

TITLE: Principals' Competencies And Other Barriers To Effective School Leadership In Serbia

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***NETWORK: 26. Educational Leadership***

***ALTERNATIVE NETWORK: 1. Continuing Professional Development: Learning for Individuals, Leaders, and Organisations***

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## **General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework (600 words)**

Effective educational leadership makes a difference in improving learning and pupil engagement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Waters et al., 2003). Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors contributing to student learning. Leadership influences on student achievement are mostly indirect, exerted through their impact on school staff, culture and organization. The total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership on student learning are estimated to account for about a quarter of total school effects (Halinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000 in Leithwood et al., 2004).

In recent years the policymakers in Serbia have exhibited a heightened understanding of the importance of educational leadership for student outcomes. Government's "Strategy for development of education in Serbia until 2020" calls for systematic preparation of principals and their continued professional development (Sluzbeni glasnik RS, 107/2012). In 2013, National Education Council adopted the *Standards of competencies for principals of educational institutions* (Sluzbeni glasnik RS, 38/2013). Nonetheless, systematic support for professional development of principals is yet to be conceptualized. Moreover, no research has been undertaken that could inform policymakers what particular competencies Serbian principals lack or need improved. Therefore, the first aim of this study – which stems from the European TEMPUS project "Master program in Educational Leadership" 543848-TEMPUS-1-2013-1-RS-JPCR – was to examine the gaps in skills and knowledge of Serbian principals in order to inform the appropriate creation of principals' preparation and professional development programs. Secondly, we wanted to investigate principals' and other school employees' perceptions on whether there were additional, wider barriers to effective school leadership, so that they can be removed or ameliorated by policymakers.

In order to accomplish our first goal, we utilized two frameworks: 1) Serbian *Standards of competencies* and 2) integrated model of school leadership proposed by Leithwood and colleagues (2006).

The *Standards of competencies* are comprised of six domains: Management of educational processes in schools; Planning, organization and control of the institution; Monitoring and improvement of employees; Developing cooperation; Financial and administrative management; Ensuring the legality of the institution.

In regards to the integrated leadership, the prevalent belief today is that this approach offers comprehensive and focused view on leadership. Integrated leadership incorporates elements of instructional and transformational leadership, both of which seem to be necessary for good school outcomes (Marks & Printy, 2003). Integrated leadership consists of: (1) creation of the vision and setting of direction; (2) understanding and development of people; (3) redesign of the organisation,

and (4) management of teaching and learning (Leithwood et al, 2006). Many educational systems have established standards of competencies and/or practices of school leaders that rely on the integrated model of educational leadership (e.g., Ontario, England).

Examination of indicators and practices described in the two frameworks revealed that they considerably overlap. Therefore, our instrument for identification of gaps in competencies of Serbian principals included items that can be traced to both Serbian *Standards of competencies* and the integrated model of educational leadership.

The second aim of our study relied on the notion that “street-level bureaucrats” or local implementers of the reforms play an important role in educational changes and should therefore be consulted and recognized when policies are planned (Lipsky, 1971; Datnow et al, 1998). In other words, perceptions of principals and other school employees about factors that hinder effective leadership in schools can uniquely inform policymakers about priorities and potential policy developments in educational leadership.

Considering the above, our research questions were:

- 1) In which areas of educational leadership are there gaps in skills and knowledge of Serbian school principals?
- 2) What are the wider obstacles to effective leadership in Serbian schools?

## **Methods (400 words)**

Two studies were undertaken to answer two research questions: quantitative and qualitative.

The quantitative study focused on competencies of Serbian principals in the area of educational leadership. The sample in the quantitative study consisted of 200 principals from different regions of Serbia (129 elementary school principals and 71 secondary school principals). School principals took part in the study by filling out a questionnaire designed for this purpose. The questionnaire comprised of two parts. The first part gathered contextual information, whereas the second part of the instrument (82 items) was focused on principals’ perceptions in respect to (a) how important they perceived specific tasks to be part of their overall duties and (b) the extent to which they perceived the need to improve their knowledge and skills in order to perform each task more effectively. The responses were measured on a 4-point Likert scale. As previously mentioned, all items / tasks were created based on the indicators found in Serbian *Standards of competencies* and the integrated model of educational leadership. The frequencies of participants’ responses were analyzed and discussed.

Qualitative research was done with the aim of gaining insight into the barriers faced by school principals in Serbia, their potential solutions, as well as the competencies that the principals need to improve their performance. Participants in the research were: (1) principals, teachers and school counselors from pre-schools, primary and secondary schools in Serbia. There were ten 6-8 people focus groups (3 with elementary school principals, 2 with secondary school principals, 1 with pre-school principals, 3 with teachers and 1 with school counselors) coming from urban and suburban schools in four major cities in Serbia: Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Niš; (2) heads of the regional school authorities of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, representatives of the local government, the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation and the Institute for the Improvement of Education. There were 7 interviews with these representatives. Considering the sample, the prevalent perceptions in this report are those of school employees. Both focus groups and interviews were semi-structured, with guides being developed based on educational leadership literature and open, in-depth interviews with two elementary school principals and one secondary school principal. Audio recordings of focus groups and interviews were transcribed, and responses categorized and interpreted.

### **Expected outcomes / results (300 words)**

Preliminary results from the quantitative study show that most of the principals: (a) perceive that all tasks specified in the instrument (and, by extension, in the Serbian *Standards of competencies* and integrated model of educational leadership) represent important professional duties of principals, and (b) state that they either mostly need or very much need to improve their knowledge and skills on these tasks. On average, over two thirds of principals (67.60%) mostly need or very much need the improvement on the tasks listed. Furthermore, all tasks are, to a certain extent, equally perceived as those where development of knowledge and skills is mostly or very much needed. On *each* of 82 tasks in the instrument, more than half of principals placed themselves in the “mostly need improvement” or “very much need improvement” category.

Preliminary results of the qualitative study indicate two broad categories of barriers to effective school leadership in Serbia: (a) barriers related to the system as a whole; and (b) barriers related to the school as an organization. System-level barriers refer to: insufficient and insecure school funding; employment policy and evaluation of teachers’ work; inadequate selection of school principals and lack of their professional development; legislative issues, mismatch between work of different educational institutions, and negative image of educational institutions in society. At the school level, the participants cited the barriers to high quality leadership that come from: principals; teachers; parents, and other school staff.

A variety of potential solutions was proposed by the participants. Especially pertinent for the policymakers are: harmonization and changes of laws and bylaws; implementation of clear

procedures; depolitization of selection of the principals; creation of an institutionalized training for school principals; formalization of distributed leadership within schools; introduction of an accountability system for teachers, and introduction of pay grades for teachers and principals.

### **Intent of publication**

We are currently analyzing the results and preparing a paper to be published in an international journal.

### **References (400 words)**

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