



Heading for headship

Contrasting school leadership training in the Netherlands and Slovenia

Mateja Brejc & Tatjana Ažman (NSLE National School for Leadership in Education Slovenia)

Frans Grobbe (NSO-CNA School Leadership academy the Netherlands)

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Supporting the professional development of school leaders in Croatia & North-Macedonia

In the Erasmus+ project *HEAD: Empowering school principals for inclusive school culture*, the **Netherlands School Leadership academy NSO-CNA**¹ and the **National School of Leadership in Education of Slovenia (NSLE)**² share their experiences on school leadership training with partners from Croatia and North-Macedonia. The HEAD project aims at the further professionalization of school principals in primary and secondary education in Croatia and North-Macedonia.

To benefit from diverse international experiences and practices NSO-CNA and NSLE illustrate in this paper their national educational context, approaches and methods on school leadership training. To do any relevant 'knowledge transfer' of our Netherlands and Slovenian practices we first must immerse ourselves in the way School leadership training originated and is organized in our country's educational systems. This situational analysis and contingency approach may support our partners in Croatia and North-Macedonia in making their own trade-offs in the design and development of adequate training in their countries tailored to their own **educational contexts, organisational roles and positions** of school leaders, and **professional standards and associations**.

In this paper we first introduce the Netherlands practice followed by the Slovenian experiences on school leadership training. We compare and contrast these two and conclude with some recommendations for our Croatian and North-Macedonian partners regarding the professional development of their school leaders and its training.

¹ <https://www.nso-cna.nl>

² <https://en.solazaravnatelje.si>





A. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL LEADERS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Context of school leadership training in the Netherlands.

To illustrate the origin, development and current state of school leadership training in the Netherlands we will:

- Trace back to the introduction of formal school leadership training in the Netherlands.
- Explain relevant features of the educational system in which school leaders operate.
- Elaborate on the organizational role and position of school leaders in this educational system.
- Present national professional standards and the school leader registry.
- Introduce NSO-CNA school leadership training programmes in relation to the standards.

Introduction of School leadership training in the Netherlands

In the mid 1980's the Netherlands educational sector publicly debated the importance of more school autonomy combined with more accountability of individual schools on their student outcome. More school autonomy of course stressed the need for more management development on the school level to run these autonomous schools. In 1989 the Netherlands School of Educational Management (NSO) was founded as the first specialized school-management training institute of the country. The institute was not established by the government but was advised by the ministry of education to organize as a **private foundation** and associate itself with five Universities where the expertise on management and organization was recruited for a brand-new *Master of Educational Management*. Now in the 2020's a variety of professional Master-programmes is offered in our country next to a wide range of courses for school (middle-) management. **No one government standard** for school management or leadership curriculum is established or agreed upon and **no national licencing** by the government is in place in The Netherlands. Instead the associated school leaders have formulated their own professional standards for primary and secondary education on which training offers are based.

The work of the Netherlands' school leader has considerably changed over these last thirty years. Next to improving student outcome and school development the work with 'partners outside school' is more important now as actual societal issues are more 'included' in school





life and strategy. Professionalization of school leaders requires now on top of their management task additional leadership skills to shape the direction of the schools relating to these actual topics like³ citizenship education, healthy schools, equal opportunities, student and parent involvement, newcomer education, and (social) safety. Dealing with this diversity of interests and issues, stakeholders and school partners requires a lot of the people in leadership positions. It involves in addition to the more traditional rational management tasks also the more emotional issues around school identities, school interests and public demands on education.

Features of the Netherlands' educational system: freedom of education & high autonomy

