

How school leaders decide when school autonomy is low: interactive leadership to navigate system governance

Monica E. Mincu^a and Anna D'Addio^b

^aInstitute of Education, University College London, London, England; ^bUNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report Team, Paris, France

ABSTRACT

This theory-building article explores how governance structures shape school leadership practices in contexts with limited autonomy. In low-autonomy environments, principals often occupy dual roles, functioning as administrative enforcers of centrally determined regulations and limitedly as instructional leaders, striving to influence teaching and learning processes. Various governance features, such as low decisional power at the school level, high teachers' autonomy and reduced functioning budgets, impose tight restrictions on principals' actions. The method draws mainly on a comparison of structures to highlight convergent governance modes. Qualitative data from the Global Education Monitoring Report (2024) collected in France, Italy, Ivory Coast and Romania solely exemplifies salient aspects. Despite challenges that are typical when school autonomy is low, school leaders adopt interactive tactics, including informal negotiations with teachers and school boards, to reconcile top-down mandates with local school needs. The analysis reveals that fostering collaboration and coherence among staff is often contingent on persuasion and consensus-building. Indeed, formal authority and low principalship powers are insufficient in hierarchical and loosely coupled systems. Ultimately, this study highlights that understanding leadership in low-autonomy school systems requires acknowledging the structural conditions that enable or constrain principals' effective powers to influence teaching, organisational culture, and decision-making.

KEYWORDS

Low-autonomy school systems; school leadership; decision-making; system governance

Introduction

There is a growing recognition that school leadership should not be understood solely within its immediate context (Printy and Liu 2021). Principalship is

intrinsically embedded into the specific school system constraints that shape it (Lakomski and Evers 2022). Context matters (Harris 2020) indeed, and in multiple ways: on one hand, effective leaders are responsive to their context (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008), while on the other hand, culturally specific approaches to leadership development and training are crucial (Harris and Jones 2015). The broader system governance (Torfing et al. 2012) is a primary contextual layer, often overlooked, whose influence is quite different in diverse school autonomy and accountability regimes. This article examines school leaders as professionals with limited autonomy, particularly those working in centrally managed school systems. Governance in this context includes, but is not limited to, governing bodies and their relationship to improvement (Ranson 2011). Their leadership is profoundly shaped by the way school systems work (Green, Preston, and Janmaat 2006), as well as the legal boundaries of their decision-making authority and the underlying values and assumptions embedded in these structures. As recently reminded in a key policy document, leadership in education is a ‘process of influence to mobilise people to act together towards specific goals with opportunities but also constraints to achieving them’ (UNESCO 2024, 7). In line with this definition, this study explores, precisely, the specific constraints, that is the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of organisational governance, playing the role of a higher-level moderator on decision-making (Somech 2010). At the same time, it focuses on the specific interactive practices school leaders adopt in low-autonomy settings.

A low-autonomy school system is a sociological tool that allows for theory building in comparative social science (Green, Preston, and Janmaat 2006). This specific typology is at the heart of an important dilemma in the field of educational leadership: which practices, behaviours, and tactics are adopted to overcome specific systemic barriers? While this field acknowledges the importance of system governance for leadership, it is rarely investigated in traditionally centralised contexts, particularly in how the school system type shapes leaders’ decision-making processes. Most power is centrally held, and, at the same time, a residual amount of power is shared locally with teachers and other school actors in decision-making bodies. An organisational operational mode, quite different from that in high-autonomy settings, influences the margins of both formal and informal leadership. From this perspective, the significance of this study lies in its contribution to a growing scholarship focused on the relevance of context (e.g. Harris 2020; Lakomski and Evers 2022) in educational leadership. As already mentioned, the broader governance (i.e. low-autonomy arrangements) is a primary contextual layer in this study, rather than broader societal aspects. It also adopts a theoretical approach and builds across different contexts, representing the same school typology: low autonomy, although not always accompanied by low-accountability systems.

The primary research question, therefore: *How do principals navigate decision-making in their interactions with the external and the internal school context?* The

central premise is that, in systems where school autonomy is low and access to human and material resources is insufficient, organisational barriers play a significant role. In such environments, the ability to act with creativity and personal initiative becomes even more critical than in systems with greater autonomy. A comprehensive understanding of decision-making in low-autonomy settings should consider both the agency of school leaders and the structural influences and constraints they face (Campbell 2024). This article primarily examines the limitations imposed by governance structures and the specific interactions adopted by empowered leaders to overcome these.

Theoretical framework: system governance, decision-making, and interactive leadership

Governance mechanisms such as networks, hierarchies, markets shape leadership values, attitudes, behaviours, knowledge, capacities, self-direction, and collaboration. In highly autonomous schools, governance through professional networks within and across schools incorporates public service values and fosters self-directed individuals (Mincu 2023; Mincu and Davies 2019). But what happens when the institutional design is based on hierarchies and at the same time paradoxically engenders fragmentation? What margins for manoeuvre do they have?

