



# 9

## Inside the School: A Comparative Review of Empirical and Policy Studies on the Role of School Leaders in Developing Schools and Teachers

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### 1 Introduction

Leadership and management of educational institutions is an issue that, in the context of reform processes implemented in the field of education in the countries of South-East and Eastern Europe, has been the centre of attention of education scientists or education policies for only around fifteen years. Prior to that, leadership and management of educational institutions was considered a secondary, rather than primary, segment of research interest. Hence, it is not surprising that the body of knowledge on school leadership and management and school principals in Central and Eastern Europe has not been fully developed. Interesting research on school principals conducted in these European regions over the past ten to fifteen years (e.g. Brundrett et al. 2006; Sentočnik and Rupar 2009) has primarily been empirical and has significantly contributed to national educational systems. Hence, it is important to

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highlight the research conducted on the quality of educational systems or school quality (Ammermüller et al. 2005), as well as the related conceptual and methodological approaches to the issue of leadership and management.

Consideration of the issue of school leadership and management, as well as the function and the role of the principal, requires an examination of a broad range of factors and their relationships, which makes involvement in school leadership and management yet more complex. If these relationships are considered in the context of an educational institution, without reference to the perspective from which the educational objectives of the institution are derived, such as the social, economic and humanistic aspects of the national contexts, one is frequently left with more new questions than final answers. Given the complexity of intensive social and political changes in South-East and Eastern Europe, as well as the drives for the reform of education and related public systems, achieving quality in education requires that national social context(s), educational/pedagogical practices and school effectiveness principles be considered.

Small transition countries frequently apply benchmarking with developed countries in order to accelerate meeting the objectives of promoting and improving their own systems. Similarly, education policies adopted by small transition countries are more inclined to accept recommendations given by institutional authorities, such as the recommendations of the bodies of the European Commission. In this chapter, rather than focusing on the 'old' EU member states, we focus on a comparison between Croatia and two small EU countries, Estonia and Latvia, as well as on identifying those reform ventures due to which Estonia has soared to reach the category of systems whose educational effectiveness is visible in the results of PISA testing (Programme for International Student Assessment) conducted in 2015, which has placed it at the forefront of all the EU member states (OECD 2015). Moreover, Estonia has exceeded its own results and advanced from 11th position occupied in 2012 to first position in 2015 (Butrymowicz 2016).

The specific objective of this chapter is to provide an overview of the basic similarities and differences amongst the social and educational contexts of the three small countries, which we assume, due to

their being part of the European continent, show an equal striving for the quality improvement of their own education systems at the level of education policies and practices, even though they achieve significantly different results. A comparison was performed between Croatia, which geographically belongs to the Mediterranean region, and Estonia and Latvia as Baltic countries. The chapter focuses on school leadership and management, primarily in the context of the reform initiatives of education policies for the improvement of education systems in a competitive European environment. The analysis is based on actual data and the education policy documents, as well as on the previous comparative research of the three social contexts.

An incentive for the consideration of school principals as the central topic of this paper was provided by a research study coordinated by Ärlestig et al. (2016), especially its second part that addresses the issue of European countries undergoing fast transition into democratic societies, the two Baltic countries of Estonia (Bluma and Daiktere 2016) and Latvia (Kukemelk and Ginter 2016). The starting points for the mentioned authors' considerations were the political changes, the social configuration, the laws, as well as the expectations of the countries themselves over the past fifteen years. Following a content analysis of references to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, a basis was provided for a comparison and consideration of school leadership and management in the Republic of Croatia.

## **2 Similarities in the Education Systems, Reform Processes and in the Leadership and Management of Educational Institutions in Croatia, Estonia and Latvia**

According to the total area and population, Croatia, Estonia and Latvia rank as small European countries.<sup>1</sup> The three countries have a relatively homogeneous population structure, although in Estonia and Latvia the Russian ethnic minority accounts for around one quarter of the population.<sup>2</sup> The three countries are members of the European Union: Estonia

and Latvia since 2004 and Croatia since 2013. These countries commenced social reforms and democratisation processes in the 1990s, following their exit from communism and a totalitarian and authoritarian society, while more intense educational reforms were launched only in 2000.