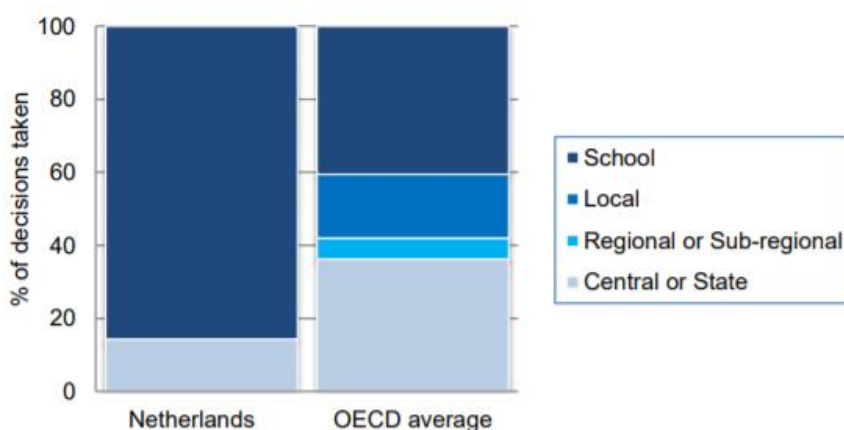
A lack of standardization and detailed national guidance on behalf of the ministry of education is typical and fundamental to the Netherlands' educational system. Here anyone may provide education within certain limitations. Schools have been offered a great degree of freedom to implement government education policy as they see fit for themselves. Private schools (but still publicly financed) may therefore have a religious (Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Islamic) or ideological character or may be based on a specific educational approach or philosophy (for instance Dalton, Montessori, or Jena-plan). The government provides funding for all these schools, provided they meet certain requirements. The 'lump sum' financing (based on the number of pupils in school) enables the school management to spend the money as they find appropriate in their own schools. The *Ministry of Education* is responsible for education funding, some general education policies and determines some overall objectives of the education system. On behalf of the Ministry of Education the so-called Education Inspectorate is responsible for periodical assessment of all schools receiving public financing. Inspections are there to make sure that funds are being spent appropriately, curriculum is in place for the required subjects and the national-level attainment targets are met.





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Figure 7. Percentage of decisions taken in public lower secondary schools at each level of government, (2011)



Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eaq-2012-en>.

Figure 1: Source ⁴

The Netherlands system is characterized by a relative very high autonomy of schools and their school governing boards, but this autonomy is also accompanied by a permanent national public policy debate how this decentralization and autonomy is balanced with the responsibility of the National Government. Primary education (4-12 years) is compulsory for children from the age of 5. At the age of 12 there is an early tracking of children in one of three types of secondary education⁵.

Governing boards of schools as the school's formal authority and school leader's employer

So called *governing boards of schools* are ultimate responsible for ensuring the quality of the education in individual schools, compliance with legislation and healthy finances of their schools. Although most schools meet the minimum legal (quality) requirements, there are

⁴ https://www.oecd.org/education/EDUCATION%20POLICY%20OUTLOOK_NETHERLANDS_EN%20.pdf

⁵ <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/study-holland/education-netherlands>





school governing boards that persistently achieve low educational results in some of their schools, compared to other schools. So next to the relative high autonomy of schools also the high variety in between schools regarding their quality of student outcome is typical for the Netherlands situation and seem to be interrelated. It is not easy for the ministry to intervene in low performing schools given their autonomy. So, all primary and secondary education in the schools is organized by and under the authority of these governing boards. A (small) governing board with its administrative staff runs one school but school boards usually have more schools under their governance. In primary education we have 900 boards with on average 7 schools. In secondary education 350 boards with on average 4 schools. A board is the employer of the school leader and pays for the School leadership training. There is a wide collection of functions and titles associated with school leaders (principal, school head, location director, vice-principal, team leader). ***In general, in The Netherlands, a school leader is understood as: someone in school with a formal (managerial) responsibility for the education, organization, and personnel.*** 'School leader' refers to different leading positions but in general hierarchical and functional leading education staff in the school, responsible for the qualitative performance of that staff (definition of the Ministry of Education inspectorate - quality of school leaders, 2014). The Ministry of education states that you need a school leader qualification **but does not set or prescribe a standard at national level**. Standardizing is the domain of the professionals (school leaders) among themselves in their professional associations.

There are no formal requirements for prospective school leaders either (except for a certificate of good conduct) and a higher education degree. In the case school leaders also have teaching responsibilities they must have a teaching qualification but in most cases school leaders already are experienced teachers. It is up to the individual governing boards to set specific criteria when hiring for leadership positions in their 'own schools'. In all primary and secondary schools, you have so-called **participation councils in which staff and parents are represented**. These councils have legal rights to be informed or offer advice on school policies to the schools' formal authority: the school governing board. The school leader represents this 'formal authority' (the board) on the individual school level to the participation council of parents and school staff.





