



**DESK RESEARCH REPORT ON
EDUCATION RESEARCH**

**School leader recruitment, retention
and motivation in Europe**



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INTRODUCTION

This review briefly considers recent research on the recruitment, retention, motivation and impact of school leaders. These areas are intertwined in various ways, with motivation influencing retention for example. Therefore, rather than attempting to focus on individual aspects and artificially separate various domains, the individual and the environment in which school leaders work are taken as being largely inseparable. As a result, rather than treating school leadership as separated from the context in which it takes place, this paper takes these to be interlinked, with context central in shaping the working lives of school leaders.

In order to maintain cohesion with the EEPN Desk Research Report on “Teacher recruitment, retention and motivation in Europe” (Kelly, 2019), we adopt a reflexive definition of motivation in this contribution, as that which attracts, retains and drives school leaders to improve their practice. This is to avoid over-theorised speculation, which would distract from pragmatic concerns of reducing school leader shortages and providing impulses for professional development in the field.

School leader shortages across Europe

While there are no exact figures available, many instances point to shortages of school leaders being a serious issue in various European countries (see for example Howley, Solange, & Perry, 2005; Lemoine, McCormack, & Richardson, 2018; Whitaker, 2003) and beyond. With school leaders filling a key position in the school organization that has a significant (mostly indirect) impact on student outcomes (Day et al., 2009; Hattie, 2015; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009), attracting and retaining sufficient apt candidates for the position is paramount to ensure schools are set up for success.

This review

In the European context, research on school leadership is comparatively young, with many European countries barely having three decades of dedicated research covering it. Thus, empirical work discussed in this contribution will be taken from the European context where available with some larger studies from further afield serving as additional sources of information. However, its relevance for the European contexts has to be seen with caution. US principals, for example, operate in a high-accountability context that is in many instances market-driven and linked to (other) mechanisms of new public management (Easley II & Elmeski, 2016). This stands in contrast to various European countries which often feature far less high-stakes mechanisms of accountability.



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SCHOOL LEADER RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND MOTIVATION IN EUROPE

Motivation to become a school leader

The attractiveness of a school leadership position can be influenced by the difference in salaries between experienced teachers and school leaders. Compared to the minimum salary received by teachers with 10 years of experience, school leaders receive an up to 25% higher minimum statutory salary in most European education systems. In more than half of the education systems, the maximum salary of school leaders is “at least 25% higher than the salary at the top of the teacher pay scale” (Tremosa, Davydovskaia, Sigalas, European Commission (Belgium), & Eurydice (Belgium), 2018, p. 30). Nevertheless, there is a high variance between different countries. On one end of the spectrum, school leaders in Italy earn more than twice as much as teachers with 10 years of experience. On the other end of the spectrum, school leaders in the lowest salary range in the Netherlands and Portugal can potentially earn less than teachers with 10 years of experience (Tremosa et al., 2018).

Becoming a school leader can also be seen as a career progression for teachers. In terms of career trajectory leading to school leadership positions, there is often a progression that starts with being a teacher, then taking up additional responsibility (being in charge of coordinating all classes of a certain level for example), and then possibly taking up professional development courses in leadership. At some point, one then becomes a deputy principal, sometimes by appointment, more often upon application. This is often viewed as a steppingstone towards becoming a formal school leader (a school principal), with some skipping the position of deputy principal. Occasionally, school leaders progress to positions in school supervisory authorities or lower levels of education ministries.

Recruitment and qualification

There is no universal recruitment or qualification process for school leadership positions in Europe. Instead, recruitment or qualification processes can be differentiated by eligibility criteria, selection criteria, level of decision-making, recruitment procedure, and phase of career training (OECD, 2008; Schleicher & OECD, 2012; Taipale, 2012). Across Europe, there appears to be a struggle to attract enough candidates to become school leaders.