Broader system governance defines the operational dynamics of single organisations within any social subsystem, such as healthcare, education, or specific industries (Torfing et al. 2012). Governance, a critical aspect of the macro-environment, entails reaching shared aims through structured processes. It often encompasses factional conflicts, staff turnover, contradictory regulations, and clashing modes at various organisational levels (Ansell et al. 2024). From historical and sociological viewpoints, varying degrees of bureaucratic governance influence leaders' actions. In addition, historical environmental processes and organisational turbulences affect how leaders manage challenges and exercise their agency during different periods. For example, in Sweden, school leaders' decision-making authority and the margins of control over the organisation evolved significantly across three distinct periods: (1) limited decision-making and control capacity before the 1990s, (2) increased decision-making capacity but restricted control before 2006 and (3) enhanced decision-making and control subsequently (Wermke et al. 2022). These changes were influenced by substantial shifts in State regulations and governance modes, transitioning from centralised to decentralised systems. In addition, organisations are controlled externally by the available resources. Leaders perform symbolic, responsive, and discretionary roles depending on contexts, in addition to preferences and inclinations (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003). In turn, the environment is influenced by social actors' interpretation, and actual behaviours which reinforce the existing structures (Pfeffer and

Salancik 2003). Educational leadership perfectly aligns with these social science insights on the role of contexts, structures, and tasks. For example, Luschei and Jeong (2021) prove that public governance impacts leadership enactment and student achievement globally. However, their approach is unable to capture differences between countries and within specific school systems typologies. Additionally, school leadership is notably shaped by societal and administrative norms (Printy and Liu 2021; Hallinger 2018). In the same vein, the systemic role of context and structure is found to be, on a larger scale, key in modelling firm-level behaviour and organisational performance (Mahoney and McGahan 2007).

More significantly, effective leadership in education depends on the broader context of organisational purposes, social structures, constraints, and specific tasks (Lakomski and Evers 2022; Harris 2020). This does not solely concern the variability of leadership as an organisational quality across different regions. Rather, it is about achieving the right balance between external structures and individual agency, particularly that of school leaders, within distinct types of school systems. From this social realist and moderately holistic viewpoint, leadership must be empirically understood in close relation to its context. Many actions in schools arise from socially defined roles that confer specific powers and impose limitations on individuals or groups (Lakomski and Evers 2022). These capacities extend beyond personal attributes to encompass broader social structures and processes, enabling or constraining the ability to exercise influence. Fundamentally, the roles assigned to school leaders delineate their scope for action. For example, in contexts of high autonomy (Keddie and Mills 2019; Woods et al. 2021), administrative, pedagogical, and organisational tasks (Leithwood 2023) are normatively prescribed. Conversely, in less autonomous systems, these roles are primarily confined to administrative functions and certain limited organisational aspects.

From a different stance, researchers in educational leadership maintain that the activities of school leaders are loosely connected to the wider organisational contexts, including the stakeholders involved in decision-making processes (refer to Xia, Shen, and Sun 2020 for a review). This perspective aligns with methodological individualism, assuming individual agency as a primary factor enabling action, decision-making and change. The emphasis on the agency of individual leaders is seen as a heroic stance: the blame is put on the social actors striving to alter social structures, rather than on systemic issues. Typically, context is approached as local community and State policies (Gu and Johansson 2012), but rarely as governance structures or system patterns. Systemic constraints should be considered jointly with principals' actions (Lakomski and Evers 2022), so that decision-making theories could effectively integrate actors' agency and context. Though individual decisions derive from personal experience and motivation, their actions react to the school system as environmental challenges influenced by governance modes (Campbell 2024).

The autonomy granted to school leaders in deciding actions and processes is shaped by the granted institutional autonomy. This includes collective freedom

and formal decision-making mechanisms (Kim and Weiner 2022). This concept is particularly significant as it represents the intersection of individual agency and the broader societal context. Kim and Weiner (2022) suggest that the collective agency of principals and external controls are essential conditions upholding principalship agency. However, the degree of autonomy is determined by the ability to engage in significant decision-making at the organisational level. Rationalist, conceptual, political, social, psychological, and ethical deliberation have been applied to decision-making as a cognitive activity (Chitpin 2021). From a societal perspective, control mechanisms have been historically shaped by school system formation, i.e. centralisation versus decentralisation (Green 2013; Salokangas and Chapman 2014). Control occurs through formal power and accountability mechanisms. This means that individuals who hold the power wield significant influence within an organisation. Various forms of control and decision-making create four distinct governance patterns, which also consider complexity and risk appetite as additional factors. Control and consent are interrelated concepts, where control mechanisms can be both overt and hidden. Related to this, a comprehensive concept of a decision-making power relationship emerged (Xia, Shen, and Sun 2020). Power is scrutinised externally between principals and districts, as well as internally between principals and teachers. Various studies evaluate win-win and zero-sum situations, alongside new methodologies assessing the impact on outcomes and the potential for teachers' influence to predict principals' influence.

In the context of interactive forms of governance in education (Mincu and Davies 2019; Torfing 2023), principals serve as pivotal figures, engaging in micro-political leadership actions and strategies. These practices involve negotiating power with relevant stakeholders both within and outside the school and are essential to the decision-making process. Such actions may manifest as power struggles, particularly in loosely coupled systems with low accountability, or as various forms of power dynamics: power-over (control or dominance), power-with (collaborative efforts), or mixed approaches (a combination of control and collaboration) in more tightly coupled systems with high accountability (Xia, Shen, and Sun 2020; Jerrim and Sims 2022). Interactive leadership refers, therefore, to the ability to influence change and strategic organisational development. The type of outcome (stagnation/inertia, incremental/evolutionary, disruptive/radical) depends on the environment in which the principal actions occur. This paper provides an exploratory account of interactive tactics focused on decision-making. It is guided by a main research question, which breaks down in two subquestions:

How do principals navigate decision-making in their interactions with the external and the internal school world?

