

5 Navigating between Principalship, Leadership and Management

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Introduction

In 2009, we published an article (Trnavčević & Roncelli Vaupot, 2009) discussing aspiring principals in Slovenia. Among our findings, we discovered that aspiring principals tend to describe their roles as paternalistic and hierarchical, often assigning a management role to the principal. Leadership style and power were closely linked to the principal's position (Trnavčević & Roncelli Vaupot, 2009, pp. 99–100). Furthermore, participants in the study characterized a principal's role as paternalistic and protective.

In 2024, a principal appeared on the critical TV show *Tarča* (Prazni katedri, 2024) and expressed concern that teachers must be protected from parents who communicate disrespectfully and demand better grades for their children. She claimed that an excessive involvement of 'unprofessional publics' in teachers' professional autonomy occurs in schools. This indicates that after over 16 years, the focus on leadership still emphasizes managerial practice and the power dynamics inherent in the principal's role.

In daily newspaper *Delo*, a principal SB has called for 'practical solutions' without engaging in theoretical discussions (Kuralt, 2025). In his view, principals are often expected to address 'practical' issues rather than engage in educational theory. This perspective directs principals to act more as managers than true leaders. By basic definition, leadership involves influencing and inspiring followers. If we consider teachers to be the followers, then principals must empower them to maintain their autonomy and professionalism in both internal and external contexts.

However, the messages conveyed through the aforementioned TV show *Tarča* and daily newspaper *Delo* are quite similar. They are focused on ‘protection’ of schools. The president of the Slovenian Principals’ Association explicitly stated that schools should be regarded as ‘sacred places’ which ‘only authorised professionals can enter’ (Kuralt, 2023).

These assertions regarding a ‘protective’ stance raise numerous questions and issues about the role of principals and the nature of principalship. We will focus on a single perspective, basing our discussion on the assumption that schools operate within specific contexts and legal frameworks. Principals are influenced by traditions, values, school culture, routines, and expectations. The legal framework defines their position, power, and authority, which in turn shapes their practice. Consequently, we propose a conceptual model that reconstructs the relationship between leadership, management, and principalship, advocating for a theoretical revival of principalship as a vital discourse.

Legal Context: Principals in Slovenia, Italy and Austria

In this section, we provide a comparative analysis of principals’ roles and positions in the legal context of three neighbouring countries, Slovenia, Italy and Austria.

Slovenia

In practice, the role of a school principal in the Slovenian educational system reaches far beyond administrative responsibilities. As both a pedagogical leader and an executive manager, the principal plays a key role in shaping the school climate, fostering collaboration among staff, and creating conditions conducive to learning. According to Dolgan (2012), principals in Slovene elementary schools take on a dual role, functioning as educational leaders and institutional managers. They must balance the expectations set by the school’s founder, whether municipal or state authorities, and the professional needs of their staff. Their effectiveness is closely linked to their leadership style, which should reflect their traits, the characteristics of their team, and the specific conditions within their school environment. A thorough awareness of these elements is essential for developing leadership training programmes that can strengthen school performance.

While Slovenian legislation outlines the principal’s formal duties, it does not explicitly define the leadership competencies required, particularly those commonly referred to as ‘soft skills.’ Yet, as will be explored

through the analysis of legal provisions, policy documents, and professional development programmes in the following sections, an increasing emphasis on these competencies is emerging. Although not yet systematically defined or embedded in legislation, the need for soft skills is gradually gaining recognition across various regulatory and professional frameworks.

The primary legal basis for defining the role of the principal in Slovenia is the *Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja* (ZOFVI) [Act on the Organisation and Financing of Education] (1996). Principals' competences are systematically defined by the ZOFVI. According to Article 49 of this act, principals are responsible for organizing, leading, and directing the institution's work, preparing development programmes, managing employment relationships, ensuring legal and financial compliance, and guaranteeing the professional and lawful execution of educational activities. These legal provisions indicate that the Slovenian legal framework already encompasses the essential components of principalship as recognized by international sources. In Slovenia, the principal's role legally transcends administrative management and includes both strategic and professional dimensions. It is, therefore, crucial to understand that ZOFVI as a systemic law does not require changes regarding the roles and tasks of principals; the issue lies not in the legislation itself but rather in its inconsistent implementation in practice. A shift is needed at the level of execution, meaning that principals should be provided with conditions necessary to fulfil their statutory role. Support mechanisms must be strengthened, and a professional culture that respects their autonomy and accountability must be cultivated.