The common features of the three systems include the financing of public schools from the state budget, as well as the existence of schools for ethnic minorities (in Estonia and Latvia for the Russian ethnic minority, as well as schools for other ethnic minorities; in Croatia schools for the Serbian and Italian ethnic minorities, as well as schools for other ethnic minorities). The founders of educational institutions at the pre-tertiary level are local or regional government. The founder of primary schools in Croatian towns is the town (local) government, whereas secondary schools are founded by the counties (regional government). School maintenance costs in the three countries are financed by the state by ensuring decentralised resources, or by reimbursement from the state budget.

The three countries face a significant decline in the birthrate, and such demographic changes directly lead to a decrease in the number of students and to difficulties in sustaining schools in rural areas.

Teachers and pedagogues in these countries do not have high social status. The basic characteristics of teachers in schools are provided in comparative key data on EU countries (Eurydice 2013) showing broad similarities. For example, in the three countries, teachers generally complete their initial education with a university degree and they are granted a free professional training programme. The provision of qualified teachers in small towns and rural areas is yet another problem of the three countries. Most teachers at the pre-tertiary level in the three countries are between 45 and 60 years of age. Teacher salaries in the three countries are lower compared with most teacher salaries in economically developed EU member states. If we compare pedagogical standards, there are evident similarities in the student-teacher ratio, which does not exceed 17 students per teacher. The three countries have retained both classroom instruction and subject instruction (classroom instruction is performed by one teacher at the primary level, whereas subject instruction is performed after primary education).

### **3 Differences in Education Systems, Reform Processes and the Leadership and Management of Educational Institutions in Croatia, Estonia and Latvia**

A content analysis of the characteristics of the Estonian (Bluma and Daiktere 2016, pp. 136–160) and the Latvian education system (Kukemelk and Ginter 2016, pp. 125–135), an examination of other recent sources, and identification of the characteristics of the education systems have revealed significant qualitative differences between Estonia, Latvia and Croatia.

The biggest difference between these countries is the historical fact that Croatia gained its independence in 1991 through the Homeland War, its internal sovereignty only in 1998, and has managed to successfully tackle the consequences typical of post-war periods. From its independence to EU accession, which all occurred within a relatively short period, Croatia had to deal with a broad range of social and economic processes that arose with the new social and political values of democracy. This is inseparable from a vast array of other social and cultural values, such as human rights, children's rights, intercultural processes and the transformation of the collective frame of mind into individual consciousness, among other things. All these changes needed to be made by those who until 1991 had lived in Croatia in entirely different social and political authoritarian contexts. Estonia and Latvia left the USSR through its peaceful dissolution. Consequently, they were able to launch reform initiatives without any major obstacles, striving to implement the democratisation of society and adapt to the market economy.

Notwithstanding the demands for change, which are frequently confusing and turbulent, Croatian citizens show a high level of trust in education and in the education system, as opposed to the trust in other institutions which continuously declined from 1997 to 2008, such as in the judiciary, trade unions or parliament (Nikodem and Črpić 2014). Through the parallel creation of a democratic political culture, the democratisation of education is implicit.

After 2000, Croatia developed an education infrastructure and, in addition to the traditional Croatian Education and Teacher Training Agency, it founded new institutions to provide infrastructural support for the systematic development of education at all levels, such as: the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education, the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education, the Agency for Science and Higher Education, and the Agency for Mobility and European Union Programmes. Research potential in the field of education is partly concentrated into institutes and partly into scientific departments at universities or other formations, amongst which it is important also to mention the Croatian Centre of Scientific Excellence in School Effectiveness and Management Research (see Alfrević et al. 2016).

The chapter will try to provide answers to the following questions, distinguishing amongst the reform processes and management of educational institutions:

- What qualitative reform shifts have been made by education policies in these three countries and what changes have occurred in schools?
- What characteristics can be identified as qualitative shifts and can be considered as role models?

In the field of preschool education, Estonia has ensured kindergarten attendance for 95% of preschool children, Latvia for 90% and Croatia for less than 80% of preschool children.

The length of compulsory education (primary and lower secondary education) in Estonia and Latvia is nine years, whereas in Croatia it is eight years (primary school). Students start school before they reach the age of seven (Eurydice 2017).

Laws have frequently been amended in Croatia, primarily those concerning primary and secondary education. Problems that appear after the enactment of laws concern the passing of a large number of ordinances pursuant to the laws. Excessive prescription from the top down or from education policy can be identified in the Croatian system. In fact, irrespective of the expressed need to increase the autonomy of direct lead entities of educational work at school

(MZOS 2014)—freedom of teaching of classroom instruction teachers, subject instruction teachers, expert associates and principals—the system is currently still overburdened by a large number of regulations that are difficult to keep abreast of. The same applies to monitoring and measuring effectiveness.

