

DOI <https://doi.org/10.32782/2956-333X/2025-4-4>

LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS – FROM FORMAL MANAGEMENT TO INFLUENCING SCHOOL CULTURE

Markéta Šimková,

PhDr. Ing. Mgr. Ed.D., LL.M., doktorand DTI Dubnica nad Váhom, Slovakia

orcid.org/0009-0001-5538-3809

marketas3@seznam.cz

Summary. The leadership of educational organizations is undergoing a fundamental transformation driven by the complexity of the school environment and increased demands on educators. This article reflects the shift from traditional administrative management to a broader conception of leadership emphasizing pedagogical guidance and the purposeful shaping of school culture. The aim is to analyze leadership as a multifaceted process that indirectly influences the quality of instruction and the wellbeing of all stakeholders by cultivating climate, trust, and psychological safety. The text focuses on concepts of distributed and instructional leadership, highlighting the role of teachers and other specialists as leaders, and discusses the critical psychological dimension of leadership (motivation, change resistance). Simultaneously, the paper critically examines the limits and risks of leadership in Czech school practice, particularly the threat of principal overload and the phenomenon of “paper leadership”. Conclusions indicate that effective leadership is a shared, culture-forming process and represents a necessary supplement to formal management essential for ensuring sustainable school development and staff professional satisfaction.

Keywords: Leadership in Education, School Culture, Distributed Leadership, Instructional Leadership, School Management, Teacher Wellbeing.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the management of educational organizations has undergone significant changes related to the increasing complexity of the school environment, changing expectations placed on schools, and the growing demands on teaching staff. Schools today are not only institutions that deliver curricula, but also social spaces where different professional roles, values, and interests meet, and where the quality of interpersonal relationships significantly influences students’ educational outcomes and teachers’ professional satisfaction. In this context, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the traditional concept of school management based primarily on the administrative and organizational running of the institution is not sufficient. Current professional literature in the Czech environment points to the need to shift from a narrowly understood management to a broader concept of leadership that emphasizes pedagogical leadership, working with people, and the targeted shaping of school culture (Pol, 2017; Lazarová, 2015). In this concept, leadership in educational organizations is understood as a process of influence aimed not only at the effective functioning of the school, but above all at supporting the quality of teaching, the professional learning of teachers, and the creation of a safe and stimulating educational environment. The role of the school principal is thus shifting from a predominantly managerial concept to that of an educational leader who creates conditions for cooperation, shared responsibility, and joint professional learning among the teaching staff.

Research conducted in Czech schools has long highlighted the importance of school culture and climate as key factors in school quality. Pol and Lazarová (2011) emphasize that teacher cooperation, open communication, and shared values are not a spontaneous product of school life, but the result of targeted and long-term efforts by school leadership. Dvořák et al. (2010) point out that the quality of pedagogical leadership is reflected in the professional development of teachers and, through this mechanism, also in the educational outcomes of students. In this sense, leadership becomes one of the key tools with which schools respond to external and internal challenges. A specific feature of leadership in schools is its significant relational and psychological dimension. School management works with teachers’ professional identity, their motivation, workload, and ability to cope with change. Urbánek (2018) points out that the quality of the school climate is closely related to the degree of security, trust, and support that teaching staff experience at school. Leadership that neglects these aspects can easily become formal and ineffective,

while leadership based on respect, participation, and meaningfulness contributes to the long-term stability and development of the school.

Foreign research supports and further expands on these conclusions. Studies by Leithwood et al. (2008) show that leadership in schools has a significant, mostly indirect impact on student learning through the creation of school culture and systematic support for teachers. The concepts of distributed and pedagogical leadership described by Spillan (2006) and Hallinger (2011) emphasize the fact that school leadership is not exclusively linked to a single formal role, but represents a shared process in which other actors in school life also participate. These approaches are in line with Czech professional discussions emphasizing the importance of cooperation and shared responsibility in teaching staff. The aim of the article is to reflect on leadership in educational organizations as a complex and multi-layered process that significantly influences the functioning of the school, its culture, and the wellbeing of teaching staff. The text is based primarily on Czech professional sources and research, which are set in a broader international context. The article does not aim to offer a universal model of good school leadership, but rather to support professional reflection on leadership as a key factor in the quality of education and the sustainable development of schools in the current conditions.