RQ 1 What tactics are adopted to navigate system governance constraints?

RQ 2 What interactive leadership practices are enacted in organisational-level decision-making?

The context of low school autonomy

The State governs from a distance and has increasingly done so through mechanisms such as partnerships, which challenge traditional hierarchies. In low school autonomy systems, State control remains an essential ingredient in most areas, but the resources provided are limited (Mincu 2024). This implies the rise of *ad hoc* markets or extra tasks for school leaders to complement their inadequate budgets. Networks of professionals and organisations are less common, and schools engage in informal consultations with each other instead of formal partnerships. Where central government resource allocation is limited, schools' autonomy appears weaker than the official formal structure indicates. Similarly, the ability to engage with the local community is reduced. While highly autonomous school systems are typically balanced by significant levels of external accountability, others display moderate autonomy. In this latter case, municipalities and principals collaboratively make decisions regarding financial or human resources policies. Compared to the above configurations, reduced autonomy implies no control over human resources, such as selection and hiring, reduced financial autonomy, lack of teachers' accountability and locally organised and relevant professional development. However, a certain autonomy in the curriculum tends to characterise such systems. At the same time, both very high or very low levels of school autonomy and accountability pose risks (Day 2019). These risks pertain to the schools' ability to address the needs of students and local communities effectively, as well as the potential for growing functional cultures. Low levels of organisational autonomy tend to be compliance-oriented rather than strategy and management-focused. School-wide requirements such as school self-evaluation, improvement and offering plans, introduced to enhance organisational cohesion and capacity for improvement, are frequently regarded and executed merely as statutory obligations (Normand and Derouet 2016).

The legalistic administrative paradigm, characteristic of systems with low school autonomy, positions teachers and principals as public officials directly accountable to central authorities (Paletta 2012). The designation of working time predominantly as teaching time should also be noted. In such institutional contexts, the production of written reports and adherence to legal requirements serve as essential organisational tools rather than mechanisms for local improvement, adaptation or change. The notion that school leaders possess greater authority and can delegate some of their power to subordinate levels (Kaparou and Bush 2015) is partially accurate. Teachers enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy, directly granted at the central level. Often there are no incentives or career benefits to engage in organisational tasks and thus teachers avoid the delegation of such duties. Moreover, teachers may not be formally assessed or may not be evaluated by external bodies such as school inspectors (Mincu 2024). Consequently, an internal disconnect between school leadership

and teachers may occur. This situation presents significant challenges to implementing effective leadership practices and processes within the areas of organisation, pedagogy and human resources. In essence, conventionally hierarchical school systems are defined by a loose governance structure relying on formal compliance through official reporting (Mincu and Granata 2021; Paletta, Basyte Ferrari, and Alimehmeti 2020) and collectivistic cultures with minimal hierarchy (Kaparou and Bush 2015). In other words, such arrangements and school culture shape specific school leaders' practices and behaviours internally, with teachers, and externally, within the broader system.

Methodology

This interdisciplinary study focuses on country-specific arrangements and challenges in line with theory-building approaches in public governance and educational leadership. The method draws on: (1) as a comparison of structures and desk-based description (Bray and Jiang 2014) to highlight contextual similarities; (2) a comparison of contexts, as enabling and constraining factors (Landman 2008), from a social realist perspective. A small-N sampling of country cases with different degrees of limited (Italy, Romania) or no school autonomy (France, Ivory Coast) was identified and is instrumental in understanding a specific school system type and implications for leadership. Providing a detailed description of each case falls outside the scope of this paper. The data collected across the four country cases constitutes a unique pool of evidence and follows a convergent mode analysis (Zeng and Day 2019).

Given the article's focus on a system typology and the decision-making dilemma in such contexts, this paper derives its insights primarily from descriptive data on governance arrangements, structures, and tasks. The organisational case studies are briefly addressed here as governing boards in decision-making (see Figure 1). In line with comparative social science, we build theory after considering instances of low-autonomy systems. Additional data to triangulate our findings have been collected from secondary principals, which are thought to be highly effective and innovative, by ministry officials or scholars, with experience in rural and urban areas and in both less and more challenging schools across all countries. The saturation limit can be considered for the overall pool (40), given the convergent mode of analysis, although this limit might be lower if we consider a case study approach (Mears 2025). The semi-structured interviews were organised around the school system and governance arrangements, leadership tasks, and levels of autonomy in decision-making. A constant comparison as corroboration of interpretation within the same case of system governance was in place. However, to avoid spurious interpretation, the two researchers debriefed findings with expert researchers from the four countries (Coe 2025).