Before 2000, there were 32 sectors in Croatia as fields of human activity that it had inherited from the former social system. The reduction of the number of sectors to a total of 14 resulted from contemporary social, economic and cultural changes, as well as market relations. Nevertheless, the sectors were not reflected logically inside schools, so an incoherent methodology of vocational education reform impeded the faster improvement of secondary education reform. The founders have obviously not been able to keep abreast of the sectoral changes and so the reform processes are primarily focused on subject-oriented vocational curricula.

Irrespective of the legislative amendments in Croatia and harmonisation with EU regulations, inconsistencies in the logical relationships among laws can be identified. Hence, the Croatian Qualification Framework Act was enacted only in 2013, when the reform of the National Classification of Occupations was launched. It would have been logical for that process to have ensued from the arrangement of sectors and sector profiles. Hence, reform processes in Croatia are frequently performed using the method of ‘connecting the dots’.

If the effectiveness of education policy is considered, one cannot fail to notice that Estonia took a fundamental step forward in the reform of upper secondary education, whose management it took over from the founder (the local government) through legislation and it restructured it into an appropriate, rational and effective network of vocational schools. Concerning the level of education policy and practices, it appears that Estonia has centralised that part of the system which the labour market depends on, while simultaneously decentralising the position of school principals, delegating to them new responsibility—responsibility to the market rather than bureaucratic responsibility (cf. Pavičić et al. 2016, p. 44). As opposed to Estonia, Croatia and Latvia have not defined the segments and levels of decentralisation. Further, there are problems in understanding and defining the notions

of decentralisation and autonomy in Croatian education policy both at the national and local level, which interferes with and slows down the efforts of those who are supposed to implement them in practice.

Estonia has been more successful in facing the problem of a large number of small schools in rural areas through integration and school mergers and even closing some down. In contrast to Estonia, Croatia has been striving towards the sustainability of small towns and the islands and has thus continued to promote small schools, meeting the interests of the founders and the local government. An attempt to implement an e-education system by introducing an information and communications infrastructure into a school located on an island has not been systematically monitored in order to show its actual effects.

Estonia and Latvia have standardised teacher competences at the national level, as opposed to Croatia, which is still considering the qualification standards of teachers, primarily vocational school teachers. Prior to the 1990s, classes in Croatian schools comprised over 30 students. The demographic picture with low birthrates in the three countries has resulted in a decrease in the number of students and hence currently the student-teacher ratio is considerably lower in Croatian secondary schools (10 students), the same as in Latvia (Eurydice 2013), which is actually the ideal pedagogical standard. However, this did not result in an improvement in student achievement. As opposed to Croatia and Latvia, the number of students in Estonian classrooms is higher due to school mergers. This makes it not only more rational, but also more appropriate for student development from the aspects of pedagogy and socialisation.

Through the main objective of its education policy focused on creating equal opportunities for instruction and learning, Estonia has overcome both social and cultural differences amongst students, reducing inequality to the minimum, which is considered a significant role model even for the US (Butrymowicz 2016). The specific way for the Croatian system to address the issue of inequality in education is to resort to external incentives in tackling social differences through, for instance, scholarships for students of low social status. Estonia has taken another route, by creating equal opportunities for instruction and learning both at school and outside school, whereby no students ever feel discriminated in any segment.



In 2008 the Croatian parliament passed the National Pedagogical Standards for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education.<sup>3</sup> The intention was to contribute to creating equal educational opportunities for children and young people—ranging from the internal organisation, staff potential, the information and communications infrastructure, increasing the effectiveness of inclusive education, and reducing the number of students in homeroom classes in which children with SEN are enrolled, to name a few aims. Systematic monitoring of implementation indicators is lagging behind for obvious reasons.

#### **4 School Principals: A Relevant Factor in the Quality of School and Educational Effectiveness**

Following an overview of the compared characteristics of three small European transition countries—Croatia, Estonia and Latvia—which emerged from communist rule at the beginning of the 1990s and which show a wide range of similarities, it can be stated that Estonia is currently the country with a positive initiative in education policies. The country has recorded an evident upward shift primarily concerning student achievement, as well as regarding the link between education and the labour market. This upward shift would not have occurred without a relationship having been established between the education policy perspective and the practical perspective, which converts education policy ideas into reality, with specific reference to schools. In this context, three crucial breakthrough points in Estonian education policy can be identified. Firstly, defining the national curriculum for all students with the autonomy both of teachers and school work; secondly, the centralisation of secondary education, while taking into account the connection with the labour market; and, thirdly, the creation of equal opportunities of instruction and learning for all students. All these developments would not have been possible without the more emphasised role and autonomy of school principals within the education system.