Article 49 of the ZOFVI hence stipulates that the principal is both the pedagogical leader and executive head of a public educational institution. Further, Article 49 lists the principal's responsibilities, including the organization and planning of school operations, development of annual and long-term plans, ensuring the legality of school activities, and overseeing the functioning of professional bodies within the school system (*Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja* (ZOFVI), 1996, as amended). In addition to defining the principal's role, the Act also sets out specific eligibility criteria for appointment in Article 53. The requirements vary depending on the type of institution but generally include a relevant higher education degree (at least at the second cycle level), professional titles such as *mentor*, *advi-*

sor, senior advisor, or counsellor, a minimum of five years of experience in education, and successful completion of the principal certification exam. For example, principals of public kindergartens, schools, and institutions for children with special needs must meet qualifications appropriate to their institution, including pedagogical or counselling credentials. Principals of higher vocational colleges must hold the title of lecturer and have a minimum of five years of experience. Notably, a candidate who does not yet hold the principal certification may still be appointed, provided they complete the required examination within one year of starting their term. Failure to do so results in automatic termination of their mandate, which otherwise lasts five years.

However, despite this detailed enumeration of tasks and conditions, the law does not provide a specific list of leadership competencies required for the position. It defines the function, not the profile. This gap places the responsibility for interpreting and developing leadership expectations in the hands of educational institutions and training bodies.

Effective educational leadership increasingly relies on a broad range of interpersonal and managerial skills. These include social intelligence, communication abilities, emotional stability, team leadership, and human resource management. Such competencies are essential for implementing distributed and shared leadership, guiding the school community, engaging with parents and the broader public, and fostering a collaborative school culture. As Pellitteri (2021) emphasizes, emotional intelligence, encompassing the ability to recognize, understand, regulate, and express emotions, is crucial for effective interpersonal communication and the creation of a positive emotional climate within schools. Leaders with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to navigate the emotional dynamics of the school environment, thereby strengthening relationships among teachers, students, and parents and promoting a culture of collaboration.

These competencies are somehow recognized and promoted in the official training programmes for principals, coordinated by the Ministry of Education. The training goes beyond regulatory knowledge and covers practical aspects of leadership development, with specific attention to managing teams, developing a school vision, and resolving interpersonal conflicts. One such example is the programme *Mreže ravnateljev za razvoj vodenja* (Networks of principals for leadership development), implemented by the School for Principals (a unit of the National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024), which emphasizes lead-

ership through peer networking, mentoring, and self-reflection (Ažman & Zavašnik, 2023).

Despite these educational efforts, leadership competencies – particularly soft skills – are still not formally or legally included in the selection and evaluation criteria for school principals. Current appointment procedures remain primarily focused on formal qualifications, such as academic degrees, years of professional experience, and professional titles. In contrast, personal traits, emotional intelligence, and leadership abilities are typically assessed only informally, if they are considered at all.

The Draft National Programme for Education 2023–2033, published by the Ministry of Education, acknowledges this gap. It proposes the strengthening of school leadership capacities and the establishment of a systemic approach to continued professional development and self-reflection for school leaders, including tools for leadership quality assessment (Ministrstvo za vzgojo in izobraževanje, 2024).

In summary, while Slovenian law positions school principals as key figures within the educational system, it has yet to fully capture the complexity and multidimensional demands of modern school leadership. Despite growing emphasis on soft skills in training and guidance documents, these competencies are still only marginally embedded in the formal legal and procedural criteria for appointing and evaluating principals. This misalignment underscores a broader issue: the need to reconcile statutory frameworks with the practical realities of educational leadership, where qualities like empathy, effective communication, and intercultural awareness are often just as vital as legal proficiency. Bridging this gap will be essential for any meaningful reform aimed at strengthening the professional identity and support structures for school leaders in an increasingly complex educational landscape.

