

## School Principal Essay

This school principal is female and in her early forties. She is well-educated and has a Master of Education from an American institution. Before being appointed as a school principal, she worked for an international assistance organization and then for a local civil society organization, where she successfully led many projects on education. In 2013, among other civil society activists, she was invited to the Ministry of Education to share her reflections on problems in education and offer her vision for solving them.

She delivered a great speech and after that she was offered a position of school principal. She was deeply committed to education in general and school education particularly, so she accepted the proposed position. She did not pass a mandatory training on school leadership recommended by the Ministry of Education. She worked as a school principal for five years. The school she led is one of the oldest in Baku (was established in 1895), is located in the city center, and is one of the best public schools in the city. The school is large with around 3,000 pupils enrolled.

After five years, this school principal decided to leave her position and continue her education abroad. That was an unexpected decision for many who have known her well, especially considering her commitment to school and education. This change in the career plans was probably one of the main reasons of research interest to explore why a young, ambitious, committed and motivated school leader suddenly decides to leave the position.

She was asked to write an essay about her experience and, as a guide, she was provided with questions united under some themes. She was particularly asked to share her reasons for leaving school leadership. Questions and her answers are provided below as they appear in her essay. Not all the questions were answered, but she has promised to continue. Later on, hopefully, her answers to the rest of questions will be uploaded.

I went to school in a small town in the western part of Azerbaijan. That times it was multicultural and multinational town with several schools with different languages of instruction. A so called "Russian school", where Russian was the primary language of instruction, there were two Azerbaijani schools and one Armenian. I went to the Russian school and got education in Russian. I remember Russians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis and even Ukrainians among my teachers up to 1988.

My school was the center of our life that times, because all interesting things that could happen in the life of a child, happened there. It was just little jokes, sweet memories connected to my friends among which were Azerbaijani and Armenian girls and boys. I went to a school of music and learned playing piano and my teacher was Georgian. So, now I can say that up to 12 years old I was growing in a diverse multicultural environment which was very good for my personality. But it was not integrating all people around me. I grew up in dual world. A Russian speaking world, with my mother, school and teachers, and an Azerbaijani-speaking world with my relatives from dad's side. Unfortunately, they were not integrated and existed in different dimensions.

I cannot say anything special about how my teachers and schoolmates influenced my personal development. I rather think that many events that happened later in my life happened despite (or even athwart???) my childhood experience. I don't remember any strong ambitious person close to me that would serve as an example of a leader or women leader, or someone that would have ambitious plans regarding my future. My mom would always encourage me and my brother to learn more, to read more, to watch intellectual TV programs, but my teachers would never try to impact me or my classmates in terms of our out- of school- life and experience, I can say that our teachers and school as a whole were rather indifferent to what could have happened to us in the future.

In my class, there were many students that did not speak Russian as they were coming from families where Russian was not language of communication, they were very weak and unable to progress with the school program and all my teachers did about it was complaining about their

inability to study to their uneducated parents. Nowadays, when I know a lot about education and how to work with children to help them to be successful and try myself to implement many things for such students, I regret about school experiences that those students had and always skeptically listen to older generation's opinions about effectiveness and quality of Soviet school system. In today's Azerbaijan, we do a lot more to provide effective system for all children. Even if we still have a long way to go, we as a school system are more ambitious and forward-looking than the old school system that I experienced in my childhood.

I was a successful student as I had a great advantage – my Russian mother who helped me and my brother. She read a lot by herself, she was very curious and reflective woman and she was the only person in my childhood that really impacted my intellectual development and had plans regarding me and my brother.

When I graduated from the secondary school, it was already 1994 and my country gained independence from the Soviet Union and was making attempts to build effective higher education system. I entered Baku State University, thanks to my parents! The 1990s??? were very difficult times for my country and for my family. But despite this, I recall far more interesting and fulfilling experiences from my university life. I really loved my teachers and I can say that some of them impacted my critical thinking and ability to analyze written texts. I still remember interesting questions that my university teachers asked and those questions, even if I could not answer them immediately, made me go back to them again and again and developed reflective thinking in me and persistence to find the answer, to come up with an interesting idea, to articulate my own vision of situations.