Croatia has only just started abandoning traditional practices. Such practices imply that the school principal has a functional role linked with unlimited mandates and that responsibility is shared with the school board. In addition, Croatia has only just started focusing on the issue of the professionalism of school principals. Estonia, on the other hand, has already taken this step. It realised the importance of professional school principals involved in school leadership and management who are not dependent on limited mandates, while school boards have been allocated a consulting role. School principals of primary and secondary schools in Estonia need to hold a Master's degree in the field of education and need to have acquired competences in leadership and management. They are developed by a special course for principals, prescribed at the national level. The school principal is a professional who signs a permanent employment contract that grants considerably more power than previously used to be the case. In Latvia, the greatest influence on the selection of the principal is borne by the founders. School leadership and management has not been professionalised. A specific feature of Latvia is that 24% of school principals are about to retire (Bluma and Daiktere 2016). In the Croatian education system, school principals are teachers with experience of working at school, while the school boards are in charge of decision making.

The responsibility of Estonian school principals has been extended through the expansion of opportunities for their direct influence on school processes. The school principal is the person responsible for the processes of teaching and learning, as well as student achievement, school development, school culture, teacher supervision, financial management, the creation of a successful image of the school and the promotion of the school. In Estonia, the school principal has the opportunity to grant financial rewards both to teachers involved in classroom instruction and to those involved in subject instruction, while state support comprises a 20% increase in the school budget (Kukemelk and Ginter 2016). Moreover, the school principal in Estonia is obligated to keep abreast of the processes of change and to connect with all the key stakeholders at both local and national levels.

Although social homogenisation in transition countries is a factor that disrupts change, during a relatively brief period of democratisation,

Estonia has managed to achieve a high level of social cohesion, while both the Croatian and the Latvian system are currently still addressing this problem. Over an almost equal period of democratisation, Estonians have managed to lower the pressure exerted by the amount and the pace of social changes. The achieved success in influencing the wider community, primarily the parents and families, in sharing the responsibility for the students' success is also impressive.

Finally, small transition countries did not have the tradition of the external evaluation of education prior to the democratic processes, nor did they participate in international research studies. The three countries under review are currently participating not only in PISA testing, but also in international research, such as TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). School principals and teachers have been under pressure due to the fact that the role of the school from the aspect of educational practices in the school has been publicly presented as a problem. Education policy has identified positive interpretations of international research findings, primarily those showing that school principals exert direct influence on the creation of a positive school climate and on the creation of a school culture that directly affects the motivation of both teachers and students (OECD 2016). Education policies or schools that ignore their own results become isolated, retaining the undesirable status quo. Estonia has managed to implement the results of education research in its schools, which still needs to be achieved in Croatia and Latvia.

The question arises about what Croatian school principals need to do to improve school and overall educational effectiveness? Following this overview, one of the first tasks for which school principals need to be trained or which they at least need to become aware of is sensitivity to problems related to student achievement and, simultaneously, sensitivity to the continuous social changes. Sensitivity to problems is a prerequisite for research on learning and teaching strategies. Irrespective of the fact that school principals support professional training programmes for teachers and other staff, which are financed by the state, teaching strategies and styles are certainly enhanced by teachers and their personal knowledge. One assumes, from the pedagogical aspect, that it

would be more effective for teachers to be involved in improving practices based on their own action research conducted at the school in which they work. Consequently, the role of school principals extends to an examination of the influences that play a role in improving student achievement together with teachers who achieve the expected learning outcomes and the prescribed syllabus or vocational curriculum. The contemporary curriculum paradigm, focused on learning outcomes, requires self-evaluation as an integral part of the educational process. The school principal needs to insist on more frequent self-evaluation as part of the permanent and more comprehensive monitoring of both the teaching and the learning processes in their own school, so that everyone at school is able to clearly identify and explain what actually needs to be improved in these processes.

The Estonian experience clearly shows that teachers do not perceive supervision by the school principal as strict control in the sense of a relationship between a superior and a subordinate, but rather as jointly provided encouragement to students to achieve better learning results. This shows students that everyone in the school cares equally about their success and lets them know that help is readily available as soon as they are faced with any problems.