Italy

Compared to Slovenia, Italy and Austria have developed more structured and legally defined approaches to school leadership. In Italy, entry into the principalship is governed by a national-level competitive examination (*concorso nazionale*), established by Decreto Legislativo 30 marzo 2001, n. 165 [Legislative Decree No. 165/2001] (2001), which assesses candidates' knowledge of educational law, school organization, and leadership skills (Savelli, 2017a, 2017b). Successful candidates

are appointed as *dirigenti scolastici* and are responsible for the strategic management of their schools, a role significantly strengthened by the enactment of Legge 13 luglio 2015, n. 107 [Law No. 107/2015] (Riforma del sistema nazionale di istruzione e formazione e delega per il riordino delle disposizioni legislative vigenti, 2015), commonly known as *La Buona Scuola*.

This law redefined the principal's role from that of a primarily pedagogical leader to a strategic manager responsible for overseeing staff recruitment, financial and human resources management, and the overall development of the educational institution. Article 1 of *La Buona Scuola* assigns principals the task of preparing and implementing the Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa (PTOF), overseeing teacher assignment, and aligning school activities with broader national and regional education strategies. These responsibilities function within a framework aimed at enhancing school autonomy and fostering long-term institutional planning.

Following selection, new principals undergo an induction period that includes mandatory training organized by INDIRE (Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa). Although the initial training primarily addresses legal and managerial content, contemporary leadership frameworks emphasize that effective school leadership also requires interpersonal competencies, such as communication, negotiation, and collaboration skills, which are crucial for fostering inclusive and effective school environments (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016).

Altogether, the Italian system increasingly recognizes the importance of soft skills in school leadership. While these competencies are not always explicitly evaluated in formal selection procedures, they are strongly emphasized in post-selection training and professional development. As a result, newly appointed principals are better supported in addressing the multifaceted demands of educational leadership.

Austria

In Austria, the role of school principals is defined by a combination of legal mandates and competency-based models that emphasize both formal qualifications and soft skills. The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) has developed a comprehensive leadership profile and training programmes to ensure that school leaders are equipped with the necessary competencies to manage schools effec-

tively (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2020). The legal responsibilities of school principals are outlined in the School Education Act (Wiederverlautbarung des Schulunterrichtsgesetzes (SchUG), 1986) and the Civil Service Act (Beamten-Dienstrechtsgesetz (BDG), 1979). According to Article 56 of the SchUG, principals are responsible for the pedagogical and administrative leadership of the school, including quality assurance and personnel management (SchUG, 1986). Article 45 of the BDG 1979 further details the duties of civil servants in leadership positions, emphasizing accountability and adherence to legal standards (Beamten-Dienstrechtsgesetz (BDG), 1979).

International frameworks, such as those outlined in the UNESCO *Global Education Monitoring Report 2024*, emphasize that school leaders are expected to balance administrative management and instructional leadership to promote quality education (UNESCO, 2024). Although specific national profiles vary, Austria follows this general orientation through its national competency frameworks for principals, which stress both formal qualifications and interpersonal competencies (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2020). Notably, while no formal principal training is mandatory before appointment, Austria provides structured professional development and coaching opportunities for school leaders once they assume their position (<https://www.leadershipacademy.at>).

Austria offers state-supported coaching and professional development programmes for school principals, with a strong emphasis on soft skills such as emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and relationship-building. One of the most established programmes is the Leadership Academy Österreich, coordinated by the Federal Ministry of Education and organized in collaboration with external experts. It focuses on fostering reflective, relationship-oriented, and systemically aware leadership. Its curriculum includes modules aimed at developing personal and interpersonal competencies, including emotional awareness, communication strategies, and team leadership (see <https://www.leadershipacademy.at>).

In addition to nationally organized initiatives, private training providers offer supplementary programmes in Austria, including seminars on emotional intelligence in leadership. Although these are not formally part of national education policy, they reflect a growing acknowledgment of the importance of interpersonal skills in school leadership.