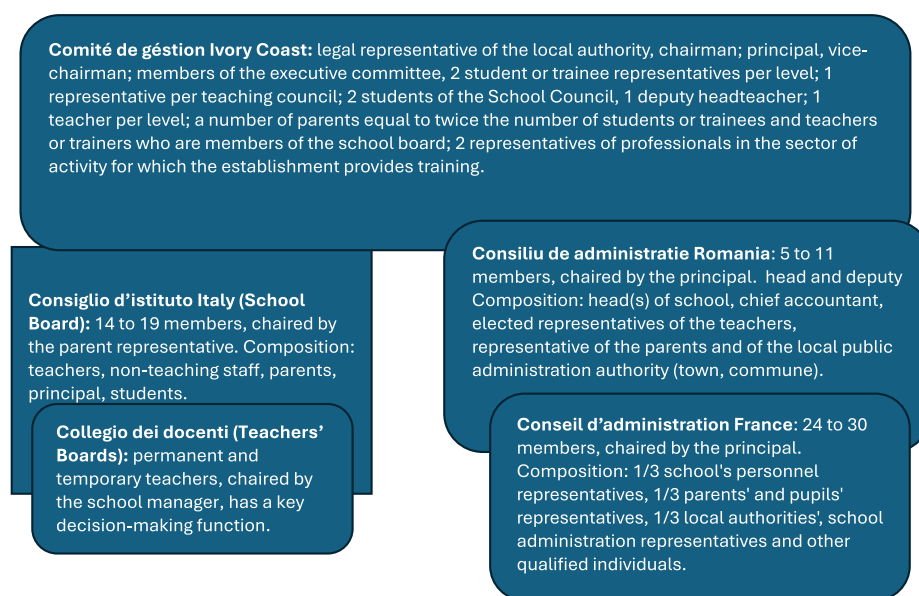


Figure 1. Governing boards and decision-making.

Following Thomas and Myers (2017), this study seeks to incorporate key context characteristics more directly into the analysis. This approach recognises that complex institutions possess inherent values and routines, which influence process outcomes significantly, potentially even more so than individual preferences (Peters and Pierre 2016). In alignment with social and political science, educational leadership confronts a structure-agency dilemma. Similar to comparative political science, the analysis examines convergent governance frameworks and their impact on leadership practices, while the strategies employed to navigate these external conditions are considered as variables.

Findings: convergent governance arrangements in low school autonomy systems

A tripartite design, central, regional/municipal, and school levels implies that most tasks are handled at higher levels despite efforts to decentralise in some cases. A key issue in low school autonomy systems is the disconnection between principals' tasks and teachers' autonomy and working time, which are defined centrally. For instance, significant teacher autonomy in France and Italy combines with slightly divergent decision-making processes. A common characteristic is the internal variability in pedagogical practices at the year groups' level, which is a consequence of the radical autonomy in teaching practices. This aspect limits professional collaboration and pedagogical coherence (Mincu 2024). Ivory Coast and Romania show quite different patterns of system governance in education. Ivory Coast follows a long-standing

centralised mode, while the Romanian system adopted plural teachers' accountability tools, as well as other measures to enhance the degree of school autonomy.

The impact of system governance on principals' roles and practices

Even in less autonomous school systems, school leaders operate within a variety of organisational contexts within and between countries. They are essentially required to act as leaders despite significant financial and human resource constraints, as well as restrictive governance rules. Increased legal responsibility often does not come with enough support or resources (Cheng, Wu, and Hu 2017; Pont 2020). In addition, leadership roles are not always clearly stated, and resource availability is unpredictable. Principals are highly aware that governance limits their powers and thus the opportunities to perform their roles. Two levels of approval by internal teachers and school boards represent a clear barrier in principals' decision-making in Italy.

We carry on with us a model of governance of "collegial bodies" that dates to 1974, established when the school was not autonomous. That model of governance does not work. (Italian Principal INT2)

Awareness of the mismatch between types of legislation (e.g. teachers' autonomy and the performance expected from principals) and system fragmentation is equally on the rise in France:

The headteacher always feels alone and must manage something that is not managed. Teachers have their status; they don't care, and the ministry doesn't know the school anyway. So, we can't talk to each other. (French Principal INT8)

With the exception of the Romanian case, principals have few legal possibilities to control teachers' work. However, the culture oscillates from a lack of responsiveness to fear of control. In the hierarchical Ivorian system, principals 'do not interfere with pedagogy', which is externally and centrally controlled; their role is just to remind teachers of the training opportunities: 'if the teachers do not engage with the external request of training, it is not my business' (Ivorian principal, INT3). This is most emblematic in a pillarised system where every school aspect is centrally determined or needs approval. However, in the Romanian case, which is a more articulated system including checks and balances between accountability and autonomy, principals denounce that:

It is the system that makes our lives difficult ... So it is the relationship with those who have to help you run the school – the deputy headteacher, the members of the board of governors, the parent representatives on the board of governors and the local community – that counts a lot. (Romanian principal INT3)

In traditionally centralised contexts, principals behave as State administrators, ensuring compliance with national policies while also striving to foster

effective school environments. The balance between administrative duties and instructional leadership varies across systems, reflecting different regulatory frameworks (Paletta, Basyte Ferrari, and Alimehmeti 2020; Tulowitzki 2013). While administrative responsibilities often take precedence, some principals also engage in instructional and organisational leadership, either as part of their broader set of duties or as a strategic response to the evolving needs of their schools. In these four countries, school leaders describe their role using terms such as ‘controlling’, ‘monitoring’, and ‘steering’ rather than ‘managing’ or ‘leading’. This perspective underscores the structured nature of their responsibilities, where adherence to formal regulations is a priority. For example, in France, principals see themselves as representatives of the State, responsible for implementing national legislation and ministerial directives (Normand and Derouet 2016). Similarly, a Romanian school inspector notes that principals often function as public administrators rather than autonomous managers due to the constraints imposed by the system. Teachers’ perceptions further reflect this reality, as they commonly refer to school leadership as ‘the administration’:

There’s one example that’s revealing in their daily lives: a lot of teachers, when they talk about principals, they don’t say ‘the management’. They say ‘the administration’ as if we were super secretaries. (French Principal INT5)

Principals in these education systems express a strong desire for greater involvement in staff recruitment and increased financial autonomy to enhance school management. While they recognise the benefits of centralised decision-making in maintaining coherence and equity, they also highlight instances where additional flexibility could lead to more effective implementation of policies and resource management. In certain contexts, centralised decisions face obstacles when implemented in varied local settings. For instance, in France, recent policy measures that introduce responsibilities beyond teaching have encountered implementation challenges due to existing regulations and limited policy flexibility at the local level:

That they are too detailed. We are steered by the centre, yes, but these policies do not adapt well to my context. There’s now this endowment for middle leadership tasks. It doesn’t apply to my school, because they prescribed these roles in great detail. They don’t let principals to decide. We might need to manage the behaviour or the relationship with families or whatever we need to do locally. There’s no autonomy. (French Principal INT1)

Similarly, in Romania, rural schools operating under strained economic conditions frequently navigate complex interactions with local authorities to secure resources, as a necessary lobby with municipalities and directly with the mayor. In Italy, the structured allocation of human resources creates difficulties for school leaders who seek a more customised approach to leadership (Paletta 2012). A key characteristic of these governance modes is that schools often

operate with a degree of constrained autonomy due to the reliance on centrally allocated public funds. The balance between national oversight and local agency may also shape the way school leaders engage with their responsibilities. Unlike Romania or France, where school inspectors and other local entities such as the *académies* are involved, the relations with the intermediate level, that is the regional level, are quite weak in Italy. The possibility to interact effectively with responsive authorities at the regional and local levels is a necessary element and is problematic in this country:

[I wish] at the regional level, there were support groups that monitor and say: “I see the difficulties and needs. What do you need us to do, how can we help you?” This does not happen, that is to say, that in fact you are a bit abandoned. (Italian Principal INT3)

The perceived distance between central authorities and the realities faced by schools is a common concern across all these countries, leading to a sense of isolation for principals.

The hierarchy in our direct relationship, it is with the Inspectorate and not with the ministry. Only for national exams we have a direct relationship. For the rest, the inspectorate in this has a cooperative relationship, in the sense that we often respond to their requests, especially when it comes to activities that need to be carried out in schools ... there are a lot of deadlines that they ask for. (Romanian Inspector INT9)

Interactions with the municipality are more beneficial, especially in small cities, where school are more supported across all countries, whilst in larger cities they are amply depending on the principals’ capacities to negotiate extra support. Experts report that while collaboration is politically endorsed, its application is scant, especially with respect to professional development and instructional leadership. Another limitation relates to the amount of teachers’ autonomy, allowing for endemic high teacher turnover. In the Italian case, this is identified as the problem of the ‘free riders’:

Free riders, those who change school every year, in our schools are 30%, so you have to board. That is to create more stable, more stable and more responsible staff, but this isn’t possible because they have the possibility to change school every year. (Italian Principal INT1)

Quite differently, more accountability at the school and the inspectorate levels, as well as successful principalship practices enhance contact between colleagues more broadly and within specific teachers’ panels. This is gained through personal modelling and involvement in showcasing lessons by a Romanian principal, or trips abroad. The relationship between school leadership and centralised governance is shaped by a tradition of legal compliance and structured reporting practices. While these mechanisms ensure consistency, they may not contribute to broader pedagogical and organisational transformations. This highlights the evolving challenge of embedding instructional leadership

and professional development within existing governance modes. In addition to teacher autonomy, rigid teaching times and schedules hinder principals from fostering the professional development that would empower them (UNESCO 2024). Exceptionally able leaders identify innovative ways to address system rigidities. A comparison between regional and national regulations allowed one principal to identify 24 h per year that could be deployed in other activities or tasks beyond teaching. In addition, a reduction of each period by 3 min led to an effective reshaping of the school schedule with fewer subjects per day. In larger schools, through task delegation, principals are able to distinguish control and support functions, creating new structures and cultures:

You gain that political capital that you gain in a certain way and then at a certain point maybe you lose it because you think that vacation should not be taken at a certain time and that is wrong. In other words, they should be separate. There is an administrative organisational part, let's say administrative, and the other part is educational. (Italian Principal INT6)

When the principal is successful, a culture of trust and support is in place, based on professional conversation, advising and guiding practices and school interactions to socialise early career teachers. If this appears to be the norm in high-autonomy schools, it is exceptionally rare in low-autonomy systems, given the contractual constraints. As seen in other highly structured education systems, a coherent and locally adapted approach to learning, assessment and student well-being can be complex to implement. While deputies are sometimes formally assigned instructional leadership roles, their ability to shape classroom practices and pedagogical innovations usually faces high teacher autonomy and overlapping teaching and working time. Therefore, the power over financial and human resources held at the central level influences principals' capacity to implement targeted initiatives and support teachers in professional development efforts. Significant between-school variation in effectiveness and in organisational terms under a centralised regime is a paradoxical but typical trait. Quite ironically, the State is unable to centrally oversee what happens on the ground. There is also an important variation in terms of practices of strategic interactions with the external and the internal school contexts.