Eligibility

According to Taipale (2012) the qualification requirements usually fall into one of three categories: “no common qualifications requirements determined; a teaching degree and experience in education; and leadership training in addition to the former requirements” (Taipale, 2012, p. 12). On one end of the spectrum are for example Sweden and Norway which currently do not have any precise qualifications requirements. In Sweden, even a higher education degree is not explicitly required although it is quite common in practice and although becoming a principal comes with the requirement to follow a comprehensive qualification programme within the first four years. Countries like Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Lithuania and France require aspiring school leaders to have at least a Bachelor’s degree, be qualified as teachers in the relevant school form, and have some years of work experience in the educational field. On the other end spectrum are countries like Scotland, Hungary, Malta and Spain, which require leadership training on top of the teacher education (Bezzina, 2002; Eurydice Network, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f, 2019a; Ingbórsson, Alfirević, Pavičić, & Vican, 2019).

Decision-making process

Among the potential candidates, future school leaders are often selected by the school, school board or committee (e.g. Slovenia, Portugal, Spain, and Ireland) or by local authorities (e.g. Finland, Hungary, Scotland, Sweden). While in many countries this means the deciding institutions have full autonomy



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over their decision (e.g. Slovenia, Sweden, Finland), in other countries their autonomy might be limited by the need to adhere to a framework set by the state government (e.g. Spain, Norway) or by the need to consult with other stakeholders (e.g. Hungary, Ireland) (Barzanò, 2011; Eurydice Network, 2018a, 2018c, 2018d, 2019b; Schleicher & OECD, 2012).

Exceptions include Germany, Italy, and France with decisions on selections made further away from schools through strictly regulated selection processes. In Germany, school leaders are proposed by the city's school department and confirmed by the relevant State Ministry of Education. In France, selection starts with the admission to principal training and ends with an appointment by a government authority (Barzanò, 2011; Eurydice Network, 2018e, 2018g; Taipale, 2012).

There is no standardized recruitment across countries. Recruitment procedures often include interviews (e.g. France, Ireland, and Greece) (Athanasoula-Reppa & Lazaridou, 2008; Eurydice Network, 2018g; Schleicher & OECD, 2012).

Not only does the decision-making body and recruitment procedure vary from country to country, but also selection criteria do. They include but are not limited to leadership experience, interpersonal skills, seniority, opinions of stakeholders, quality of work proposal for the school, academic qualifications, and school leadership values (Schleicher & OECD, 2012).

School leadership training

More than half of all countries in the European Union have introduced compulsory education for school leaders (Ingþórsson et al., 2019). Trainings can be provided as pre-service, during the induction, or while in-service, and there is a high cross-country variance of when the training is actually offered. Some countries like for example Finland, England and Sweden offer training opportunities in all three career phases, while others focus on two (e.g. Austria, Norway, Denmark) or one (e.g. Netherlands) of those phases (Schleicher & OECD, 2012).

Despite this widespread availability of training programs, there is evidence that school leaders do not feel adequately prepared for their new position (Schleicher & OECD, 2012). One of the reasons for this might be the content of trainings themselves. There appears to be a growing trend of more and more countries offering pre- or in-service training for school leaders (OECD, 2018, p. 137).

The percentage of lower secondary school leaders, who report that school administration or principal training elements were included in their formal training before taking up their role, varies greatly between countries. Roughly 90% of Finnish school leaders and less than 10 % of Croatian school leaders report that such elements were included. The same is true for instructional leadership elements. Roughly 95% of Maltese school leaders report such elements were part of their formal training, but only ~50% of Finnish school leaders, only ~30% of Lithuanian school leaders, and only ~10% of Croatian report the same (OECD, 2018).

In-service school leader motivation and demotivation

To the best of our knowledge, there is no data on in-service school leader motivation that cuts across Europe. Therefore, insights from selected studies from the European and non-European context are offered. These are in some instances based on case-studies, so findings may be contextually bound.

First and foremost, job satisfaction leads to job retention. School leaders experiencing a high level of job satisfaction are more likely to stay in their job. Motivation and satisfaction of school leaders are influenced by both external and internal factors (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). Motivating factors can be the love for children, a sense of duty, and the feeling of being responsible (Erdem & Cicekdemir, 2016).