Austria's approach to supporting school principals places significant emphasis on developing emotional and social competencies through professional development opportunities such as the Leadership Academy Österreich. These programmes focus on cultivating empathy, effective communication, and conflict resolution, skills increasingly recognized as vital for nurturing collaborative school environments and promoting organizational effectiveness.

Further insights into the evolving role of school principals in Austria are provided by Wiesner and Schratz (2019), who discuss the balance between accountability and improvement. They highlight the challenges faced by principals in navigating a highly centralized system while striving for school-based innovation. The authors also introduce the Field-Transformation360 model, which emphasizes the development of leadership competencies across four quadrants: rational processes, strategic processes, creative processes, and identity processes. This model underscores the importance of personal mastery and reflective practice in effective school leadership (Wiesner & Schratz, 2019).

While Austria's legal statutes may not explicitly reference soft skills, these competencies are firmly embedded in the national competency frameworks and leadership training strategies, reflecting their central role in effective school governance.

Comparative Insight

This comparative lens reveals key differences presented in Table 5.1. These distinctions highlight the systemic strength of Italy and Austria in formally acknowledging and embedding soft skills as essential components of effective leadership. In contrast, Slovenia emphasizes professional experience and optional training, but the absence of a standardized framework for evaluating leadership preparedness creates a noticeable disconnect between legal mandates and educational practice.

School Management, School Leadership and Principalship

To provide a limited overview of the number of publications on school management, school leadership, and principalship, a basic search was conducted across three different repositories. We intentionally chose the terms school leadership and school management instead of educational leadership and educational management to highlight the roles of principals as leaders and managers. In the Web of Science repository, we found the following results for the publication years 2021 to

Table 5.1 Key Differences in Selected Countries

Criteria	Slovenia	Italy	Austria
Legal basis for leadership	Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja (ZOFVI)	Legge 107/2015 [Law 107/2015] <i>La Buona Scuola</i>	Wiederverlautbarung des Schulunterrichtsgesetzes (SchUG) & Beamten-Dienstrechtsgesetz (BDG), 1979
Soft skills in legislation	Not explicitly included	Integrated into training and leadership assessments	Included in the national competency models for principals
Selection process	Based on formal qualifications (education, exams)	National competitive exam includes leadership evaluation	Appointment based on formal qualifications and competency frameworks
Continuous training	Available but optional	Mandatory professional development via INDIRE	Professional development and coaching offered after appointment (state-supported)
Evaluation of leadership	Informal and limited	Legally mandated periodic evaluation	Part of professional development programmes, includes feedback and personal growth plans

Table 5.2 Number of Articles per Category and Repository from 2021 to 2025

Repository (category)	School management	School leadership	Principalship
WOS (under 'topic')	16,411	7,341	113
Sage Publications (research article)	87,228	138,982	37,074
Emerald	47,705	21,558	123

2025 (<https://www.webofscience.com/>): under the search term school management, there were 16,411 results; under school leadership, there were 7,341 results; and under principalship, there were 113 results. In the Sage Journals repository, under the search term school management, we found 87,228 results categorized as research articles. Additionally, there were 138,982 results for the search term school leadership, and 37,074 research articles under principalship. In the Emerald repository, we discovered 47,705 results for the term school management. For school leadership, there were 21,558 results, and under principalship, there were 123 research articles. The results are presented in Table 5.2.

The number of publications in each field reflects global research interests and policy priorities. However, there seems to be a low interest in the topic of principalship. Why is that? It may be because discussions about school leaders often focus on principals by using the terms ‘school leader’ and ‘principal’ interchangeably.

School Management

The neoliberal agenda has promoted the marketization of public education (Bartlett et al., 2002; Locatelli, 2017; Lubienski & Malin, 2025). In the UK, the field of management in education emerged relatively recently after 1988 (Bush, 2008) but gained significant attention and international reach in the early 1990s. With the rise of New Public Management and the marketization of public education, extensive discussions arose regarding whether education should be viewed as a public or private good, the purpose of public education, and the challenges of policy borrowing (Oplatka, 2004). This led to a heightened focus on school leadership.