I was a child of two people whose family stories could demonstrate the real nature of Soviet governmental policies towards its own people. My mother was Russian. She was born in 1948 in Dagestan, Makhachkala. Her Russian family was exiled to Caucasus region in late 1920s as a “kulak<sup>1</sup>” family from places around Don river, where her father and mother were born and raised.

My father is Azerbaijani, he was born in 1944 in Goycha<sup>2</sup> region of modern Republic of Armenia, which was historically inhabited by Azerbaijanis, and from where his family and thousands of other Azerbaijani families were forcibly deported in 1948-1950. They moved to a western part of Azerbaijan and settled in a small town, named Khanlar<sup>3</sup> in Soviet times and which name is Goygol now.

Both of my parents had disadvantageous family histories, they were coming from forcibly removed and deported families, they studied in secondary schools, but could not enter university and get higher education. Me and my brother are the first generation of people with higher education. But I can say that my parents never felt unhappy about it or never mentioned those events in their families lives as something that had destroyed their future. They rather accepted it as an old history, which they lived together with the whole country. They were quite normal and modest people with an average income, their plans to give access to higher education for their children were probably the most ambitious plans in their entire lives.

My mom was the main person in my life up to the times when I became a mother myself. She was beautiful, kind, soft and a very patient woman. She was very curious and well-rounded, despite the fact that she didn't have good education. She liked reading. She read a lot to me and my brother and taught me to read when I was 4 years old. She supported my desire to learn playing piano and I started studying in a school of music when I was 8 years old.

I remember many books and toys that I had in my early childhood and games that I played. At home, I had my own space where all my toys (dolls, various doll home appliances, and other girls' stuff) were arranged in a particular way. Everyone in our family called it Yuliya's corner, for me it was my home.

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<sup>1</sup> Means “rich” villager

<sup>2</sup> Now Sevan after being renamed by Armenian authorities

<sup>3</sup> Before it was Yelenendorf settled by Germans; was renamed by Soviet Authorities

All my childhood I remember playing two role plays: a teacher and a mother. When I turned 13 years old, I stopped playing mother. I remember this very well, because we moved to a new apartment and I left all my toys to my little cousins. My new play was “woman at work.” This is how I name it now, when I am almost 43 years old. I just played a role of a woman who was always busy with some kind of tasks. I was filling in papers and answering calls. My mom would often grumble at me because of many papers that I used in my play. At home, I always played by myself. I remember myself playing a role play: I pretended to have a visitor and tried to explain what was written in a newspaper. I had many interesting newspaper articles and magazines for these purposes.

When I played with my elder brother, it would be rough and tumble games in the yard, or bicycle riding or something like that, but he never joined me in my home plays. I had many friends in school and they often visited us in our home, they would come for birthday parties, or holidays and weekends. I always had many boys among my friends as well.

I remember that from my early school life I could arrange my classmates in groups and suggest various games to play. Or I would be telling stories to them. I was good at re-telling stories that my mom read to me. Sometimes I told stories that were product of my imagination and my friends would guess whether the story that I told was mine or I read it somewhere. Now I think, that probably that was my first experience as a leader. I perfectly remember that my teachers were negative about it. They would complain to my mom that “Yuliya likes commanding, she gathers children around her and starts telling them what to do, and they all listen to her and do what she says.”

My mom was not happy to know that her daughter liked being “commander” and she’d always tell me, “Stop behaving as if you were the main person in that class.” I never objected to this, because I didn’t really understand what exactly I was doing wrong. By the time I turned 15, I was very silent, modest, timid and an extremely unconfident person. The only thing I wanted was to finish the school, enter the university and leave that town.