While teachers in Croatian schools still focus on the content of their subjects, principals of Estonian schools have been able to emphasise flexibility to a higher degree. The principals engaging in collaborative leadership (Spillane et al. 2010) are also able to connect and achieve reciprocity in the relationships with teachers, leaders of subject areas, etc., aiming to reach shared objectives. One cannot claim that the Estonian success has been due to the implementation of these specific practices. It can be assumed that the significance of school autonomy in Estonian education lies in the fact that the school principal encourages all the stakeholders to reach the same goal—students feeling good and satisfied in the personal efforts required by the studies. According to Bush and Middlewood (2005), student satisfaction depends on teacher motivation and their satisfaction at work, which requires special efforts of the principal, as they need to take into account individual factors that affect the motivation of all the school staff, as well as teacher groups and social factors inside the school, organisational factors concerning

teacher workload, their requirements for professional development and advancement and, eventually, cultural factors amongst which the sense of justice is the most important. The same applies to the ethical dimension, as the moral traits of the school principal are identified from that perspective (MacBeath 2013), as are the mission and values of the school as an educational institution.

## 5 Instead of a Conclusion

In this chapter, the fundamental characteristics of three small European countries—Croatia, Estonia and Latvia—from the aspect of geography, politics and sociology have been reviewed. As marked by rapid transformation into democratic and competitive societies, and their specific national contexts, the countries' similarities and differences have been analysed, with special emphasis on leadership and management in schools and on the role of the principal in reform processes in the education system. In addition to a wide range of similarities, differences have also been highlighted in the pace of change and in effectiveness concerning educational efficacy and school efficiency.

Crucial steps in reform in the Estonian experience have been identified through a comparative approach and these include the restructuring of higher secondary education, primarily vocational education, and reform of the leadership and management system, as well as the greater autonomy given to schools and the delegation of a higher level of responsibility to both teachers and school principals.

The professionalisation of school principals in Estonia and the standardisation of the teaching profession in both Estonia and Latvia are examples of sound practices that Croatia is only just starting to focus on.

The demographic picture in both Estonia and Latvia has been showing slight improvements, yet a continuous decline in birthrates since the 1990s has resulted in a drop in the number of students. As opposed to Croatia and Latvia, Estonia opted for integration and school mergers. It is important to point out as a particular breakthrough the equal

opportunities of teaching and learning achieved by Estonia by maximally reducing the social and cultural differences amongst students.

Social cohesion is a significant factor as well, especially in the contexts of social equality and minority rights. Estonia can be singled out as a benchmark, since it has succeeded in reducing the pressures imposed by the extent and pace of social change. In addition, Estonian political culture and success in winning over the wider community are also impressive, primarily in cooperation with students' parents and families.

The innovated role of the school principal has resulted from the positive initiative of education policy, an evident upward trend in student achievements and connecting the education system to the labour market. Due to the fact that their autonomy has been guaranteed by law, school principals in Estonia are persons responsible for the teaching and learning processes, student achievements, school development, school culture, teacher supervision, financial management, the creation of a successful school image and the promotion of the school. Moreover, school principals in Estonia have the chance to provide financial incentives to teachers involved in classroom instruction and those involved in subject instruction.

Advances in the professionalisation of school principal activities have resulted in the fact that school principals need to meet the contemporary social challenges and cannot continue to serve as employees of the state. They need to simultaneously accept challenges arising from economic and globalisation changes, scientific research and information and communication technologies.

## Notes

1. Estonia covers an area of 45,200 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 1.3 million; Latvia has a total area of 64,600 km<sup>2</sup> and 1.9 million inhabitants, as opposed to Croatia with 56,500 km<sup>2</sup> and 4.2 million inhabitants (Source: EU Member Countries in Brief [[https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries\\_hr](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries_hr)]).
2. Estonians are a majority ethnic group with a share of 69% compared with 25% members of the Russian ethnic minority and 6% members of other ethnic groups; Latvians/Letnians are a majority ethnic group,

accounting for 62% of the population in relation to 27% of the Russian ethnic group and 11% members of other ethnic minorities (<https://www.stat.ee/34278>); Croats are a majority ethnic group with a share of 90.3%, compared with 4.3% members of the Serbian ethnic group and 5.4% of members of other minorities ([https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv\\_Eng/publication/2012/SI-1469.pdf](https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2012/SI-1469.pdf)).

3. These standards refer to technical and organisational opportunities and benchmarks for the performance of educational activities.

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