

Editorial

The challenges of leading educational institutions

This thematic issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies* focuses on educational institution leadership, which is becoming increasingly complex due to numerous changes in the educational environment. The first PISA results, published in 2000, had a strong effect on the changed discourse in education (Sahlberg 2014) and put competitiveness, comparability, standardization, external responsibility and free school choice at centre stage. Accordingly, the state's and different stakeholders' (primarily parents') expectations for schools and their leaders have also changed. Professional responsibility, including a focus on students' needs, equality and justice, is required of schools and educational institution leadership. Principals are thus faced with the challenge of balancing external requirements and internal trust (Scherp 2008).

The OECD study *Improving School Leadership* (Pont et al. 2007) defines school leadership as a key factor in improving students' outcomes; therefore, it makes high-quality leadership a priority in all educational systems. This is to be achieved through four policy "levers":

- (re)defining school leadership responsibilities, i.e. more autonomy and a clear responsibility to improve learning outcomes;
- distributing school leadership within schools and across schools through, for instance, the introduction of middle management¹ and effective school boards;
- developing skills for effective school leadership as part of principals' lifelong learning; and
- making school leadership an attractive profession for the best candidates with adequate remuneration and career development prospects.

Experts on quality (e.g. Ishikawa 1987; Juran 2009) also agree that the principal is the crucial role model for employees and students. They emphasize leadership and maintain that leaders have the biggest influence on an organization's quality. Following the above, leadership is—in addition to teachers—the most important factor in ensuring quality learning and teaching, which is also made clear by various research studies on leadership in education. Thus, certain concepts have been developed that relate leadership to learning and define areas in which the relationship is the strongest. The intersection of findings demonstrates that

¹ In some countries, middle management denotes class leaders; in Slovenia, it could mean teachers' working groups.

principals have an indirect impact on learning by creating favourable conditions for developing teachers' professionalism and by participating in professional development. Therefore, much of the attention is devoted to high-quality training programmes for principals. While all European countries have developed training programmes for principals before they are appointed (these are mandatory in some countries), lifelong learning remains unsystematic because principals participate at their own discretion. This has led to various national and international projects focusing on principals' work and different roles and the always-new competences expected from them. Some projects with participating experts from Slovenia have also focused on principals' competences, such as Central5: the Central European Competency Framework for School Leaders (Schratz et al. 2013).

Among other international projects, the European Policy Network on School Leadership (EPNoSL) (2010–2014) particularly influenced the publication of this thematic issue. This project focuses on the autonomy, responsibility and distribution of leadership; schools' responses to educational policy initiatives; and leadership training programs. The project is coordinated by Dr. Kathy Kikis-Papadakis and is organized by the Foundation for Research and Technology–Hellas (FORTH) in Crete, Greece.

Educational institution leadership training is an important factor in the quality of principals' work; therefore, we present examples of principal training programmes across Europe. We must not ignore cooperation and partnerships among different institutions or within each individual institution. European projects within the Lifelong Learning Programme also contribute to the development of principal training programs. We also present the Comenius multilateral Developing Leadership Capacity for Data-Informed School Improvement (DELECA) project, which is coordinated by Dr. Justina Erčulj (National School of Leadership in Education, Slovenia) in conjunction with other participating institutions in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Latvia and Sweden.

We would also like to mention the Erasmus+ project known as Entrepreneurial Competences for School Leadership Teams (EC4SLT) (2014–2016), which is coordinated by Prof. Dr. Paul Harrison (edEUcation, the United Kingdom) and is focused on the improvement of primary- and secondary-school principals' quality and effectiveness. Its aim is to improve creativity and innovativeness and to identify the key economic competences that could be transferred to school leadership teams.

In view of the projects focusing on the new challenges related to leading educational institutions, let us now look at the authors and their contributions to this issue of our journal.