### **Self-perception as a school leader**

I am much more confident than I was when I was 15 years old girl 😊. But seriously, my reflective nature helped me to believe in myself, because I could see the consequences of my decisions since my early university years. I can say now that most of them were quite smart. For example, to enter the master’s program after graduating with a bachelor’s, to decide about the specialization and choose the topic for master’s dissertation, to start working in a small company while a master’s student and some other decisions.

I had always been concentrated on results. To some extent, I am results-oriented person, because before doing something I try to understand what I want to get and try to do my best to attain it (when I had to make decisions about school staff). At the same time, I am always concerned about the means to be applied in order to get to the desired results.

I am disciplined and well-organized. I was the first school director in Azerbaijan that had set visiting hours for people outside of school, while having my door open for students and staff of the school all the time. I never come late to meetings. I always explain to my staff the reasons behind the actions. I always ask their opinion and I never ignore/forget conflicting opinions. I do not like conforming positions of staff, I like those who try to oppose – there is always something to learn from them.

I am flexible. I am not afraid of asking questions and changing decisions where it is possible. If there is an important issue that needs clarification and/or additional opinion, I involve colleagues and people from outside of school system. I am not afraid of sharing my experience and opinions on important issues. I am open and keep my school’s doors open for researchers and students coming for internships.

I can build trust with people whom I work with. My staff members often come to me to talk about various issues, including family and kids. They ask my opinion, ask for help in various situations and I always try to be responsive and keep their confidence.

I am curious, emotional and sociable. I always ask questions and prefer making decisions as a result of a common thought DOES SHE MEAN CONSENSUS? MAJORITY VOTE?. I participate in all aspects of the school's life: I suggest ideas for various events, I suggest scenarios for events, I ask questions as if I was a student when I do participant observations of lessons.

When there is a need for a quick solo decision, I do not hesitate to make it as well. When there is something urgent to be done for the MoE reporting, for example, I would do it by myself.

My actions never diverge from my words. One of the strongest principles that I apply as a school leader is "do what you said, people should see that you are consistent and logical." I apply this principle when dealing with difficult employees and difficult families.

Sometimes I am very straightforward, even if I know that this would not help me or can somehow influence others' thoughts about me. I can make friends, at the same time there are many people around me that do not like me.

### **Changes and Evolving Styles**

I did change. But there are some important features that I keep from my school and university years: I always wanted to be the best in my studies. I always kept my words and actions coherent, never promised anything that I could not do. I could make quick decisions. And I always was flexible.

I am not sure I understood this question very well, but I can say that my perception is that I can influence people's work and thinking, I can change their perception of themselves and the way they work. I can create situations in which they try to do their work so that I like it and encourage them to do more.

For example, by the end of my first year as a school leader I asked myself a question: "What did you do in this school for the entire year?" The answer was I changed two things. I could change the perception of a school director as a "closed, inaccessible person" that never speaks outside of meetings and school assemblies. I also changed the culture of the school's meetings and assemblies.

Now I will try to explain this statement. Before I started working in the school, employees would think that if the director mentions someone's name during the meeting, then it was a sign of underperformance and everyone would try to keep silence and refrain from active participation. When I came and started leading the meetings and observed other colleagues during the meetings I realized that this should have been changed. I started promoting active participation and employees' initiatives. I supported small timid ideas from the staff, presented various innovations and never minded open thoughts. By the end of the year, my staff wanted to be mentioned during the meetings. They realized that those employees that did good job during a certain period were going to be awarded with diplomas and certificates. So, the culture of silent meetings with one talking leader was replaced with the culture of active participatory meetings with one smart facilitator.

I think I am successful.

I like reading, my background in literature gives me the opportunity to influence students' and teachers' choice of readings. I suggested opening a book club in the school. I myself led several

meetings of the club in the beginning. Now the clubs are led by students and they invited me to share what they read and ask me about my reading list. Another example is music. I like music and we regularly invite students and teachers of Baku Music Academy to play at our school for our students and parents.

