

Case study: **System leadership in Rwanda**

A growing concern for education policymakers is how to improve teaching and learning quality at scale. In turn, leading thinkers are calling for more attention to the ‘architecture’ of education systems: the delivery structures, and workforce roles that will reform teaching and learning practices (Education Commission 2019; Banerjee et al, 2017; Bold et al, 2013).

Education Development Trust and IIEP-UNESCO are collaborating on a major new study to contribute to this agenda. The research is looking at ‘middle tier’ roles in education systems: those professionals, such as district supervisors, pedagogical coaches and teacher mentors, who work across schools to support teaching and learning. Drawing on six case studies of promising practice – across India, Jordan, Kenya, Rwanda, Shanghai and Wales – it will offer insights into the characteristics of these instructional leaders and what more can be done to support their potential as change agents.

These short case studies offer initial insights from the research. Full findings will be available in early summer 2021.

Developing school system leadership roles in Rwanda

A major priority for policymakers in Rwanda is transforming the role of the head teacher into a skilled leader of learning, where it is a focal point for the continuous professional development of teachers and has responsibility for leading teaching and learning in a school (MINEDUC, 2018). An interesting new workforce innovation in Rwanda at the middle tier has been key to delivering this change at scale. Almost 500 new roles have been created: National Leaders of Learning (NLLs) and Local Leaders of Learning (LLLs), who are high performing head teachers recruited to support peer head teachers in leading learning. As ‘system leaders’, these Leaders of Learning have dedicated responsibility for developing collaborative professional practices between head teachers and with wider education officials.

The reforms have been supported by the Building Learning Foundations (BLF) programme of the Rwandan Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) and Rwanda Education Board (REB), implemented by Education Development Trust, British Council and VSO.

Based on initial analysis for the research study, interesting features of these middle tier reforms include:

- **A strong role focus on collaborative leadership across schools, and coaching head teachers.**
The NLLs and LLLs lead Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) where head teachers share best practices and challenges.
- **Innovative approaches to recruitment and induction,** including site visits to schools during recruitment to observe candidate leaders in practice.
- **An accredited continuous professional development course** – the Certificate in Leadership for Learning is delivered in conjunction with the University of Rwanda, and modules are based around the accreditation of practical work-based learning through submission of a portfolio.

Leading school collaboration and Professional Learning Communities

Leaders of Learning roles have a strong focus on leading collaborative professional development for peer head teachers, through organising Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). NLLs have responsibility for termly district level PLCs which include the District Education Officer, while LLLs work with Sector Education Officers to run, organise and facilitate monthly PLCs for all head teachers in a sector.

In our interviews Leaders of Learning spoke positively about the benefits of school collaboration and peer coaching through the PLCs. Respondents spoke about how they are

METHODS

Evidence for this initial case study was conducted through desk and field research with programme staff and participants of Leadership for Learning activities. This included interviews and focus groups with the Building Learning Foundations programme team, interviews with three district or sector officials, and with Local and National Leaders of Learnings. Interviews took place in August 2020 while schools were closed in Rwanda due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

free to be open and contribute both their ideas and challenges. They have become more comfortable to learn from and share with colleagues over time and, in doing so, have found the PLCs to be a source of new expertise and information. They use the PLCs as an opportunity to develop plans and actions for their own schools.

“Because it is the head teachers’ meeting they are free to open and to say about their challenges and their views, and all others also contribute their views and ideas. So if one teacher is facing a big challenge all others are supporting how to do, how to solve. So the other head teachers they get a new idea.” (R15 LLL)

Respondents clearly saw peer coaching as central to the Leader of Learning role and a successful PLC, something which was a professional shift for them and required ongoing practice. Respondents spoke about working together to find the solution to challenges and supporting those being coached to take practical action – examples of changes in schools included finding a solution to ensure better use of a school library and giving learners access to books between lesson to help with practicing English

Respondents commented on the mindset shift which has accompanied these new practices, as they model a more open school culture where head teachers listen, learn and experiment together. Both LLLs and NLLs felt that they benefited from the opportunity to visit other schools as the location of the PLCs rotates. As part of these visits they have the opportunity to experience another school compound, observe teaching and discuss school management, With some head teachers not from an education background, this experience offers valuable insights into the functioning and improvement of other schools. One Sector Education Inspector described this as allowing heads to benefit and learn from comments directed at other heads and see how to apply change in their own school.