Teachers' councils and school boards: the extent of principals' influence

Despite the growing emphasis on collaboration, only half of the countries that have established leadership standards explicitly include it as a core principle (UNESCO 2024). This gap highlights the need to institutionalise shared decision-making as a fundamental leadership practice. However, creating a consensus may be difficult because instances and actors operate in contexts shaped by different factors. In low school autonomy countries, principals either navigate complex collegial structures (Italy, Romania), or can decide on relevant

matters (except for hiring/firing teachers and requiring professional development beyond their teaching time) almost alone:

A principal could decide on his own, except on matters that must go through the board, e.g. the closure of posts, the opening of a new section, etc. The peculiarity in France is that the head of the school is also the chair of the governing board. I, for example, hold meetings whenever I have to; I validate all the decisions of this board, but I can do it anyway. I still feel that in any case, the head of the school, besides being Chair, is the technical expert. So, when decisions are proposed, they are rarely invalidated. (French Principal INT4)

Italian and Romanian principals engage in extensive discussions before reaching decisions. In many circumstances, conversations occur informally, before official council meetings:

One needs to persuade and enlarge the circle. Whenever I deem it necessary to introduce a change, I use, let's say, persuasion in groups, constantly widening the circle. The decision-making process often involves strains in relationships. People have suffered, but alas, there is no other way when you want to change. We are now in the fifth year of a significant change approach: some things have been implemented, and some fears have been overcome. (Italian Principal INT2)

Principals use words such as 'forcing but with their assent', 'stressing the collegial bodies to check their resilience', and the 'need for provocation to induce any innovation'. This dynamic implies that even when coherence in learning and assessment is put forward, teachers' councils may not approve it. This happens despite the school's strategic plan mentioning it. Hence, the decision-making power of the collegial bodies significantly restricts principals' ability to implement reforms. Moreover, principals play a critical role in school boards, but their influence varies across countries. In France, Romania and Ivory Coast, the principal chairs the school board and implement its decisions. In Italy, the board is chaired by a parent. These differences significantly impact principal's authority. Some French principals, for example, believe that the decisional process favours their voice, while Italian principals consider quite the opposite (Mincu 2024). Key interactions and strategies are deployed to make these collegial boards work. Principals are stuck in schools where unions are most powerful, and teachers collectively will oppose significant changes. Few of them succeed in transforming a deeply rooted culture of no deliberation or just opposition, by creating other preliminary spaces for discussion: formally, at the departmental level, and informally as persuasion by peers and principal.

The board meetings are quite short, and I keep telling them that they are for deliberating, not for debating. They are for debating as far as you come to a deliberation; otherwise, eh? (French Principal INT4)

I've found that in many schools a psycho-collective trauma is created, and then it doesn't come to anything, so we've changed the organisation. I made all the meetings very short. I only accept interventions that concern solely that point of order

objectively. “I don’t like it, I don’t like it,” it doesn’t exist, I don’t know, but I’m glad to say that we worked very hard to change the organisation of the departments where all preliminary discussions might take place. (French Principal INT1)

Parents’ involvement in school governance also varies. In Romania and Italy, parent representatives have been reported as neither particularly engaged nor highly knowledgeable about educational governance (Mincu 2024) and with a tendency to align with teachers. The influence of local communities and political representatives on school governance is complex and varies by country. The interactions shape the extent to which schools can innovate and adapt to emerging challenges, such as implementing new assessment strategies. Ultimately, principals operate within intricate governance frameworks that shape their leadership approach. While shared leadership is crucial, it is often hindered by structural constraints, entrenched traditions and decision-making bodies that prioritise individual autonomy over collective action. To enhance school leadership effectiveness, policymakers must acknowledge these realities and support principals in fostering meaningful collaboration within teachers’ councils and school boards.

Discussion

Decision-making processes in the public sector have often been regarded as a ‘black box’. The increasing focus on public governance and leadership studies aims to reveal the underlying dynamics of decision-making (Peters and Pierre 2016). The four countries under consideration exhibit similarities in the decision-making authority of principals and their ability to exercise control within schools and the broader educational system. The following paragraphs will discuss these aspects in detail. A conceptual, interactive leadership lens captures the type of negotiations and strategies aimed to enhance decision-making processes.

Interactive Leadership within broader system governance: finding strategic partners to overcoming hierarchies

This part conceptualises major challenges and answers research question 1: *What tactics and leadership practices are adopted to navigate system governance constraints?* Governance structures in many countries, including those discussed here, are often hierarchical but not always strictly top-down. Structural complexity, diverse administrative layers and fragmented responsibilities can influence principals’ practices and behaviours. These factors affect their autonomy and capacity as leaders within their institutions. Gurr and Drysdale (2012) observe that governance structures that are highly procedural or fragmented, even within autonomous school systems, and can sometimes pose challenges for school leadership, requiring principals to navigate intricate administrative