National professional standards for school leader's professional development

According to *collective employment agreements* of the school leaders (with the employers' association = united governing boards), in primary education school leaders must be registered in a **professional register for primary education**. This School leader register for primary education accredits training programmes of hundreds of training institutions matching topics of the *professional standard for primary education*. This standard has recently (December 2020) been revised. The national professional standard identifies the knowledge, skills and qualities that are expected in a profession and enables the members of a profession to take responsibility for the development of their own profession. It aims to give professionals more professional identity and autonomy and sets the boundaries of their profession.

The School leader register for secondary education has also introduced a revised **professional standard for secondary education (January 2021)**. Unlike school leaders in primary education, school leaders in secondary education are not obliged in any way to be registered in the professional register, still it is a strong recommendation. Like for primary education, the professional standard for secondary education lays a foundation for the professional development activities and the registry. Through the register school leaders have access to information on the training offer of professional development activities (by a wide variety of training institutes) matching their individual needs and accredited by the professional register in accordance with one of the five categories of the standard.

The professional standards for primary and secondary education are remarkably similar. They both **describe five key leadership practices of leaders in education**⁶. The professional standards are intended as development-oriented tools, to provide inspiration and guidance and create a common language in the domain of school leadership. The standards are developed in collaboration with school leaders' associations. The professional standards are the basis for a personalized professional development tailored to the individual work setting and preferences. Following job performance review or selection in the school, the school

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[file:///C:/Users/Algemeen/Downloads/SRVO_National_Standards_for_School_Leadership_in_Secondary_Education_2021_online_version_low%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Algemeen/Downloads/SRVO_National_Standards_for_School_Leadership_in_Secondary_Education_2021_online_version_low%20(1).pdf)

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leader (to be) chooses and selects from the offered formal and informal professional development activities and registers them in these nationally organized registers to verify their activities in professional development in relation to the standard.

Schoolleadership training in accordance with the two national professional standards

So, school leaders can select for themselves out of the dozens of trainings and programmes that are accredited by the school registry organization in relation to the five leadership practices.

School leaders pick and select according to their preferences trainings from this list of accredited trainings which are offered by numerous public and private training providers. Only a few institutions in the Netherlands are fully specialized in school leadership training and have an offer for all elements of the standard.

One of them is the NSO-CNA Leadership academy. The institute is dedicated to School leadership training and only invites (future) school leaders in their trainings and has a training offer for all leadership practices of the two standards. NSO-CNA has formulated 'learning outcomes' for their trainings and programmes matching the leadership practices as described in the national professional standards. These learning outcomes form the backbone of our curriculum in all our professional development activities for school leaders. We recently designed a Master of Educational Leadership (MEL) that covers the total of the standards in primary and secondary education. A training group of this MEL consists of both primary and secondary school leaders. The MEL is subjected to periodic programme accreditation by and independent quality institute⁷ to verify its Master-level. The programme accreditation system covers (post-graduate) Master's programmes in the professional higher education and academic higher educational sectors in the Netherlands. Next to this elaborate Master programme NSO-CNA offers less intensive programmes for prospective school leaders and school leaders in the first stages of their leadership career.