Innovative approaches to middle tier recruitment and induction

In many systems, promotion into positions of leadership is based on years of service rather than performance. Leading thinkers internationally have

“Before I used to work alone, I was not that collaborative but right now I value to collaborate with others, so for any decision that I have to make I invite others and we discuss and in the end we implement but through collaboration.”

(R17 – LLL)

“Before the head teachers in my sector they used a dictatorship and say that if I am head teacher if I want things to be done this way they will be done this way. So there is no need to tell me how to do things when I am the head teacher. Now through or monthly PLCs conducted through our local leaders of learning head teachers have understood how they need to cooperate and work as a team.”

(R14 – Sector Education Inspector)

called for the professionalisation of middle tier recruitment and for this to be based on the skills and competencies required for effective performance (Education Commission, 2019).

An innovative set of approaches have been used to recruit the NLLs and LLLs. Selection criteria are based on the competencies required for collaborative leadership, beyond high performance as an individual head teacher. Benchmarked against international standards, the framework includes coaching skills and the drive and capacity to improve performance in others.

In addition, the recruitment approach looks at candidates’ school-based practice, alongside more traditional interview evidence. For example, the process for recruiting the National Leaders of Learning included a District Selection Panel which undertakes a site visit to applicants’ schools. The panel collects evidence on the applicants’ collaborative leadership skills through interviews with teachers, students and the community,

and explores capabilities such as appetite for learning, openness and external collaboration. The panel also collects evidence on candidates’ approach to inclusive education through the interview process and evidence collected during the school visit.

Careful investment has been made in role orientation and induction since the new focus on coaching peer school leaders and leading area-wide change represents a significant shift in professional duties for the Leaders of Learning. A centralized induction event helps to prepare new roleholders, helping them to explore the professional and mindset shifts required for the role. This includes highly interactive activities such as watching film clips of teaching, hand-on exploration of school and district level data, and practicing coaching skills. The leaders are also supported to transition to their new PLCs, holding their first meeting and beginning to discuss priorities. An important feature of these induction programmes is a cross-district learning and opportunities to build networks for future support and resilience.

An accredited Continuous Professional Development Course

To help the NLLs and LLLs step up as system leaders, they are given specialist training in collaborative leadership. The training is guided by a clear competency framework, and activities are designed to develop the knowledge, skills, understanding and confidence to lead others through change. The framework includes competencies in the heads’ own leadership and professional learning, and their practice in strengthening the capacity of other headteachers. It is fully aligned to the competencies expected of school leaders set out in Rwanda’s Professional Standards for Effective School Leadership.

The training is delivered and accredited by the University of Rwanda, as the Certificate in Leadership for Learning. There is a close connection between the NLL and LLLs’ training, their leadership practice – through the PLCs and in their school communities – and their accreditation. This includes documenting learning from experiences leading learning through PLCs, and being observed offering peer coaching to head teachers. At the end of the course participants submit a final portfolio which includes evidence of their competencies.

The overall CPD for the middle tier leaders is designed to build collective responsibility for change: the Leaders of Learning complete their certificate by jointly work to address a Ministerial commission on a strategic national issue in the Education Sector Strategic Plan.

The requirement to build a portfolio means that leaders have to be intentional about reflecting and capturing their learning, and the impact of their leadership. Respondents shared how this had brought about wider benefits. It has strengthened engagement with Sector and District Education Officers, for example. Officials support NLLs and LLLs with their portfolios, often proving advice on evidence and structure. This in tandem serves to build and reinforce their own understanding of the competencies of school leadership and the challenges faced by head teachers.