I demonstrate my power by providing a personal example and sharing my knowledge and experience.

I think I provided answers to the questions NN 6,7,8,9 above describing my personality and work principles.

Regarding the “power” for me. “Power” is the strength that enables me to change situations for the better, to make people think differently and work differently. Perhaps, my power is my personal example. I never demand something that I can’t do by myself.

There is one more thing that makes me feel powerful as a school leader. I never rely on someone’s opinion. I try to be personally involved in the most important aspects of my school’s life, whether it is reporting to the MoE, or students’ problem, or communication with parents, or difficult employees, or purchasing new appliances, or participating in projects and opening new classrooms. I know the situation from the beginning, I know the facts and I make informed decisions.

Another factor that can describe how I understand power as a school leader is how I use my personal and family connections to bring new resources to the school. Last academic year I helped to open a new technological lab in my school and my husband supported me with this project by connecting me with the Ministry of Transport and High Technologies.

## **Purpose of Schooling**

The purpose of schooling in my country has always being conceptualized society-wise. The school graduates should be educated in a way that enables them to be active and responsible citizens, to participate in important society events, to know and support national traditions and so on. This could be said for Soviet and post-Soviet times as well. In 2006, my country introduced a new National Curriculum, which was an attempt to become more person-oriented, but, at the same time, to keep important common messages as well.

We got familiar with such concepts as self-regulation, personal freedom, respect for others, respect for differences, understanding of one’s own will, self-realization and many other messages borrowed from learner-oriented education philosophies and systems. I’d say that in terms of conceptualization and purpose declaration our education documents can be accepted as progressive and advanced. But in terms of conceptual understanding and practical realization we have to go a very long way. Say, if you ask five school principals how they understand the concepts of “person-oriented education,” “self-regulation,” and “self-realization” you’d get five different answers. This is the problem. We should arrive at common, shared understanding of what we want to achieve and how to achieve it.

## **QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO SUBJECT**

Personal experience related to school life and leadership, family role

Schooling experience

1. Can you recall your school memory? Did you like a school? Why? What were your favorite activities in a school? What kind of activities did you enjoy in a school?

2. Describe your school life/experience. How was it? What about teachers? What about your school principal? Did they have influence on you? What kind of memory do you keep on them?
3. How have your early educational experiences shaped you as a leader?
4. Which lessons you liked the most at school and why? Which lessons you disliked the most at school and why?
5. What you can say about your relations with friends during school life?

Family impact, parental attitude and support

Life story

What kind of personality did you have as a young child?

Parents and home

1. What was your home life like when you were a child?
2. What was your parents' parenting style: patriarchal and more traditional or more liberal?
3. What kind of values did your parents have?
4. Describe how your father influenced you as a child and as an adult?
5. Describe how your mother influenced you as a child and as an adult?
6. How have your family experiences shaped you as a leader?

Siblings

7. Can you describe your relationships with your siblings?
8. Did they have an influence on you or you influenced them I childhood years? Please describe.

Early childhood

9. How education was valued in your family? What was education level in last three generations of your family?
10. Who had the biggest influence on you growing up? Why?

University years

1. What kind of personality did you have as a student?
2. Who did influence your University/profession choice? If no one did, then why you had chosen the field you're currently in?
3. What is most remarkable from your experience as University student?
4. What you can say about your relations with friends during university life?
5. Which disciplines you liked the most at the University and why?
6. Did you have the university teachers who influenced your worldview, your opinions, your attitude to life in general? If you did, then which disciplines did they teach you?
7. What is your first memory of being a leader of something (could be as a child or as an adult)?

Self- image

1. What kind of personality are you now?

Evolving Style

1. How successful are you in communication with others as a principal?
2. How do you influence the culture in your school?
3. What is the meaning of power for you?
4. What makes you feel powerful or successful as a school leader and in general?
5. How do you demonstrate your power in a school environment?