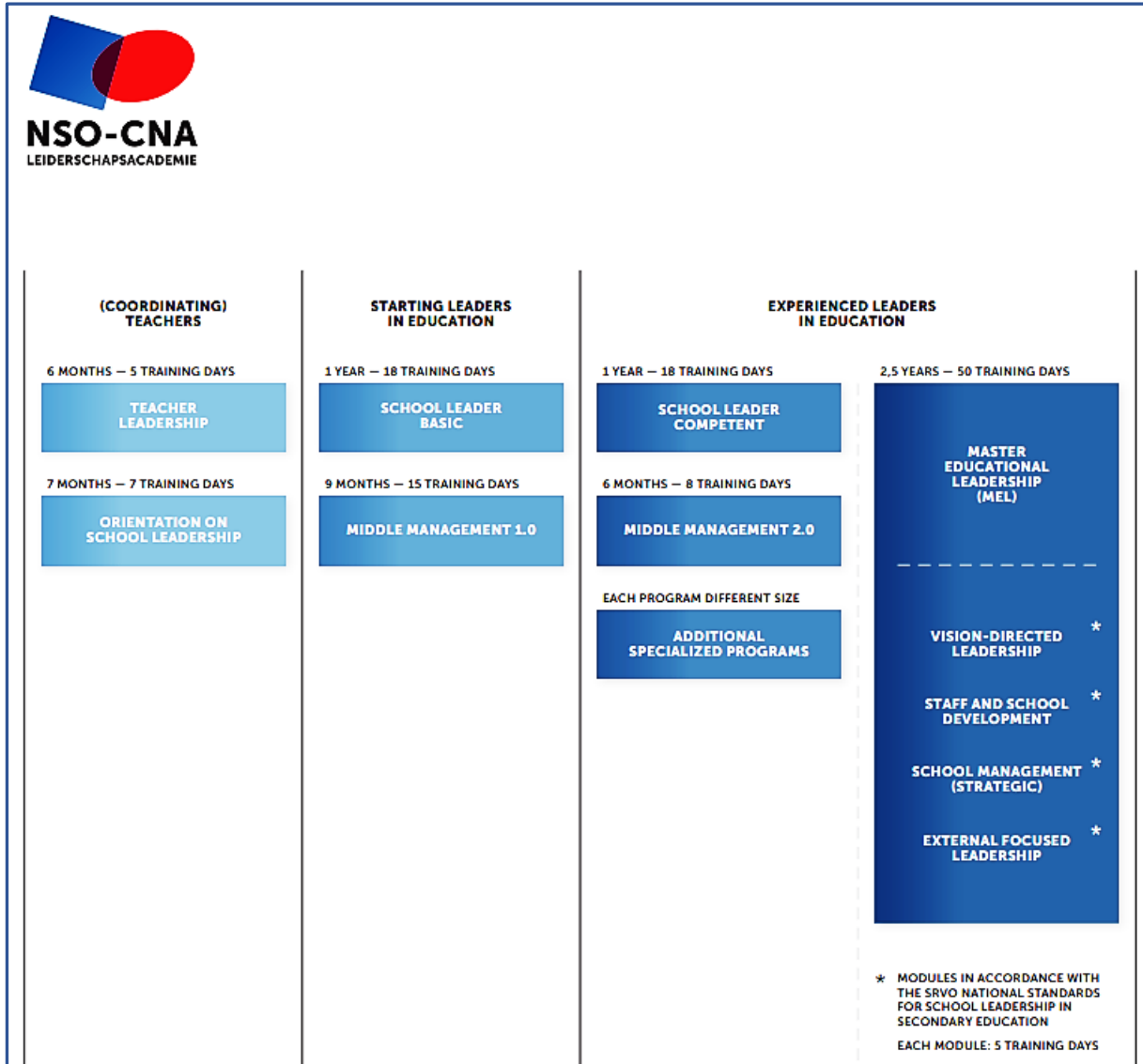
⁷ <https://www.nvao.net/en>





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Figure 2: NSO-CNA portfolio of formal Schoolleadership training in the Netherlands



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B. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL LEADERS IN SLOVENIA

In this section we introduce some key features of the Slovenian context of school leadership training as an introduction and a means to identify similarities and differences with the practice in the Netherlands and come up with some recommendations for our partners in Croatia and North-Macedonia.

Formal position and appointment of school leaders in Slovenia

School leaders in Slovenia exercise pedagogical leadership and manage the school. They are autonomous in the selection of their staff, managing finances, buying equipment for the school, designing the content of the elective part of school programme, organising schoolwork, ensuring the quality of educational processes and cooperation with the environment. The Slovenian school leaders' context is specific in terms of selection and appointment, where teachers have a strong influence.

School leaders are appointed to the function for five years only but can be reappointed later. They are **appointed and dismissed for headship by School Council** which oversees both processes. Before the appointment, the School council acquires the opinion of the teaching staff, the local community and the Minister of Education Science and Sports (Koren and Brejč 2020).