In this context, the concept of management was largely imported into educational systems worldwide and impacted them in two main ways: culturally, as the UK system differs from other educational systems, and disciplinarily, as key ideas, concepts, theories, and approaches, along with tools and techniques from general and business management, were adapted for use in education. Management has acquired negative connotations, being seen as overly technical rather than people-oriented, perhaps due to this ‘import.’ Mertkan (2013) argues that the shift in the focus of educational policy reforms has led to leadership becoming the predominant discourse.

Mintzberg (2004), a respected theorist in the field of business management, provides an intriguing perspective by linking management to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. He argues that management is not merely a science, profession, or set of skills; it encompasses judgment, vision, insight, and choice. This viewpoint positions management as an art and underscores the significance of wisdom in practice-*phronesis*. Therefore, management transcends basic process-oriented and transactional elements and deserves greater attention in educational contexts than it currently receives.

If management is rooted in *phronesis*, it necessarily incorporates ethical dimensions, experience, and knowledge, all aimed at promoting what is considered ‘good’ for the school. While Aristotle’s ideas origi-

nate from the past, they provide valuable insights for comprehending modern concepts like management. If experience, choice, and judgment are central to phronesis, then principals should not be appointed solely based on meeting legal qualifications; they should also possess proven experience in leading people and managing processes. This way, they are better equipped to make informed judgments and choices compared to those who may be well-educated but lack practical experience.

Bush (2007, p. 393) asserts that both management and leadership are equally essential in schools and does not prioritize one over the other. He references Leithwood et al. (1999), who observed that school leaders engage in their daily responsibilities without distinctly separating managing from leading. However, whether referred to as school leaders, managers, or simply principals, there is an implicit value-laden understanding of their roles. Consequently, we will discuss leadership and principalship in the following section.

... and School Leadership and Principalship

Wei (2025, p. 628) considers leadership and principalship to be synonymous. She states that 'principalship reveals a process of influencing by which school principals exert an intentional impact on others; they aim to structure activities and relationships in educational contexts.' Leadership is also defined as the act of influencing others. The question of whether school principalship can be used as a synonym for leadership is not merely rhetorical; by using specific expressions and concepts, we reshape and define the meanings and implications of our practices. By examining the daily lives of principals, we encourage them to define their identities as leaders. Nevertheless, the legal framework, cultural context, and other factors significantly influence the roles and practices of principals.

In the Slovenian context, principals are both leaders and managers, primarily appointed to carry out management tasks in accordance with legislation. The introduction of the concept of leadership appears to elevate principals' roles to that of school leaders. However, various training programmes focus on educational management.

Educational management in Slovenia began to gain prominence in the 1990s. In 1996, the National Schools for Leadership in Education was established, offering a certified programme for school principals. Over time, theoretical foundations for nationally constructed concepts emerged, reflecting international trends in leadership. The programme

consists of six modules: Introduction to Leadership, Theories of Organizations and Leadership, Planning, People in Organizations, Principal as Pedagogical Leader, and Legislation (Šola za ravnatelje, n.d.). These module titles have remained almost the same since 1996. The continuation of the required, licenced programme focuses more on soft skills, such as developing learning networks, supervising teachers, and providing constructive feedback. The rhetoric emphasizes that principals need to inspire, motivate, and, as the president of the principals' association suggests, 'protect' teachers. This discussion reflects a recurring theme: protective principals and disempowered teachers. Despite recent shifts in rhetoric, the legal framework and existing legislation defining principals' roles and obligations have not changed substantially. We now observe new challenges for school principals that necessitate a rethinking of principalship, though empirical research in this area remains limited.

The question of whether 'school principalship' can be used as a synonym for 'leadership' is, hence, not merely rhetorical. Our choice of language and concepts reshapes and defines the meaning of our practices. By understanding the everyday experiences of principals, we encourage them to identify themselves as leaders. However, various factors, including legal frameworks and cultural contexts, influence the roles and practices of principals.