What is your perception of yourself as a leader?

## Purpose of schooling

1. What is the purpose of schooling for you?
2. Do you think the purpose of schooling has changed over the years? In what ways?
3. Can you describe two or three differences in schooling between the Soviet period (or previous time) and today? Had these differences led to positive or negative consequences in terms of schooling?

### QUESTIONS LEFT WITHOUT RESPONSES:

<p>ROLE OF SCHOOL PRINCIPAL</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you think is the main role of the school principal?</li> <li>2. What are the main responsibilities of the school principal in your opinion?</li> <li>3. How would you describe your leadership style? More liberal and flexible or more demanding, strict, conservative and traditional? Why you think than the one you're using is appropriate today?</li> <li>4. What values do you (or did you) try to show as a leader?</li> <li>5. What are/were the biggest challenges you face as a school leader?</li> <li>6. Do you think there are differences in leadership style between male and female school principals, in general? If so, can you give an example or two? If not, why not?</li> <li>7. What knowledge and skills do you have, what is your leadership capacity?</li> <li>8. Are there any essential characteristics of school leaders?</li> <li>9. What are the functions of a leader in the school principalship? Educator profession?</li> </ol>
<p>LEADERSHIP STYLE</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. What are the behaviors of you as principal that help you to engage teachers, and support student achievements, involve parents?</li> <li>11. How successful are you in communication with school teachers, students, parents and school non-teaching staff? Could you please provide any example?</li> <li>12. What are you strongest features as a school leader?</li> <li>13. What kind of leadership skills and abilities would you like to develop and improve?</li> </ol>
<p>INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>14. What do you feel is the best incentive to motivate teachers in using student-centered learning approaches?</li> <li>15. What does student-centered learning look like at your school?</li> </ol>
<p>LEADERSHIP</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell about your leadership experiences in the last 5 years</li> <li>2. What would you consider successful examples of your leading?</li> <li>3. What were challenges?</li> <li>4. What ideas about leadership did you bring from your education?</li> <li>5. What is your definition of leadership? What does mean to be a leader?</li> <li>6. What motivates to lead?</li> <li>7. What is your image of yourself as a leader?</li> <li>8. How effective of a leader are you?</li> <li>9. How willing are you to engage in leadership?</li> <li>10. What fears or apprehensions do you have about leadership?</li> <li>11. Do you think you need training on leadership? Why?</li> </ol>
<p>TIME USE</p>	<p>See attached table</p>
<p>THEME 3. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</p>	

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|  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>16. What were the skills, knowledge and attitudes acquired as a result of the school principals' program?</li><li>17. How did the school principals' program help you in supporting teachers to use student-centered learning approaches? Please provide examples.</li><li>18. How did you rate (1-5) the effectiveness of the principals' training programs? Please explain your rate.</li><li>19. What would you recommend to improve the future school principals training programs, especially in the area of supporting teachers in student-centered learning?</li><li>20. What personal gains (including increased responsibilities, self-confidence etc.) you have achieved as a result of the principals' training program?</li><li>21. How you would describe the leadership style required by national education system? By parents? By teachers?</li><li>22. How you would describe the leadership style required by the State Strategy on Education Development?</li><li>23. Do you think your school principal experience required changes in your leadership?</li></ol> |
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## Time use questionnaire

How much time do you spend on Leadership tasks WEEKLY?

Leadership Tasks	Less than 10%	Between 11-30%	Between 31%-50%	Between 51%-100%	Between 51%-100%
1. Making classroom resources available					
2. Making teacher guides available					
3. Making learning aids available					
4. Classroom observations					
5. Follow-up to classroom observations					
6. Mentoring teachers					
7. Planning teacher training / professional development					
8. Collecting and analyzing school data					
9. Meeting with parents					
10. Meeting with community members					
11. Meeting with Governing Authority					
12. Writing reports to submit to Governing Authority					
13. Other					