Table 1. Head teachers in Slovenia (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, February 2019, KPIS)²

Institutions	Total	Male	Female	Average employment period
Kindergarten*	108	7	101	25
Primary school**	483	170	313	28
Music school	67	36	31	23
Institutions for special needs***	21	13	8	26
Secondary school	160	76	84	27
Residence halls for students	14	5	6	29
Total	853	307	543	27

Legend:
 * independent public kindergarten
 ** includes primary schools with adapted programme
 *** institution for education of children and juveniles with special needs

Figure 3: Source: Cencič and Erčulj 2019





National regulation of professional and career development of principals

In Slovenian legislation this is regulated by several Acts and Agreements. In Slovenia, school leaders have the right and duty to professional development, for the purpose of supporting the professional development of school leaders several public institutions have been established such as **The National School for Leadership in Education (NSLE)** as the central public institution responsible for education and training of school leaders and other staff in leadership positions. School leaders have otherwise many opportunities for their professional development, offered by several Slovenian public (and private) institutions in forms of networks, annual conferences, thematic seminars, one day-programmes, short meetings, and more intensive programmes, lasting up to one year. **They can join 4 different professional associations** and meet also on regional level. The main idea is to build learning communities and share knowledge and good practices between school leaders and other professionals at national and international level. School leaders can choose to involve in different national and international projects to learn from each other, build learning networks and prepare recommendations to the system, present their achievements, become mentors, counsellors to other school leaders etc.

Headship licence programme and call for applications

This is the only programme of professional development that is **mandatory for school leaders and determined by Slovenian sectoral legislation**. The school leader must complete it no later than one year from the beginning of his appointment if not already done so before. NSLE publishes a call for applications once a year. Participants who meet the statutory requirements for a school leader may participate. In case of restricted enrolment, priority is given to candidates who have already been appointed as school leaders.

The National School for Leadership in Education (NSLE)

The school was **established in 1995 by the Government** of the Republic of Slovenia for training and professional development of school leaders and candidates. In accordance with the Act of the foundation of NSLE, its activities include professional development, training and other educational programmes, publishing books, journals and proceedings as well as promoting research and experimental development in education. The **NSLE is a public service**, the implementation of which is in the public interest. Currently there are 14 permanently employed staff members (director, 9 lecturers, 4 support staff).

NSLE, as the central Slovenian public institution that takes care of the professional development of school leaders, has throughout the years established the **System of lifelong learning of school leaders** (Koren 2011, Zavašnik Arčnik et al. 2014), which:

a) enables school leaders' professional development in various forms and in different career-stages;

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- b) builds on an ever developing 'definition' of school leadership that emphasises the importance of collaborative, distributed leadership and
- c) emphasise system leadership in terms of enabling school leaders to take different roles, such as counsellors, mentors etc.

Internal analysis regarding the participation of school leaders in various forms and activities of lifelong learning show that more than 87 % of Slovenian school leaders participate at least once in one of the forms of professional development provided by the NSLE. The data coincide with the TALIS 2018 survey and we also know from practice that Slovenian school leaders supplement and upgrade their knowledge after obtaining the 'headship licence'.

NSLE provides programmes and other types of support for life-long learning for school leaders and other school leaders, aimed at (Koren and Brejc 2020):

- Learning and teaching processes and student achievement since school cannot change and improve if they don't change classroom work at its core.
- Whole school approach and assuming responsibility for quality by all.
- A school culture favourable to learning at all levels, but also introducing change, constant monitoring and self-evaluation of work, the use of data.
- Distributed, collaborative leadership.
- The importance of considering the specifics of each school.

NSLE's considers as its strengths in providing adequate training:

- keeping a balance between research and implementation;
- adapting programmes (and the theories) to capacity of individuals and organizations;
- contextualisation (policy borrowing, international, peer learning);
- rich experiences;
- staff capacity building and indoctrination;
- quick and flexible response in programme (topics, methods) adjustments to current changes in the educational (and broader) environment;
- trust and close relationships with school leaders, meaning also including school leaders in its activities in different roles as trainers, mentors, peer counsellors, external evaluators, (co)authors of papers, monographs and publications, Journal Editorial board members.