This thematic issue begins with an Austrian principal training programme at the Leadership Academy in Innsbruck presented by **Michael Schratz** and **Wilfried Schley**. This programme is special because it includes all system levels: principals from all regions and all educational levels; ministry representatives; regional educational authorities; and institutions that educate and train principals. The "system approach", as the authors call it, is necessary to ensure everyone's support and inclusion to bring about school changes and improvements. Various stakeholders' collective learning and networking is another important aspect of

such training. Between the forums that take place at the Academy, participants work on different projects in close collaboration. According to the authors, the successful introduction of innovations and changes requires a different organizational culture based on cooperation and trust instead of more or increasingly complex planning or control.

In their research study, **Janine Smit**, **Carl Bagley** and **Sophie Ward** examine the ways in which principals in Dutch primary schools respond to governmental initiatives, specifically the Professions in Education Act. This act was adopted to assure the quality of education delivered by teachers, principals and support staff in schools. The authors begin with the assumption that a principal's actions have an important effect on school performance and student outcomes. They rely on five dimensions of successful school leadership: establishing goals and expectations; strategic resourcing; planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (Robinson 2007). In all, 103 principals participated in the study. The data were collected with a questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The authors conclude that principals feel responsible for responding to the Government's initiatives but do not follow them blindly. They consider the school's culture and history. It is also very important to note that principals do not see their roles merely as executors of educational policy requirements but believe they are significant actors in a complex process of political changes.

Jacky Lumby's article was written in 2013 as part of the European Policy Network on School Leadership; it considers the principal's role in achieving greater equity in education. The United Kingdom faces increasing inequity despite constant debates on social justice, inclusion and equal opportunities in education. Lumby draws attention to the gaps between the attainments of students from different social backgrounds, between girls and boys, and between native-born and immigrant students. She concludes that existing beliefs should be changed and principals should develop the will and capacity for educational leadership for equity. She states that no principal training programme includes the field of leadership for equity. Therefore, she suggests that principals should receive more opportunities to critically reflect upon their role and how they can lead in such a way as to guarantee equity for all participants in the educational system. She also calls on education policymakers to act accordingly.

The next two articles examine the principal's role in encouraging teachers' creativity and professional development. **Majda Cencič** and **Tina Štemberger** present the findings from their research study on how preschool teachers assess school leadership as a factor influencing preschool teachers' creativity. They also examined the views of some preschool teachers identified as being creative about leadership's effect on their creativity. Creativity fulfils employees, leads to successful societies and influences social and economic development; in addition, leadership has an important role in encouraging creativity. The research study results demonstrate that the participating preschool teachers positively assessed the role of leadership in influencing their creativity. Therefore, the authors suggest that principal training programmes should pay more attention to leadership for

creativity and encouraging employees' creativity.

Principals also play a key role in encouraging educators' professional development. **Justina Erčulj** approaches the topic from the aspect of leadership for learning, where the responsibility for professional development is perceived as an important indirect factor of a principal's effect on students' achievements. She interviewed principals and groups of educators for her research study, which was conceived as a multiple case study. The author finds that principals greatly influence their colleagues' professional development through their own examples and beliefs about professional development's importance in relation to quality work with students. Like Jacky Lumby, the author concludes that knowledge and skills are not sufficient for a more successful leadership practice in this area; rather, we must influence principals' beliefs that encouraging and leading professional development is one of their crucial tasks.

An important competence for principals is working with data because schools are expected to use data when introducing improvements, which assigns them responsibility toward external stakeholders. **Eric Verbiest et al.**, partners in the DELECA project, developed a training course to enable principals to use data more effectively when introducing changes in schools. The article presents the basic concepts supporting the project: data literacy, principals' competences and training for school leadership. It also presents the content of the training course with reference to the competences that principals develop in the program.

The article by **Borut Čampelj, Nives Kreuh, Vladislav Rajkovič** and **Eva Jereb** links self-evaluation and school informatization. In their research project, the authors relate theory to practice through self-evaluation and present the effect on planning and implementing the process of informatization. They include three groups of stakeholders: school leadership, teachers and students. Their model is an important contribution to the development of high-quality schools because it directs schools toward further planning activities and defining development priorities.

The articles on educational institution leadership published in this thematic issue are meant for principals and others participating in the educational process so that they may acquire a better understanding of the complexity and difficulty of a principal's work; the articles also provide a challenge for future examination and research in the field.

Editors of the thematic section "Educational institution leadership"
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