Bush (2007) highlights the diverse epistemologies and disciplines that shape the field of educational leadership and management. His systematic literature and research review draws from both international and South African sources. In 2003, Bush developed a typology of educational management and leadership models. He divided them between management and leadership models and drew a correspondence between them (Bush, 2007, p. 394). For example, for the collegial management model, he found corresponding leadership models, such as transformative, interpersonal and participative; for the subjective management model he identified the post-modern leadership model, and for the cultural management model, moral and instructional leadership models were identified. Such a typology has two implications. Firstly, it shows that models are not unique to management or leadership. They carry similar features. Secondly, redundancy is unavoidable, and so are the barriers between management and/or leadership models.

Typologies and theories of educational leadership have been exten-

sively described and discussed by scholars (Davies & Davies, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Tian & Huber, 2020). Hallinger (1992) identified trends in principalship in the USA from 1960 to 1990, which evolved from programme manager to instructional leader and then to transformational leader. Mango (2018) noted that there are over 60 leadership theories guiding researchers in this field. He conducted a thorough analysis aiming to consolidate these various theories and found considerable redundancy and similarities among them. After scrutinizing 22 theories, he identified five domains.

This consolidation effort is not unique; for instance, Meuser et al. (2016) conducted an extensive analysis of leadership theories and identified one focal theory encompassing six leadership approaches: transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, strategic leadership, leadership and diversity, participative/shared leadership, and trait theory. Educational leadership is shaped by all of these theories, domains, and models. They not only address the need of principals to 'protect' teachers from non-professionals but also reflect the importance of diversity and variety in leadership practices.

Gurr (2015) reported on the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP), which has been ongoing since 2001, and he provided an international model of successful school leadership. Initially involving seven participating countries, the project expanded to 20 countries, incorporating rich, diverse methodologies to explore the nature of successful principal leadership. Among many findings, Gurr (2015) highlights the concepts of distributed leadership and heroic leadership that successful principals embody. While heroic leadership may suggest an emphasis on individual leadership, it is essential to recognize that principals do not lead schools alone. Gurr (2015, p. 144) intentionally uses the term 'school leaders' instead of 'principals' to emphasize this point.

The distinction between 'school leader' and 'principal' is closely tied to legal frameworks, the roles and positions of principals, and the organizational structure of schools. Gurr (2015) provides an example regarding changes in pedagogy, stating that heads of curriculum areas can lead improvements in teaching methods. However, the legal framework defines school structures and hierarchies, which in turn dictate the roles and responsibilities of various school leaders. This observation suggests that emphasizing principals as school leaders extends beyond mere leadership; it pertains to specific roles and positions within

a cultural and legal context, as well as the expectations and needs of followers and stakeholders.

Social media has transformed established communication channels and opened schools to various stakeholders and the public. According to the President of the Principals' Association, this shift makes schools and educators vulnerable. This perspective warrants further research in areas such as teacher education, the selection and preparation of principals, and the exploration of theories from other fields, such as marketing and public relations, which offer substantial research on communicating when the audience is unknown. This is particularly relevant in contexts such as participation in television shows, printed publications (e.g. newspapers), and social media.

The role of principals is evolving; they now face issues for which they may not have received adequate training, such as addressing discipline, engaging with different generations of parents, and adapting to the mobile phone generation in schools. Meanwhile, policymakers and decision-makers have been slow to introduce necessary changes.

To effectively address the challenges posed by 'new technologies and media,' which have transformed modern communication, including in schools, it may be beneficial to revitalize research on principalship. The legal context significantly, although not exclusively, shapes a principal's role, duties, and authority while also defining organizational structures. Since any employee can exercise leadership within a school, the legislation stipulates a principal's formal positions and roles. While formal positions and roles do not explicitly emphasize leadership competencies, they implicitly expect them. We propose a conceptual model that reflects the legal frameworks of Slovenia, which could serve as a framework for future studies.

If a principal is put in the centre of a school due to power and authority, and assigned responsibilities, duties, and tasks to be performed, then principalship colours the management processes and leadership as influencing others.