LLLs and NLLs also described broader learning from the certificated course, including understanding how to organise a portfolio to demonstrate practical application of competencies. They explained how this had had positive impacts on other areas of professional life, such as the process of designing and monitoring of school improvement plans, and conducting self-reviews. The portfolios also give school leaders a physical documentation of progress that they can use with other

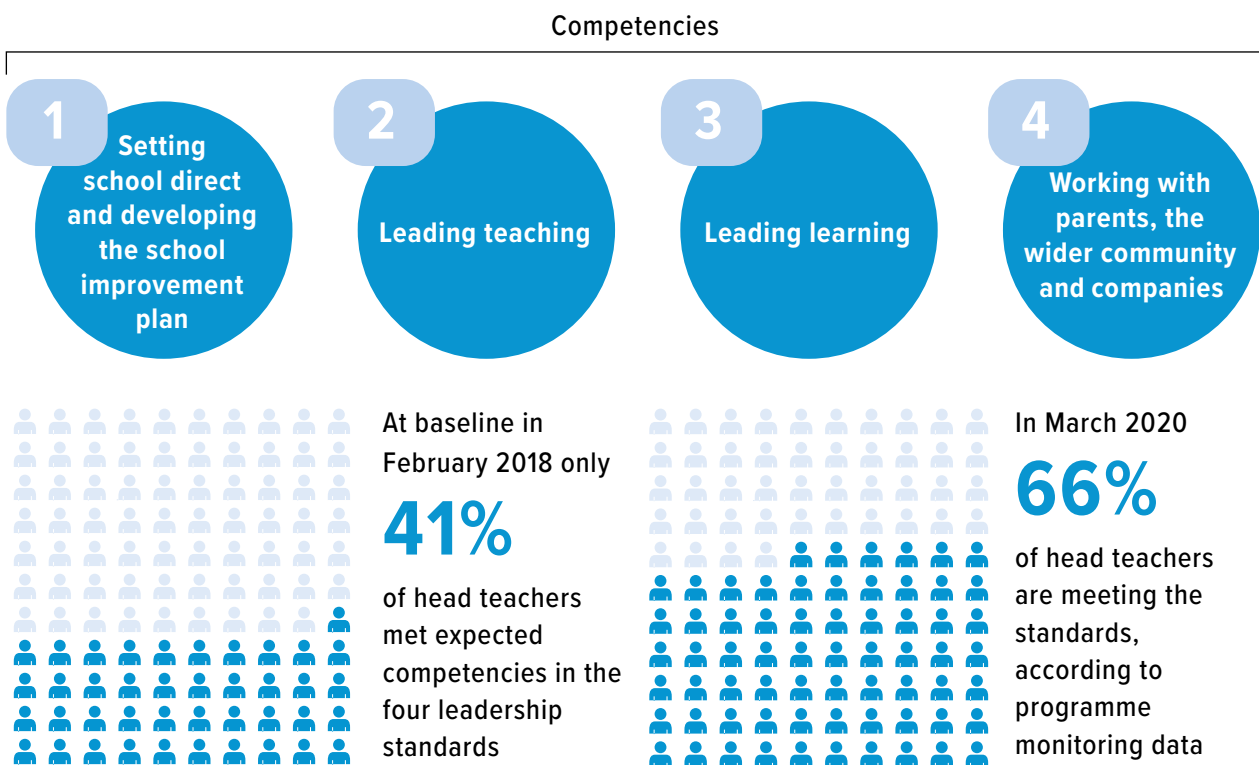
“We have been in a team that assisted with the portfolio. We have realised that head teachers are making progress that is impacting the teachers. So when the head teacher visits the teachers the comments that he has provided with feedback, so as to make sure that what the teachers say is added and being discussed, this is the main channel that made the head teachers aware that teachers need support.”
(RFGD1 speaker 2)

school stakeholders. One member of staff described how the skills from the portfolio benefitted the running of Communities of Practice with teachers within the school:

Key takeaways

The new Leaders of Learning role in Rwanda is a promising example of middle tier reform. It is associated

BLF tracks head teacher competencies in four areas



with measurable changes in head teacher professional practice. The role has been central in developing a culture of collaboration where head teachers work together with District and Sector Education Officers to solve problems and support school improvement. The role has been highly professionalised, with innovative recruitment and induction processes, and a professional development programme accredited through a portfolio submission. The practice of recording and following up on actions collectively – through PLCs and the portfolio approach – shows promise in building long term professional capacity.

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