School leadership training in accordance with the different career stages

NSLE implements numerous **programmes and learning activities in all periods of headship** and makes a distinction between:

- **Induction (pre-service)**: framing personal skills, experiences, beliefs, values, leadership training
- **Initial**: gaining leadership knowledge and skills, attitudes, school leaders' professional networks





- **In service:** system leadership, changing educational environment

These different types of leadership programmes and other support available to school leaders in three phases of their career/life-long learning can be presented as:

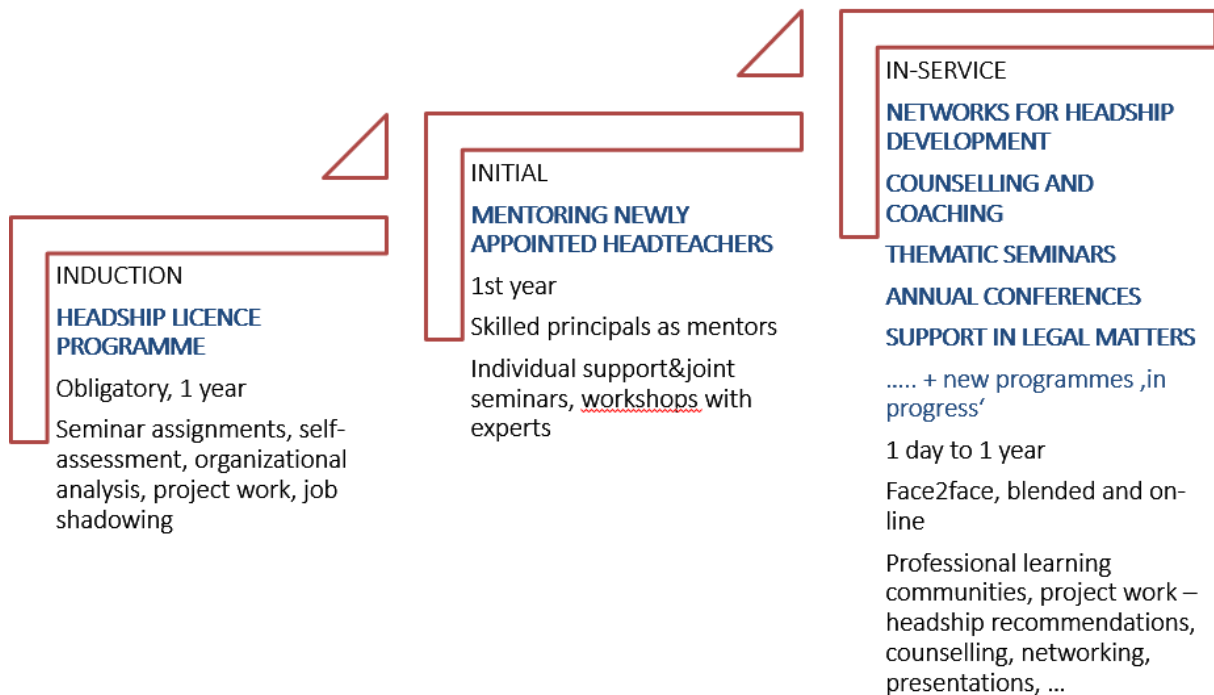


Figure 4: NSLE portfolio of school leadership training

Distributed leadership support in schools

The term school leadership is by us no longer understood as school leader's (principal's) individual position, responsibility, and actions only. In theory and practice, the involvement and engagement of all school staff in leadership is increasingly at the forefront. We are also talking about *teacher leadership* and *middle leadership*. Current leadership concepts increasingly emphasize leadership that encourages and facilitates professional collaboration and involvement of all school staff in discussions and decision-making on important issues: e.g., on developmental orientations, learning and learners, evaluating the performance and effectiveness of school work, etc. It could be said that this is a set of activities that take place under the umbrella of the so-called professional learning communities or networks. Distributed leadership is emphasised as a practice of leadership based on the recognition and development of leadership potential in the school, aimed at creating opportunities for change and enhancing the capacity for improvement at different levels (Brejc and Čagran 2019).





Following these ideas NSLE implemented several programmes to enhance leadership skills for middle leaders and development teams such as networks of learning schools, trainings for school self-evaluation, support in leading school staff (communication, ethics ...), annual school leaders' assistants conference, annual Leadership in Education conference, leading teachers' working groups, developing middle leadership skills etc.