Associated with the school leaders' individual well-being and, thus, their job satisfaction are the interpersonal relationships and communication processes at the respective school and its



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environment. Respectful interactions and the recognition of one's role and work are essential for school leaders' motivation (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018).

In terms of their daily work and tasks, cooperation, collegiality and good relations between the staff members and the school leaders are essential aspects affecting job satisfaction (Darmody & Smyth, 2016).

Being able to spend a subjectively-perceived sufficient amount of time on the school's curriculum and instructional leadership is an important external factor contributing to the school leaders' motivation (Wang et al., 2018). The working conditions at school, e.g. adequate facilities, also can have an important impact on school leaders' job satisfaction (Darmody & Smyth, 2016) and, therefore, on their decision to stay in their jobs.

There is empirical evidence that being a school leader is an intense job with a diverse set of challenges (Chaplain, 2017; Darmody & Smyth, 2016; OECD, 2008; O'Malley, Long, & King, 2015). About a decade ago, an international OECD report stated that school leaders' "burnout caused by high levels of stress and long working hours is common, yet many principals remain on the job because there are no attractive alternatives" (OECD, 2008, p. 177). Additionally, there are several findings – especially from the non-European context, that indicate that the working conditions, school context and teacher climate can influence the level of stress (Boyland, 2011; Jong, Grundmeyer, & Yankey, 2017; for a study from a European context, see Darmody & Smyth, 2016). Rigid, high-stakes accountability systems seem especially problematic in this context (Easley II & Tulowitzki, 2016). Overall, however, studies on school leader motivation and demotivation with European data, especially internationally comparative ones are lacking. Similarly, longitudinal studies on motivating and demotivating factors are missing.

An excessive workload, time pressure in general and, especially, lacking time to cooperate with and evaluate teachers are key factors for demotivation of school leaders. In addition, changes in education policy can exert additional pressure on school leaders as they try to implement them (Wang et al., 2018).

Due to the afore-mentioned high administrative workload coupled with the generally high demands, a lack of administrative support as well as a lack of management knowledge can dampen the motivation of school leaders further (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Erdem & Cicekdemir, 2016).

Another source of demotivation can be linked to the actual tasks of school leaders as compared to the rhetoric: School leaders from TALIS-countries report spending at least 30% of their time on administrative tasks, but "only 16% of their working time on curriculum and teaching-related tasks and meetings" (OECD, 2018, p. 38). Similarly, there seem to be mismatches between expectations and reality in terms of working hours and recognition (Hancock & Müller, 2014; Jong et al., 2017).

In several countries, school leaders also struggle with finding opportunities to participate in professional development courses with their regular duties "getting in the way"; embedding professional development into the work schedule of school leaders could address this issue (OECD, 2018, pp. 44–45). Over the last ten to 15 years, several policies have been implemented in various European countries to support school leaders. These include (depending on the country):

- Extended training programmes before nomination as well as expanded professional development after the appointment.
- Introduction of coaching and networking programmes for educational leaders.
- Reduction of administrative workload by hiring additional administrative staff.
- More time for management and leadership tasks (reduction of teaching workload).
- Development of guidelines and frameworks of excellency, both for schools and school leaders.



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- Transfer of competences from supervisory boards to the level individual schools in order to empower schools and school leaders.

Alternative career paths towards school leadership

Although, traditionally, most school leaders are selected from within the education sector, a teaching degree is not a compulsory requirement for becoming a school leader in all European countries (Pont, Nusche, Moorman, & Hopkins, 2008; Popović, Alfirević, & Relja, 2019; Taipale, 2012). Depending on the particular country, different models enable professionals with a non-teaching background to become school leaders, at least formally speaking. In Poland, for instance, potential candidates for the position of a school head need to hold a Master's degree and have five years of work experience; at least two years of experience in a management position are required (Eurydice Network, 2017a).

Sweden established a different model, opening the leadership positions at schools to all people having "pedagogical insight". Since Swedish school leaders normally have no teaching duties, a teaching degree is not necessary. Nevertheless, in 2005, only three percent of all school leaders in Sweden had no teaching background (Eurydice Network, 2018d). These school leaders had previously worked as, for example, military officers, school psychologists, or managers. During their first four years of serving as a school leader, heads of schools in Sweden have to absolve a comprehensive national school head training programme that converts to about 30 ECTS (Eurydice Network, 2018d; Norberg, 2018).

