

An international perspective on school leaders' professional development

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INTRODUCTION

School leaders matter and are important in influencing student performances and the overall performances of the school ^(1, 2). We know quite a bit about what successful school leaders do ^(3, 4, 5, 6). We know almost nothing about how they learn to become successful. Surprisingly little is known about school leaders' professional development activities (PDA) and its impact ^(7, 5). Since school leaders' influences on student outcomes are indirect (mediated by the school culture and classroom practices), it is difficult to find effects of school leaders' professional development activities. With regard to effects, research is concerned with formal PDA's, mostly concerning preparation programs ⁽⁸⁾. Since school leaders prefer on the job learning ⁽⁹⁾ and because a blend of both formal and informal learning contributes to school leaders

continuous learning ⁽⁶⁾, this is a big drawback. Backed by a growing research base, policy makers have increasingly recognised the significance of school leadership for effective teaching and learning ⁽¹⁰⁾. The four countries presented in this article Belgium, Estonia, the Netherlands and South Africa have developed different initiatives to strengthen the leadership capacity of their schools. We will elaborate on these initiatives in our EAPRIL-session. We will shine some light on PDA's in these countries.

BELGIUM – FLANDERS

In Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), a teaching qualification is sufficient to apply for the position of school leader. Hence, mostly experienced teachers become school leader but do not always feel prepared for the job since it has a high degree of task diversity ⁽¹¹⁾. Job turnovers are ubiquitous ⁽¹²⁾. PDA for school leaders are not mandatory but recommended and organised by different organisations (umbrella organisations, regional school networks). Umbrella organisations organize trainings varying from 1-3 years for newly recruited school leaders.



Photo from OVSG – Flemish Educational Umbrella Organisation of Cities and Municipalities.

A survey research of Daniëls, Hondeghem & Dochy ⁽¹³⁾ revealed that most of the school leaders in Flemish primary education (94 %) participate in PDA's every year. They prefer to learn via participating in one-day training sessions, informal consultation of colleagues, via networking and trainings spread over multiple days and years. School leaders favour conversations with fellow school leaders, asking colleagues and teachers for feedback and reflective learning. The survey also revealed the most favoured topics: coaching teachers, staying informed about educational trends, motivating teachers, implementing vision and mission and promoting teachers' well-being.

ESTONIA

In Estonia, schools are highly autonomous hence, leadership is very influential. However, the requirements to become school leader are quite flexible since 2013. There are two criteria: 1) any master level education and 2) proved leadership competences to apply for the position of school leader ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Since 2016, the school leaders' competence model is adapted. This model is used for leadership training and leaders' evaluation, which creates a shared understanding and a good basis for improvement in school leadership. School leaders have several training possibilities arranged on national level ⁽¹⁵⁾. School leaders' annual conferences focus on current leadership issues and offer opportunities for networking and collaborative projects.

School leaders understand their position as focusing on the schools' vision, planning changes in the school culture and supporting teachers' professional development. However, they still focus predominantly on managerial issues and every-day problem solving ⁽¹⁶⁾.

The position of school leader is perceived as unattractive and compensation is inadequate. Also, no systematic mechanism to provide professional feedback to school leaders is available. The challenge is to develop appraisal processes, frameworks and conditions that do not require an excessive investment of time and effort, that serve as an effective tool for improving practices and that are perceived as useful and relevant by school leaders ⁽¹⁷⁾.



THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, to become a school leader in primary education, completion of a certified leadership program is obligatory. In secondary education, a formal leadership program is strongly advised. Since 2018 school leaders in both primary and secondary education must comply with the competences of the earlier composed national standard ^(18,19).



A growing segment of the primary and secondary school leaders is registered in the national school leader registry. School leaders register by compiling a portfolio in order to demonstrate their professional development. After four years, school leaders in primary education are required to re-register. A majority of the school leaders in primary education re-register by finishing several professional development courses or through informal ways of professional development. Three percent of the people re-register through a formal Master's degree ⁽²⁰⁾.

In secondary education, an annually returning monitor research on professional development of school leaders shows that approximately 90 percent (n=351) engages in PDA's. They attend multi- or single-day conferences, peer reflection meetings and peer coaching. Most school leaders indicated that they are developing their personal view on leadership, their leadership competences, and their skills and knowledge on the school as a learning organisation. A quarter of the school leaders said to encounter barriers to professional development, caused by a deficiency of time or money ⁽²¹⁾.

SOUTH AFRICA

There is no official requirement for leadership training or qualification to become a school leader ⁽²²⁾. School leaders start their careers as teachers and through a diverse range of tasks and roles, they progress into leadership positions. This aids the view that a teaching qualification and experience in teaching is the only requirement for school leadership ⁽²³⁾.



There has been an academic qualification, the Advanced Certificate in Education Leadership, which was supposed to be an official qualification, but it was never officially granted the status or requirement of an official qualification. There is a legislated 80 hours of professional development for school leaders, which is not always effective in practice. According to Mathibe ⁽²⁴⁾, professional development programs for school leaders in South Africa are fragmented and not coordinated. Different teacher unions, non-governmental organisations, universities and private companies offer trainings, but they are not required nor compulsory for becoming a school leader. There is no directive from the Ministry of Education.

LOOKING FOR WAYS TO IMPROVE EDUCATION THROUGH DEVELOPING A KNOWLEDGE BASED ON SCHOOL LEADER DEVELOPMENT

These four countries seem to value school leaders as key-players differently and therefore differ in their approach to improve education through school leaders' professional development (for example by requiring qualifications and registration). They seem to use a different theory of improvement; what do they believe will contribute to school leadership development contributing to educational quality? If policy makers are driven by a wish for managerial accountability, they will strive for formal appraisal of school leaders. Finding the right balance between a managerial or a professional accountability approach ⁽²⁵⁾ seems to be a struggle for all countries. How can school leaders develop professionally considering the different contexts they are working in? What theory of improvement do school leaders use? What are efficient professional development activities, effects of PDA's and PDA's across countries? We will address these questions during the EAPRIL conference (Tartu, Estonia). The authors will organise a discussion session in which school leaders, researchers and policy makers having expertise in school leadership can participate. The aim is to network and to arrive at ideas about a theory of improvement for the professional development of school leaders.

Please join us at the EAPRIL conference in Tartu (Estonia), 26-29th of November 2019 for the Session 'An international perspective on school leaders' professional development'.

For more information take a look on [EAPRIL](#) or [Cloud 12 – Leadership in Education](#)

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