Informal learning structures for professional development in and in-between schools

It is important that the professional development activities for school leaders are diverse and effective. Such activities include, for example, longer-term programs. Regardless of the location and length of professional development activities, it is important that professionals in any of the activities have the opportunity to actively exchange experiences, ask questions, engage in forms that require group problem solving, explore opportunities to go beyond finding solutions in only one setting or environment, (re)experiencing experiential forms of learning (eg. role play), coaching that empowers the participants to find their own solutions, etc. The school leaders must thus strengthen the forms of professional development that are collaborative, experiential, active. At the level of the institution, mechanisms should be established that encourage and ensure the dissemination of acquired knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs in the institution. At the same time, the school leader must be able to monitor the effects of professional development of teachers. Professional development can be monitored with the help of various tools, e.g., portfolio, annual interviews, peer visits, peer review, annual individual professional development plan, collecting feedback from students etc.

C. DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP (TRAINING) IN CROATIA & NORTH-MACEDONIA

In this paper we introduced the context and practice of School leadership training in the Netherlands and Slovenia with the purpose of assisting our HEAD-project partners in finding their own approaches and structures tailored to their national context. Shaping Leadership is important, it has a significant (indirect) impact on student outcomes, though the role of contingency and school context. Our partners in Croatia and North Macedonia must therefore make their own (national) trade-offs in standardizing, curriculum design and installing adequate training offers and conditions for school leaders in their countries. As we have seen by means of the Netherlands and Slovenian example, it will be dependent upon their own *educational contexts, organisational roles and positions* of school leaders, and the *professional standards and associations*. A prerequisite for this is a common understanding of the relevance of school leadership training in the education system and wider society.

Raise awareness of the relevance of school leaders and their leadership training

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For any school leadership training to be supported and strengthened a shared understanding of the relevance of school leaders in the system must be established or raised. Numerous researches prove that the school leader's care for his own and the teacher's professional and career development are the main levers for the quality work of educational institutions. In the TALIS 2018 survey is emphasized that professional development activities prove to be an essential condition for establishing a culture of continuous improvement and a shared vision of learning between teachers and school management. School leaders should not only provide opportunities to participate in professional development activities, but also participate in these activities to strengthen their administrative-legal, organizational, and manage school leaders' skills (Sparks 2002; Zepeda, Parylo and Bengtson 2013; OECD 2016). In addition, professional development activities are the cornerstone of the success of any major education reform in OECD countries (Schleicher 2015). Professional development activities help teachers and school leaders to acquire the necessary competencies to be informed and to critically accept policy efforts (Kennedy 2005). Recent policy reviews have identified professional development activities as a key advantage of the most successful education systems (Jensen et al. 2016; Darling-Hammond 2017; OECD 2018).

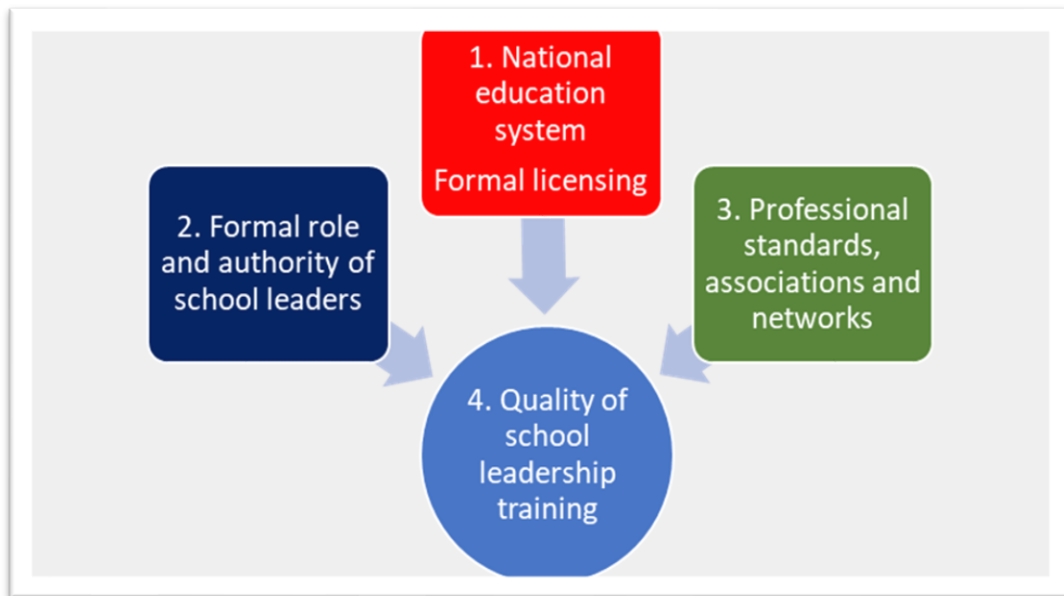
Integrated and collaborative framework for professional development of school leaders

