EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: BUILDING INCLUSIVE AND ETHICAL SCHOOL CULTURES

Lect. Univ. Dr. Carmen-Mihaela Baiceanu

Lect. Univ. Dr. Mona Badoi-Hammami

Lect. Univ. Dr. Claudia Simona Popa

Assoc. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristian Petre

Assoc. Prof. Univ. Dr. Monica Moraru

Ovidius University of Constanța, **Romania**

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between educational leadership, teacher professional development, and school culture in Romanian pre-university education, addressing a well-identified gap in regional empirical research. Using a mixed-methods design, the study integrates quantitative data from 82 teachers across five urban and rural schools with qualitative insights from six school leaders. Quantitative analyses revealed strong positive associations among leadership practices, professional development engagement, and school culture, with leadership emerging as the most influential predictor ($\beta = .54$). Professional development ($\beta = .21$) and digital leadership ($\beta = .18$) also contributed significantly, resulting in a model explaining 61% of the variance in perceived cultural quality.

Qualitative thematic analysis identified four key themes: ethical leadership as a foundation of trust and psychological safety; structural barriers that limit teacher development, particularly in rural contexts; digital leadership as an emerging competence shaping communication and innovation; and inclusive leadership as a driver of belonging, collaboration, and organizational well-being. These themes contextualize the statistical findings and illustrate how leadership practices influence teachers' experiences and resilience.

The study situates its findings within global debates on ethical, inclusive, and digitally competent leadership, showing both convergences with international trends and context-specific challenges related to digital infrastructure and policy implementation. By offering empirical evidence from the Romanian context, the research contributes to international discussions on leadership as a moral, relational, and transformative force capable of fostering equitable, future-ready school cultures.

Keywords: educational leadership; professional development; school culture; psychological safety; digital leadership; inclusive leadership

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership has become a defining factor in transforming contemporary school systems, especially amid rapid digitalisation, rising expectations for inclusion, and increasing professionalisation of the teaching career. International frameworks (UNESCO, OECD, European Commission) [11], [9], [5] emphasise that high-quality

https://www.scilibrary.at