landscapes. This is particularly evident in traditionally centralised systems. Furthermore, hierarchical organisation complicates cross-sector cooperation. For instance, in France, administrative divisions can pose challenges to horizontal collaboration among schools (Normand and Derouet 2016). In Romania, consultative methodologies dominate the interactions between school leaders and local stakeholders, particularly regarding budget considerations. Concurrently, certain systems have implemented decentralised components that grant schools increased flexibility to tailor policies to local circumstances. Nonetheless, there are concerns regarding the potential impact of school autonomy on equity, specifically in guaranteeing that all schools receive the necessary support. Principalship roles within the broader external system governance are shaped, therefore, by national-level regulations. In other words, where centralisation plays a more decisive role, school leaders operate within well-defined administrative frameworks. Their ability to tailor policies to their specific school contexts is often linked to the flexibility provided by national regulations. In areas such as human resource management, for instance, some countries allow principals a degree of input into teacher allocations, while others maintain tight centralised assignment systems. Linked to the prevalence of external ministerial hierarchies, external pressures for formal reporting shape how leaders prioritise their tasks. While the principal's main responsibility is to ensure adherence to legal requirements, some principals adeptly navigate intricate decision-making processes within the broader framework of systemic regulations. A certain amount of school autonomy is a key external ingredient that can facilitate or constrain school leadership. As Kim and Weiner (2022) argue:

Autonomy via the institutional dimension includes concepts of collective freedom and formal mechanisms of decision-making authority (i.e. conditions that enable individual principals to become autonomous agents in schools). In contrast, the personal dimension of autonomy focuses on individuals' self-agency in deciding the processes and focus of their practice by applying the rules and the resources available to them. (489)

Decision-making on school boards requires extensive negotiation practices with local political representatives and the ability to attract additional resources to ensure adequate funding (e.g. in Romania and Italy). Thus principals must actively collaborate with local political elites, sometimes adding relevant pressures to their work. The amount of local funding or the possibility of participating in competitive calls to ensure sufficient school funding is not straightforward. System fragmentation engenders informal and imbalanced competition for limited funds, exposing the profession to political challenges and informal opaque transactions. This is clearly related to system arrangements: in Italy, a parent serves as the head of the school council, whereas in France, the principal fills the role. In the first case, negotiation with parents and teachers behind closed doors is key to ensuring successful decision-making. In the

second case, even if principals have a more significant say on local matters, their decision-making autonomy is low compared to that of the central ministerial hierarchies. In the first case, interactive leadership assumes the form of a political type of transaction in an area that should be governed by the 'professional rule' (Torfing, 2023). In the second case, a principal's decision is paradoxically hierarchical whilst non-interactive. Its reach is, however, limited, given that central policymakers will allow low discretionary powers, and this will impact local adaptation and interpretation (as in France or the Ivory Coast).

Different types of control and decision-making processes connect therefore to risk appetite and system complexity. While system complexity tends to be moderate where governance is fragmented (Paletta 2012), it is generally low where control is centralised. Risk appetite is also consistently low. As Wermke and colleagues showed (2022), some principals must, due to varying governance regimes, bear lower or higher risks/complexities. Their study highlights how various education governance regimes, which differ in time and space, might lead to 'varying working conditions and discretion of principals' (740). Wermke and colleagues (2022) indicate that 'the absence of visible control mechanisms and formal standardisation of working tasks may appear to indicate decentralisation and autonomy, although the power within the organisation is actually highly centralised' (738). This is particularly relevant in low-autonomy school systems, where low accountability might create an illusion of autonomy. In addition, the lack of networks of schools and professionals impacts decision-making in relevant ways. As Kim and Weiner (2022) suggest, collective freedom at the school level and, we would argue, the collective agency of principals within the system, represent a significant enabling factor to act as autonomous agents within schools. In fragmented school systems, principals rarely gather together and share information; thus their collective agency is low. Even on rare occasions where collaboration and networking are required and externally supported, governance traditions will have a significant influence, displaying mixed forms of multiple hierarchies and fragmented practices. Parental and community involvement in school governance also differs, showing various patterns of participation. While many systems provide formal structures for engagement, the extent to which these structures influence decision-making depends on higher-level moderators (Somech 2010), such as national and local governance arrangements. In some cases, principals play a key role in facilitating dialogue between schools and communities. In contrast, in others, engagement is shaped by long-standing political models as in Italy, where the involvement of parent communities is rarely an expression of stakeholder interest.

Despite system rigidities, collaboration remains an essential ingredient in effective school leadership, particularly in governance models involving multiple stakeholders. In systems where responsibilities are distributed across various administrative levels – including national, regional and local authorities –

principals often work within a framework that requires coordination among different actors (Paletta 2012). In such cases, effective decision-making involves broader system-level negotiation and consensus-building, ensuring school remains aligned with broader educational goals. In most cases, fragmentation will prevail over the capacity or willingness of the individual principal to engage in such demanding system-level negotiations. Some key findings emerge. First, an overhaul of the governing bodies in these countries would enable leaders to make effective decisions in the interests of the students and the local community. Second, restructuring the power balance between ministry/local political authorities and principals would enhance their capacity for control and decision-making at the local level. Under the current arrangements, to overcome merely legalistic and reporting tasks, successful principals search for strategic partnership with political elites, the community of parents and the economic market. Such negotiations are also an indication of broader governance shortcomings, such as the amount and models of finance and the decision-making process. Ultimately, school principals' roles are radically shaped by the governance structures in which they operate. While some systems provide greater autonomy, others emphasise alignment with national policies and reduced independence and capacity to control. Ensuring principals have the necessary resources, support and professional development opportunities is key to enabling them to fulfil their roles effectively within their specific governance contexts.