The following chapters elaborate in detail on the specifics of this concept of leadership, its distributed nature, and its influence on the formation of school culture.

2. Specifics of leadership in educational organizations

Leadership in educational organizations has a number of specific features that distinguish it from leadership in other types of organizations. Schools are institutions with strong normative and value-based foundations, whose primary goal is not economic efficiency but rather the support of learning, development, and socialization of students. School management therefore works with a different type of goals, a different structure of relationships, and a different degree of autonomy for professional actors than management in a commercial or industrial environment. These specific features are significantly reflected in the way the difference between management and leadership is understood in schools.

2.1. The difference between management and leadership in the school context

Professional literature in the Czech environment points out the need to distinguish between school management and school leadership. Management is traditionally associated with planning, organizing, controlling, and administratively ensuring the running of the school. These activities are necessary for the functioning of an educational organization, but they do not in themselves guarantee the quality of the educational process or the long-term development of the school (Pol, 2017).

Leadership, on the other hand, is understood as a process of influencing people with the aim of creating a common direction, shared values, and conditions for the professional learning of teachers. Lazarová (2015) emphasizes that pedagogical leadership is not limited to the exercise of formal authority, but consists primarily in the ability to create an environment that supports responsibility, cooperation, and reflection on pedagogical work. The difference between management and leadership is therefore not one of opposition, but of the different nature of their functions. While management focuses on stability and order, leadership focuses on meaning, change, and development.

Research conducted in Czech schools shows that excessive administrative burdens on principals can weaken their role as educational leaders. In such cases, school management is reduced to technical management, which limits its potential to influence school culture and support the professional growth of teachers (Dvořák et al., 2010). Effective leadership in an educational organization therefore requires a conscious balancing of managerial and leadership activities.

2.2. Working with values, emotions, and teachers' professional identity

One of the key features of leadership in educational organizations is its significant value and emotional dimension. Teaching work is closely linked to teachers' personal attitudes, beliefs, and professional identity. School management therefore works not only with performance and results, but also with the meanings that teachers attach to their work. Pol and Lazarová (2011) point out that shared values and meaningful work are essential conditions for teachers' willingness to cooperate and actively participate in the development of the school.

Leadership in the school environment does not shy away from working with emotions. Changes in schools often cause uncertainty, fears, or resistance, which can significantly affect the climate of the teaching staff. In this context, school management plays a crucial role in creating a safe space for communication, sharing concerns, and jointly seeking solutions. Urbánek (2018) points out that the quality of the school climate is closely related to whether teachers feel respected, supported, and heard.

Teachers' professional identity is shaped through interaction with school management, colleagues, and the broader institutional framework. Leadership that recognizes teachers' expertise, supports their autonomy, and creates opportunities for professional learning contributes to strengthening professional self-confidence and responsibility. Conversely, leadership based primarily on control and directive management can lead to passivity, reduced motivation, and resistance to change. Working with values, emotions, and professional identity thus becomes one of the key mechanisms through which leadership influences the quality of an educational organization's functioning.

3. Distributed and pedagogical leadership in schools

The current concept of leadership in educational organizations is increasingly moving away from the idea of school management as the exclusive domain of a single formal function. Research and expert discussions suggest that school leadership in everyday practice takes place through the interactions of many actors, their decisions, initiatives, and ways of influencing others. In this context, leadership is understood as a process spread across the organizational structure of the school, rather than a set of activities exclusively linked to the position of principal.

3.1. Leadership as a shared process

The concept of distributed leadership is based on the assumption that influence on the direction of the school arises in everyday pedagogical and organizational situations in which professional competencies, relationships, and specific contexts of school work are interconnected. Spillane (2006) points out that leadership is exercised through activities, not just through formal roles, and that its quality depends on how individual actors are involved in decision-making and sharing responsibility.