France has a provision that principals can be appointed (upon application) from staff from the political ranks (as long as they have been linked to education), but only a minuscule fraction of school leaders actually enter the profession in that way (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 2012).

The profession of school business managers, which exists in England, can also be regarded as an alternative for people from other sectors to become involved in school leadership. School business managers' duties include human resource management tasks, health and safety, administration and financial resource management as well as strategic decisions with the schools' leadership teams. Despite not being the head of a school, school business managers contribute in an important manner to the successful development of their particular institutions (Armstrong, 2018; Starr, 2013; Woods, Armstrong, & Pearson, 2012).

In sum, in Europe, school leadership as a separate career path (i.e. becoming a principal without having been a teaching professional before) is a virtually non-existent path. Further research but also an exploration on the policy level of possibilities to employ professionals with a non-teaching background could help alleviate shortages of school leaders.

Effects of school leaders on teacher motivation and student performance

Motivation and job satisfaction are generally viewed as central elements to high job performance. Therefore, the impact of school leaders on teacher motivation is of special interest. Looking at instructional leadership, findings from various studies from the non-European international realm suggest a link between instructional leadership of principals and satisfaction and commitment of teachers (Al-Mahdy, Emam, & Hallinger, 2018; Krug, 1992; Sheppard, 1996; for a similar study where such a link could not be determined, see Kouali, 2017). Similarly, there seems to be a connection between transformational leadership and the organizational commitment and job satisfaction of teachers (Bogler, 2001; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Finally, there are also indications that a cooperative leadership team as well as the leadership support for sharing and distributing tasks among principals and teachers positively predict the organizational commitment of teachers (Hulpia, Devos, & Keer, 2009).



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In Germany, Schaarschmidt and colleagues found that a participatory and supportive leadership style led to more intact interpersonal relationships among staff and acted as a “buffer” for stressors of the day-to-day work (Schaarschmidt & Kieschke, 2013, p. 93).

CONCLUSION

Summary

School leaders in many European countries work in highly demanding contexts. They are expected to be managers and leaders but also (chief) pedagogues at the same time. They are often also expected to drive innovation and change. At the same time, they operate in larger educational systems that are marked by stability or even rigidity (professional bureaucracies). They often have received some sort of preparatory or in-service training, but by no means a full, comprehensive preparatory programme for their position. They are often motivated by their desire to take responsibility and take charge for teaching and learning. Yet, they are often also hampered by a workload marked by administrative tasks as well as a limited range to manoeuvre. Thus, a case can be made that the school leader as a professional entity has not yet fully materialized. Additionally, a major challenge for the European context stems from the fact that there is a major presence of US, Canadian and Australian research on school leaders, but less so from European countries. This can skew our understanding of school leadership as context can have a big impact.

Future developments

Consequently, future research should aim to establish a more solid understanding of educational leadership in a European context, ideally in such a way that makes international comparisons with non-European research feasible. This could be modeled after previous Eurydice efforts from the last century (Eurydice – The European Information Network, 1996). Ideally, future research will also consist of large-scale, longitudinal studies in order to finally generate insights that take developments over time into account.

Research needs to be conducted on requirements, but also domains of responsibilities as well as avenues of professional developments, especially in an ever-evolving context (with digitalization being a recent example of a paradigm-shift that also affects schooling).

Policy initiatives should focus on developing and implementing standards of leadership training and practice as well ensuring that the formal authority and the acquired skills (through training) are aligned with the domains of responsibility of school leaders (no accountability without corresponding autonomy).

Making teachers aware of school leadership early would help further an understanding for that role and possibly also an interest, thus possibly helping to attract more candidates to the position. Creating a career progression path for that position (for example towards leading multiple schools or optionally progressing to a position at a school supervisory authority) would help offer a long-term motivation to school leaders.



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