Interactive leadership at the organisational level: informal practices to overcome barriers

This subsection engages with the research question 2: *What interactive leadership practices are enacted in organisational-level decision-making?* As previously indicated, broader system governance models and regulatory frameworks play a significant role in defining the relationship between school leaders and teachers. As demonstrated in Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), organisations are influenced by external factors up to a certain extent and are connected with the conditions of their environment. Organisations that are externally controlled with limited discretion over resource allocation and use operate in a specific environment where external constraints influence their internal dynamics. In systems with higher levels of school autonomy, principals have a greater degree of influence over staffing and instructional priorities, which allows for a more direct impact on teachers' work (Printy and Liu 2021). In contrast, in systems where school autonomy is more limited, teachers' professional independence is well established and the role of school leaders is often framed within specific administrative and regulatory boundaries. While these leaders may not formally extend teachers' autonomy, since national regulations already define it, they can play an essential role in supporting the quality of teaching, both at the individual level and, in some cases, at the collective level.

As argued in this article, principals' capacity to control teachers' work and ensure coherent organisational settings is particularly weak at the school level. In fact, contracts typically exclude professional development opportunities at the school level. When teachers' workloads stipulate training and career progression activities, as in the Romanian case, school autonomy, and principals' capacity to exert control are slightly enhanced. At the same time, significant professional autonomy on curriculum matters and leadership influence are disconnected. Italian, French and Romanian teachers enjoy indeed remarkable levels of curricular autonomy (OECD 2020). However, teacher accountability at the school level is lacking (Italy, Ivory Coast), performed as a bureaucratic duty (Romania) or further delegated to inspectors (France and Romania). Without strong formal local accountability mechanisms and responsiveness to school leadership, principals often navigate decision-making processes through 'parliamentary-like' negotiation and consensus-building with teachers and unions. These dynamics vary across contexts, with specific governance modes providing more space for informal strategies. For example, in some settings, principals prepare extensively for formal meetings by discussing with key actors beforehand, ensuring alignment and minimising potential resistance. On one hand, this form of leadership, based on hidden forms of persuasion, is particularly relevant in environments where shared governance (Paletta 2012) and collective decision-making play a significant role. Informal leadership practices are also typical of teachers (Mincu and Granata 2021), despite their collective power and because of the overall weak coherence and leadership. On the other hand, it has been argued that political control based on collegial boards can ensure more democratic but less innovative decision-making in public governance. The role assigned to teachers' councils in Italy affects decision-making mainly in a dysfunctional way: teachers' interests are prioritised over those of stakeholders. Ultimately, slower decision-making often translates into a lack of organisational improvement. The unbalanced relationship must be remodelled to ensure effective power configurations, either zero-sum or win-win (Xia, Shen, and Sun 2020). Striking a new balance in teachers' and leaders' autonomy would benefit the local community. In fact, a revised power relationship between principals and central authorities could enhance local control over resources for an effective use of the granted autonomy.

Conclusion

School leaders often need to negotiate their space for decision-making, balancing institutional requirements with local priorities (Kim and Weiner 2022). This happens even in high-autonomy systems. However, we argue that school leadership in low-autonomy contexts is deeply affected and bounded by broader governance structures that define the scope and depth of principals' influence, both externally and internally. While hierarchical regulations often prioritise

administrative tasks and compliance, resource scarcity further complicates the principal's role as an agent of organisational transformation and pedagogical improvement, roles that are not fully formalised. Ministerial hierarchies grant low discretionary powers to local adaptation and interpretation, an aspect that is equally relevant in systems that are quite fragmented (Italy) or tightly controlled (France and the Ivory Coast). System fragmentation and rigidity lead to informal competition for limited funds, exposing the profession to political pressure and opaque transactions. The absence of professional networks weakens principals' collective agency, hindering their ability to function autonomously in schools. The amount of control also stifles the capacity to collaborate internally and externally, as is usually the case with bureaucratic arrangements across public administration sectors (Ingaggiati et al. 2024).

Interactive leadership assumes the form of a purely political transaction in an area that specific professional rules should govern. Formal interaction with decision-making bodies follows a pattern of representativeness and 'political' control. Leadership is often and quite paradoxically both hierarchical and non-interactive. Yet, within these constraints, principals do act strategically. Working collaboratively with many other actors within and outside the schools, they cultivate consensus, engage in micro-political negotiations, and rely on persuasion, rather than imposition. Such interactive forms of leadership underscore the importance of building trust, leveraging informal channels, and aligning central mandates with school-level priorities, highlighting the critical role of professional development in effective leadership (UNESCO 2024). In systems where legalistic cultures persist and accountability is low, genuine collaboration emerges less from policy prescriptions and more from leaders' capacity to navigate complexity. Recognising the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency is key to understanding leadership complexities in such environments. While reforms may call for enhanced autonomy or accountability, their success will hinge on whether principals have meaningful decision-making power backed by sufficient resources and support. Future research should, therefore, delve deeper into how principals expand their influence on teaching and learning, even within the limits imposed by governance, and investigate the outcomes of negotiated leadership practices over time.

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Notes on contributors

Monica E. Mincu is an associate professor with the Institute of Education, University College London. She engages with leadership and governance from a comparative perspective.

Anna Cristina D'Addio is a chief policy (thematic lead) in the Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO). Formerly she worked for nearly 13 years at the OECD on social policy issues and financial education.

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