In the Czech environment, distributed leadership is often associated with supporting teacher collaboration and developing professional learning communities. Pol and Lazarová (2011) emphasize that shared leadership strengthens the sense of shared responsibility for the running of the school and creates conditions for mutual learning among teachers. Leadership understood as a shared process also reduces the risk of overburdening school management and enables a more effective response to the complex challenges facing schools.

Educational leadership is a specific form of leadership that focuses primarily on supporting teaching and learning. Hallinger (2011) describes educational leadership as a set of activities aimed at developing the quality of teaching, professional learning for teachers, and creating conditions for effective student education. In the Czech context, educational leadership is understood as a key part of the role of the school principal, which, however, requires the active involvement of other members of the teaching staff (Lazarová, 2015).

3.2. The role of teachers and other professionals in school leadership

Teachers are one of the most important groups of actors involved in the implementation of distributed and pedagogical leadership in schools. Teachers' professional expertise, experience, and daily contact with students enable them to influence educational processes in ways that cannot be fully replaced by formal management. Pol and Lazarová (2011) point out that involving teachers in decision-making processes and school development strengthens their professional responsibility and promotes a culture of cooperation. In practice, teacher leadership manifests itself, for example, in initiating innovations in teaching, leading colleagues within subject or grade teams, or actively participating in the creation of school concepts.

The role of teachers as leaders is essential for the internal development capacity of schools. Foreign research confirms and expands on these conclusions. Harris (2013) states that teacher leadership is one of the key mechanisms for increasing a school's capacity to respond to change, provided it is systematically supported by school management and embedded in the school culture. Teacher leadership in this sense is

not based on formal hierarchy, but on the professional authority and influence that teachers gain through sharing practices, mutual reflection, and collaboration with colleagues. It acts as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation and sustainable professional learning, ensuring that management decisions are practical and relevant to real teaching.

Other professionals (school psychologists, special educators, educational counselors, and prevention specialists) also play an important role in today's schools. The presence of these professions expands the possibilities of leadership towards supporting the well-being of students and teachers and addressing the complex educational and psychosocial needs of the school. Urbánek (2018) points out that the quality of the school climate is closely linked to the extent to which the school is able to utilize the professional potential of all its staff and create space for interdisciplinary cooperation.

The leadership of other professionals in schools is often exercised informally through professional influence, consultation, and support for school management decision-making processes. In this context, Spillane (2006) emphasizes that distributed leadership arises in situations where different forms of expertise are combined and where influence is based on competence rather than formal position alone. The involvement of school psychologists and other experts in leadership processes thus contributes not only to improving the quality of student support, but also to strengthening the professional culture of the school as a whole. This type of leadership ensures that decisions on complex cases or conceptual changes are based on relevant expertise.

Distributed and pedagogical leadership places increased demands on a culture of cooperation, open communication, and mutual trust. In this concept, school leadership creates a framework in which individual actors can take on responsibilities commensurate with their competencies and professional roles. Effective leadership sharing does not weaken the role of the school principal, but rather strengthens the capacity of the school as a whole to learn, reflect on its own practice, and adapt to changing educational conditions. Hierarchical authority is transformed into shared professional responsibility.

4. Leadership and school culture

School culture is a set of shared values, norms, relationships, and communication patterns that shape the daily functioning of the school and influence the behavior of all its actors. The quality of school culture is reflected in the way teachers work together, in the relationships between teachers and students, and in the overall climate of the school. The professional literature has long pointed out that leadership is one of the key factors that actively shape, maintain, and stabilize school culture in the long term (Pol, 2017; Dvořák et al., 2010). Leadership is seen here as a culture-creating process that highlights the basic assumptions and beliefs of the organization.

4.1. Climate, trust, and safety at school

The school climate is usually seen as a subjectively perceived quality of the environment that reflects the everyday experiences of teachers and students with how the school works. While culture is a deeper, more stable framework of values, climate is more like how those values are seen in practice. Urbánek (2018) emphasizes that a positive school climate is closely linked to the level of trust, openness of communication, and sense of safety experienced by individual actors in the school. Leadership plays a crucial role in this process through decision-making, communication, and, above all, the handling of mistakes and conflicts.

