarships were given for PhD studies in 2021–2022 (see Table 2), 370 for pedagogical disciplines (MoES, 2021). However, over the next three years, the government does not fund educational leadership training. According to the MoES (2021) order, the same number will be awarded in 2022–2023 and 2023–2024. We believe the state should modify the list of specialties eligible for state scholarships.

In addition, one of the key elements is also developing directors' critical skills in reading and analyzing leadership literature, studies, and legislation. As previously mentioned, school directors find it difficult to understand and interpret official documents. Thus, Woods et al., (2009, p. 268) point out that "the development of critical capabilities is an area to which universities can contribute and which they need to be proactive in doing: it is one of the distinctive contributions universities are able to bring to partnerships in professional development." According to Jayaweera et al. (2021), there is a direct correlation between directors, educational leaders, and school administrators' professional development and academic achievement of students. As a result, it is reasonable to infer that universities play a significant role in the professional growth of school leaders.

Table 1 Number of scholarships and names of majors awarded by the Government of Kazakhstan for Master's programs in Education field (2021–2022 academic year)

Taught master's courses	Number of scholarships
Pedagogy and psychology	250
Early childhood education and care	200
Teacher training without subject specialization	240
Physical education	40
Music educators	20
Teachers of Art, Graphics and Design	7
Teachers of Vocational Education	20
Teachers of Mathematics	400
Teachers of Physics (Kazakh, Russian, English)	475
Teachers of Computer science (Kazakh, Russian, English)	275
Teacher of Chemistry (Kazakh, Russian, English	355
Teachers of Biology (Kazakh, Russian, English)	355
Geography teachers	110
History educators	230
Kazakh language and literature	120
Russian language and literature	60
Teachers of foreign languages	275
Social pedagogy and self-cognition	60
Special pedagogy	150
Total	3642

Table 2 Number of scholarships and names of majors awarded by the Government of Kazakhstan for PhD programs in Education (2021–2022 academic year)

PhD courses	Number of scholarships
Pedagogy and psychology	45
Early childhood education and care	5
Teacher training without subject specialization	22
Physical education	**7**
Teachers of Mathematics	30
Teachers of Physics (Kazakh, Russian, English)	23
Teachers of Computer science (Kazakh, Russian, English)	35
Teacher of Chemistry (Kazakh, Russian, English	22
Teachers of Biology (Kazakh, Russian, English)	18
Geography teachers	18
History educators	17
Kazakh language and literature	37
Russian language and literature	24
Teachers of foreign languages	37
Social pedagogy and self-cognition	10
Special pedagogy	20
Total	370

Recommendations and Conclusion

It is important to admit that our data collection tools were limited to two key instruments, which are largely qualitative and, hence it makes it difficult to generalize our findings to a wider community. However, we have been able to identify key issues in relation to school directors' PD in Kazakhstan. As such, a further study could be conducted to involve wider selection of participants.

Overall, it is necessary to establish and incorporate a holistic model of school directors' pre- and in-service training. Leadership preparation should ideally begin with teachers and finish up with director applicants, as well as provide an induction training to newly recruited school directors (OECD/The World Bank, 2015). Pre-service preparation can help with the applicant identification and provide a solid foundation for further development (Pont et al., 2008). Also, establishing mentorship programs may help young directors advance in their careers.

The results of this study indicate that significant part of the role of Kazakhstani principals is to ensure compliance with state standards, and not to focus on strategic school management, since their responsibilities are usually more administrative in nature compared to international views on the professional activities of a school head. It was found that Kazakhstani directors are experiencing significant difficulties due to insufficient training before taking up this position, as well as a lack of necessary knowledge on effective school management. The data collected for this article show the need for pre-service training for school leaders. Pons et al. (2015) state that a lack of professional growth opportunities is a cause for worry, since many have been in the system for decades and may struggle to keep up with contemporary trends. Thus, the recommendations include increasing the academic autonomy of school principals, the creation of a mentoring institute for young principals, the introduction of a voucher system to give all directors the opportunity to choose a professional development course, as well as improving the training of school leaders through master's and doctoral programs at universities with the provision of state scholarships and an expanded interpretation of the concept of educational leadership. Summing up, it is possible to conclude that leadership in the field of education in Kazakhstan is a new trend that requires an in-depth and rigorous evidence-based approach.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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