Concluding Discussion

The growing complexity of educational leadership in the twenty-first century demands that school principals possess more than regulatory knowledge and administrative competence. As emphasised by the OECD, effective school leaders must demonstrate strong interpersonal competencies, including communication skills, relationship-building

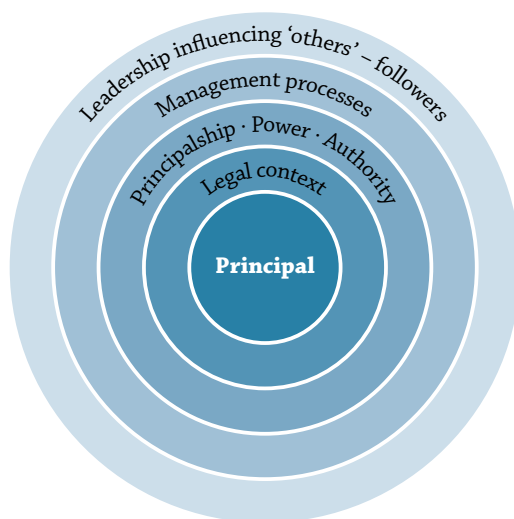


Figure 5.1
 Conceptual Model
 for Principalship

abilities, and the capacity to manage change constructively. These skills are not peripheral, but central to fostering a positive school climate and enabling sustainable school improvement.

As OECD research suggests, interpersonal and emotional competencies should not be considered optional attributes, but rather integral to the principal's role. Their absence in formal standards risks leaving principals underprepared for the relational and transformational demands of contemporary schooling. In Slovenia, this gap is slowly being addressed through professional development programmes and sublegal guidelines; however, these remain fragmented and largely dependent on individual initiative.

The legal framework explicitly and implicitly reflects a principal's power position, authority, responsibilities, and accountability. With a focus on administrative tasks, neither management nor leadership is sufficiently addressed. The foci of principals' perceived needs, knowledge and skills upgrade, and hence, professional development, move the practice towards management processes while leadership remains 'optional.'

Considering principals as *primus inter pares* and expecting them to be super persons is illusory in this complex world. Schools must be managed well with established processes and fulfilling aims and tasks, in a welcoming, supportive, and developmentally oriented school culture. Principals must understand their role and 'engage others' in leader-

ship. Distributed principalship would give rise to undistributed power and authority, accountability and responsibility while enabling sharing, distributing instructional and other types of leadership. If so, principals could get more adequate training, better navigate between different roles, and be more aware of their power, authority, responsibility and accountability position than they currently are.

Policy Implications for Slovenia

For Slovenia, these findings carry important implications. While the formal responsibilities of school principals are clearly outlined in national legislation, the systemic embedding of interpersonal competencies within leadership frameworks remains limited. The Slovenian educational policy environment still largely emphasizes administrative compliance and legal accountability, often at the expense of recognizing and systematically developing soft skills as a core component of school leadership.

To align with international trends and evidence-based policy recommendations, Slovenia could benefit from integrating soft skills more explicitly into the legal and professional profile of school leaders. The incorporation of competencies in initial principal training, such as ongoing coaching and performance evaluation frameworks, is needed. A shift in discourse is necessary, from a focus on managerialism to leadership rooted in relational ethics, emotional intelligence, and democratic engagement. Additionally, we should move towards empowering principals, enabling them to effectively administer, manage, and lead schools with the strategic goal of transformation. This shift of focus on principalship goes beyond semantic change into meaningful praxis. To effectively carry out the role of principal in Slovenia, it is crucial to consistently apply all statutory competencies outlined by ZOFVI. This includes systematically training principals in strategic, pedagogical, and organizational leadership, as well as promoting an environment that supports professional leadership within schools.

Research implications for Slovenia

Our discussion and conceptual model of principalship raise several questions and opportunities for further research. Beyond testing the model in various national contexts, it can also be compared internationally. The dominant discourse requires fresh perspectives aiming to address the needs of non-English speaking countries, as well as their

cultural traditions and legal frameworks. Research on school management should be informed by new insights from general management, which continues to influence school practices in multiple ways. Additionally, educational leadership theories may benefit from being examined through a constructivist research paradigm, as Wei (2025) suggests. Leadership, management, and principalship are dynamic concepts; new generations of parents, students, and emerging technologies demand innovative teachers guided by forward-thinking principals. As a result, exploring the relationship between the 'new' and the 'old' opens up new avenues for research.

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