Trust in school leadership arises primarily when decision-making processes are transparent, predictable, and based on respect for the expertise of educators. Pol and Lazarová (2011) point out that an environment in which teachers are involved in discussions about the direction of the school and have the opportunity to influence important decisions promotes a sense of belonging and responsibility. Leadership based on control and unilateral enforcement of change, on the other hand, increases uncertainty, leads to psychological distance, and weakens trust in the school as an institution. This creates a fragile professional atmosphere.

A sense of security is another key aspect of school culture. A safe environment allows for open communication, sharing of uncertainties, and reflection on teaching practice without fear of negative sanctions (Dvořák et al., 2010). Schools with a developed culture of trust show a higher level of professional

cooperation and willingness of teachers to engage in innovation. Leadership here functions as a mechanism that sets standards for dealing with mistakes, conflict, and professional differences. It is about creating so-called “psychological safety,” where experimentation and learning from failure are not punished.

4.2. The influence of leadership on the wellbeing of teachers and students

The wellbeing of teachers and students has become an increasingly important topic of professional discussion in recent years and is considered a critical outcome of quality school leadership. The increasing workload of teachers, pressure to perform, and frequent changes in education policy place increased demands on the mental resilience of all actors in school life. In this context, leadership has a significant indirect impact on wellbeing through the creation of working conditions, the quality of relationships, and support for teachers’ professional functioning (Leithwood et al., 2008).

Research shows that leadership that promotes collaboration, shared responsibility, and professional autonomy contributes to reducing the risk of teacher burnout and enhances their job satisfaction. Pol (2017) points out that a sense of meaningful work and the ability to influence events at school are important protective factors for teachers’ mental health. Leadership that reflects these needs creates conditions for the long-term sustainable development of the school and the professional capacity of the teaching staff.

The influence of leadership is also indirectly reflected in student wellbeing. A positive school climate, stable relationships, and clearly shared values create an environment that promotes a sense of security and belonging, which are fundamental prerequisites for effective learning. Leithwood et al. (2008) show that leadership influences student outcomes primarily through teacher support and school culture, rather than through direct influence on teaching. This is a mediated effect, where a positive environment for teachers leads to higher quality teaching and relationships with students.

Leadership focused on school culture and wellbeing is therefore not a supplementary area of school management, but an integral part of it. Creating a climate of trust, safety, and respect strengthens the school’s capacity to respond to change and contributes to the mental well-being of teachers and students. In this concept, school culture becomes a key environment in which leadership is exercised on a daily basis and whose quality significantly influences educational processes.

5. The psychological dimension of school leadership

The psychological dimension of school leadership is an important but often underestimated area of educational organization management. The school environment is characterized by a high level of emotional stress, constant change, and intensive work with people. Leadership in schools therefore affects not only organizational processes and the quality of teaching, but also the motivation of teaching staff, their ability to cope with change, and their long-term mental well-being. Awareness of this dimension is key to the sustainability of the profession.

5.1. Motivation of teaching staff

Teacher motivation is closely linked to whether teaching work is meaningful (sense of meaning) and whether teachers are able to influence the conditions in which they work (sense of autonomy). Pol (2017) points out that teachers’ professional motivation is strengthened primarily when school management supports autonomy, recognizes teachers’ expertise, and creates space for their professional development. Leadership focused exclusively on external stimuli (performance and control) can, on the contrary, lead to a weakening of internal motivation and a feeling of professional alienation.

The way in which school management communicates also plays an important role in motivation. Transparent decision-making, clear definition of expectations, and feedback based on respect contribute to strengthening teachers’ professional self-confidence. Dvořák et al. (2010) demonstrate that schools with developed pedagogical leadership show a higher level of teacher engagement and a greater willingness to participate in changes aimed at improving the quality of teaching. School management becomes a source of support and recognition, not just a control mechanism.