The introductions and examples from the Netherlands and Slovenia system show that there is no one way to foster the professional development of school leaders but that it is largely dependent upon the national tradition, situation and the division of their tasks and responsibilities in the system. Still in this national situation we identified three elements that may constitute a better integrated framework for development. The core elements of the framework and its interrelations may help this design and development process of relevant and adequate school leadership training. This development process itself is also collaborative as it involves the National (ministry) level, the professionals and their associations and the training providers of school leadership training as the main actors for integration. These actors need each other to provide more coherent and systematic professional development tailored to their national work contexts and school structures. We propose the following recommendations on the three aspects of this model:





figure 5: Framework for assessment of schoolleader training development (NSO-CNA & NSLE)



1. National education system and formal licensing

- Define to what extent in the country school leader training is mandatory and connected to a compulsory (national) school leader licence (or other permit) which sets competences or skills to be mastered by training (and assessed by examination).
- Analyse the core functions of education as stated in the national education policies and its consequences for the different national attainment targets of schools (for instance on cognitive achievement, wellbeing, citizenship, labour market allocation, digital competencies). New tasks are added to school leaders' workload making it necessary to define & prioritise core tasks.
- Introduce concepts of distributed and collaborative leadership that build on the redistribution of tasks which for a long time were considered to belong only to the individual end-responsible school leader.
- Build collaboration between stakeholders for the empowerment of school leaders, their professionalism, autonomy, and trusted position (as opposed to standardization, control etc.).
- Enable school leaders to take additional system leadership roles in peer and policy networks across school boundaries.

2. Formal role and authority of school leaders

- Promote clear job descriptions and formal position of the school leader and accountability for school management, development, and student outcome.





- Define who is a school leader. Differentiate for management levels and career stages.
- Connecting school leader training (and its learning outcome) to this specific organisational role and responsibilities on management and leadership.
- Strengthen modern forms of professional development that are collaborative, experiential, active.
- Offer professionals opportunities to actively exchange experiences, ask questions, engage in forms that require group problem solving, explore opportunities to go beyond finding solutions in only one setting, coaching that empowers the participants to find their own solutions, etc.
- Support *lifelong learning* by designing also informal and collegial school leadership training in accordance with the different career stages (pre-service and in service).
- Focus on developing a range of school leadership (school leaders, middle leaders, teacher leaders).

3. Professional standards, associations and networks

- Support professional associations of school leaders in the country that together strengthen and cocreate and guide professional development and professional standardization.
- Develop (national) professional standards that give direction to the content of formal School leadership training. Consider registry of school leaders training.
- Discriminate between individual competences and skills trainings and capacity building to engage in leadership practices.
- Support informal professional networks or ‘communities of practice’ of school leaders to back up informal learning, peer visits, peer review and ongoing professionalization.

4. Quality and availability of school leadership training (formal & informal)

- Connect learning outcome of formalized training programmes to national or professional standards of school leadership.
- Ensure coherence and quality of provision by different training institutions.
- Present publicly on national level the available trainings related to school leadership.
- Install accreditation schemes for training institutions for selection and quality purposes.
- Develop a system of informal learning and continuous professional development (learning networks, communities of practice etc.).
- Strengthen quality management of the training programmes (or training institutes) by involving independent certification bodies (for instance for accreditation of professional Master programme).





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