5.2. Resistance to change as a psychological phenomenon

Change is an integral part of the current school environment, but at the same time it is one of the main sources of uncertainty and psychological stress for teaching staff. Resistance to change cannot be understood merely as a manifestation of unwillingness or professional rigidity, but as a natural psychological reaction

to threats to established practices, professional identity, or feelings of competence. Lazarová (2015) emphasizes that the way in which school management works with change (the implementation process) fundamentally influences the degree to which it is accepted by the teaching staff.

Leadership that provides space for discussion, explains the meaning of changes (sense-making), and involves teachers in their planning (participation) contributes to reducing resistance and strengthening the sense of control over the professional situation. Conversely, the directive introduction of changes without sufficient communication increases stress levels and can lead to passivity or hidden resistance. In this regard, the psychological sensitivity of leadership proves to be a key factor in the success and sustainability of change processes in schools.

5.3. Burnout and the importance of support and reflection

Burnout syndrome is a serious risk in the teaching profession, linked to long-term overload, the emotional demands of the job, and a lack of support. Urbánek (2018) points out that the quality of the school climate and workplace relationships plays a crucial role in preventing burnout among teaching staff. Leadership that promotes open communication, cooperation, and workload sharing contributes to creating a protective environment for teachers' mental health.

An important part of psychologically sensitive leadership is supporting reflection on teaching work. Reflection allows teachers to identify difficulties, share experiences, and seek meaningful solutions to professional challenges. Pol and Lazarová (2011) point to the fact that schools that support joint reflection and professional learning show a higher degree of stress resilience and greater stability in teaching teams. Leadership that creates conditions for regular reflection and professional support thus contributes not only to the quality of teaching but also to the long-term sustainability of the teaching profession.

The psychological dimension of school leadership cannot be understood as a supplementary aspect of school management, but as an integral part of it. Working with the motivation, emotions, and professional workload of teaching staff is one of the key mechanisms through which leadership influences the quality of school culture, teachers' professional satisfaction, and the overall functioning of the educational organization.

6. Limits and risks of leadership in school practice

Leadership in educational organizations is often presented in professional literature as a key tool for school development, but its application in practice encounters a number of structural, organizational, and psychological limits. School leadership cannot be understood as a universal solution to school problems or as a set of techniques that can be mechanically applied regardless of the specific context. Reflection on the risks associated with the implementation of leadership is therefore an essential part of professional discussion and critical analysis of its real impact.

6.1. Overloading of school management

One of the most frequently mentioned and critical limitations of school leadership is the high level of work overload experienced by principals and other senior staff. Administrative demands, legislative responsibilities, and pressure to meet externally set requirements significantly limit the time and mental space available for pedagogical leadership of the school. Dvořák et al. (2010) point out that in such conditions, the role of leadership is often reduced to formal management, while systematic work with the teaching staff and the cultivation of relationships recede into the background.

School leadership overload can lead to a superficial concept of leadership that is limited to declaring visions without actually anchoring them in everyday practice. In such cases, leadership becomes more of a rhetorical framework than a real process of influencing school culture. Moreover, the risk of exhaustion is transferred to other actors if functional conditions for the distribution and sharing of responsibility are not created. This situation leads to a paradox: expectations of the leadership role are growing, but systemic conditions make it impossible to perform it effectively.

6.2. Formality and symbolic concept of leadership

Another serious risk of school leadership is its formal or symbolic application. School management may declare support for cooperation, participation, and shared decision-making without these principles being truly reflected in the organizational structure and daily functioning of the school. Pol (2017) points

out that the discrepancy between declared values and actual practice undermines the trust of the teaching staff and leads to a cynical perception of change initiatives. This inauthenticity creates internal tension and reduces the credibility of the leadership.

Formal leadership often manifests itself in the creation of conceptual documents, working groups, or project structures that have no real impact on teaching or professional learning for teachers. Such an approach to leadership can reinforce feelings of hopelessness and resignation, especially when teachers are repeatedly confronted with initiatives that do not bring about meaningful change in their working conditions or improve their autonomy. Development activities are imitated without any actual transformation taking place.

6.3. “Leadership on paper” and its consequences

A specific risk in current school practice is the phenomenon of so-called leadership on paper, which manifests itself particularly in connection with external requirements for strategic planning, evaluation, and project management. In these cases, leadership is reduced to a set of formal outputs that serve primarily to meet administrative expectations and external legitimization, rather than to promote the real internal development of the school. Lazarová (2015) points out that leadership conceived in this way loses its pedagogical and relational dimension.

The consequence of leadership on paper is often a weakening of the authenticity of school leadership and an increase in resistance to further changes among the teaching staff. Teachers may perceive leadership as another control mechanism and bureaucratic burden, rather than as support for their professional functioning. The loss of meaning and trust subsequently has a negative impact on school culture and the willingness of teachers to engage in development activities. This leads to a situation where institutional goals take precedence over educational goals.

The limitations and risks of school leadership highlight that effective leadership cannot be separated from the specific context of the school, available resources, and the quality of relationships between stakeholders. Leadership that reflects its own limitations, works with the school’s real possibilities, and maintains authenticity has greater potential to contribute to the long-term development of an educational organization than leadership based on formally fulfilling external expectations. It is a transition from external regulation to internal self-regulatory capacity.

7. Conclusion

Leadership in educational organizations is a complex and multi-layered process, the analysis of which has shown that it is not possible to lead a school solely through a formal management role. A key shift in the concept of leadership is the systemic emphasis on influencing school culture, supporting professional learning, and working purposefully with relationships within the school community. In this sense, leadership has become the main mechanism through which schools effectively respond to the growing complexity and demands of the current educational environment.

A summary of the attention paid to the difference between management and leadership, distributed and pedagogical leadership, and the psychological dimension of school leadership reveals that effective influence is achieved primarily through everyday practice, transparent communication, and participatory decision-making. Not only school principals, but also teachers and other professionals play an important role in this process, whose professional influence contributes to the development of cooperation, trust, and a sense of security. Leadership cannot therefore be understood as an individual competence linked to a position, but as a shared process deeply rooted in the school culture.

At the same time, it is becoming apparent that the practical implementation of leadership faces obvious limitations and risks. These include the administrative overload of school management, a formal approach to change, and pressure to bureaucratically fulfill external expectations. Reflection on these limitations is necessary to maintain the authenticity of leadership and its meaningful impact on the functioning of the school. Leadership focused primarily on formal outputs loses its potential to influence school culture and undermines the wellbeing of both teaching staff and students.

The key thesis of the article: "Leadership in educational organizations" is a long-term process of learning and cultivation of the entire organization. An emphasis on relationships, shared values,

professional support, and reflection creates the conditions for the sustainable development of the school in conditions of constant change. Leadership understood as influencing school culture is therefore not only an alternative to school management, but a fundamental and necessary complement to it, without which it is impossible to ensure not only the quality of education in the long term, but also the professional satisfaction and stability of those involved in school life.

Bibliography

1. Dvořák, D., Starý, K., Urbánek, P., Chvál, M., & Walterová, E. (2010). *Kvalita a efektivita školy: Výzkumné přístupy a jejich výsledky*. Karolinum.
2. Hallinger, P. (2011). Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(2), 125–142. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231111116699>
3. Harris, A. (2013). Distributed leadership: Friend or foe? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(5), 545–554. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213497635>
4. Lazarová, B. (2015). Ředitel školy jako pedagogický lídr. In M. Pol (Ed.), *Škola v proměnách* (pp. 45–62). Masarykova univerzita.
5. Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 28(1), 27–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701800060>
6. Pol, M. (2017). *Škola v proměnách*. Masarykova univerzita.
7. Pol, M., & Lazarová, B. (2011). *Spolupráce učitelů: Podmínka rozvoje školy*. Paido.
8. Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
9. Urbánek, P. (2018). Školní klima jako faktor kvality školy. *Pedagogická orientace*, 28(3), 421–445. <https://journals.muni.cz/pedor/article/view/10359>