

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE LEADERSHIP COMPETENCE OF GENERAL SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Abstract. This article examines the issues of analysing and assessing the leadership competence of general secondary school principals on the basis of empirical research. In the course of the study, the principal components of leadership competence were identified, and the degree of their manifestation in practical activity was investigated. Based on the obtained results, recommendations have been developed for improving the management effectiveness of school principals.

Keywords: *school principal, leadership competence, empirical research, education management, professional qualification, demographic factors, statistical analysis.*

Introduction. Globalisation processes are exerting a considerable influence on the field of education and are placing ever new tasks before school leaders. Today, a principal must act not merely as an administrative manager but also as a strategic leader, an organiser of innovative processes and a professional specialist responsible for the development of the pedagogical staff. This very aspect has transformed the issue of leadership competence into a significant scientific direction within education management. The educational reforms being implemented in Uzbekistan demand a new approach to the professional capacity of school principals. Aligning the quality of education with international indicators, widely introducing digital technologies into the learning process, and forming an open pedagogical environment — all of these require a complex of contemporary competencies on the part of the leader.

The aim of the present research is to study, by empirical means, the structural components of the leadership competence of general secondary school principals and to identify, through statistical analysis, the demographic factors that influence it.

Degree of study of the topic. The problem of leadership competence has been analysed in foreign and domestic scientific literature on the basis of various approaches. R. Boyatzis [1], in his well-known concept of "The Competent Manager", systematised behavioural patterns associated with effectiveness and defined competence as a deep, internal characteristic of the personality. L. Spencer and S. Spencer [2], in turn, divided competence into visible and hidden layers and proposed the famous "iceberg" model.

In the area of management philosophy, P. Drucker [3] emphasised that the effectiveness of a leader depends on the precise definition of organisational goals and on their unhindered achievement. H. Mintzberg [4], having studied managerial activity on the basis of empirical observations, has revealed in detail the complex and multifaceted nature of leadership practice.

In domestic scientific literature, B. Xodjayev [7] adapted the concepts and methodology of education management to the conditions of Uzbekistan. J. Yuldashev [8], in his work on the foundations of pedagogical management, has illuminated the ways of developing the professional and pedagogical capacity of the leader. Nevertheless, studies devoted to the empirical investigation of the competence of local school principals cannot be considered sufficient.

Research methodology. The research was based on a descriptive-correlational design, and a quantitative approach was applied. In order to determine the relationship between the professional competencies of school principals and their leadership practice with regard to job performance, the method of stratified random sampling was used. The empirical study involved 44 respondents from the Republic of Karakalpakstan and the Khorezm, Kashkadarya, Surkhandarya, Samarkand, Bukhara, Navoi, Jizzakh,

Namangan, Andijan and Tashkent regions, as well as the city of Tashkent. The following instruments were used for data collection: a specially designed questionnaire (based on a five-point Likert-type scale), individual interviews and direct observation. The questionnaire items were validated by expert pedagogues. In the statistical analysis, the T-test, the Pearson correlation coefficient and regression analysis were applied, and significant differences were assessed on the basis of the criterion $p < 0.05$.

The competence of school principals was investigated within the framework of seven structural components:

1. Instructional supervision — the ability of the principal to assist teachers in preparing lesson plans, in selecting learning materials and in assessing students' results. This area serves to monitor the pedagogical process and to ensure the quality of education.

2. Professional development practice — encompasses the ability to create opportunities for raising the qualifications of teachers, to apply assessment as a developmental tool and to encourage professional growth.

3. Collaborative ability — includes setting a personal example within the team, discussing pedagogical trends and supporting the team through innovative solutions.

4. Resource and change management — a complex of strategic actions aimed at the rational use of the school's material and technical resources, adaptation to new conditions and improvement of the quality of educational services.

5. Goal achievement - the ability to define clearly the strategic tasks of the educational institution and to ensure their practical implementation.

6. Team coordination -the skill of consistently organising the activity of the pedagogical team, distributing work tasks and forming an effective working environment.

7. Use of digital resources - the ability to apply information and communication

technologies effectively in the educational process and in management activity.

Analysis and discussion of results. According to the results of the analysis, the demographic profile of the respondents was, in particular, distributed as follows: by gender - 60 per cent women and 40 per cent men. Among the age categories, those aged 46–60 constituted the leading group (53.3%), while the youngest segment, namely those aged 25–35, accounted for only 4.4 per cent. From the perspective of educational level, principals with a bachelor's degree formed the majority (60%), while the remaining 40 per cent held a master's degree.

Analysis by length of service showed that principals with six or more years of experience accounted for 60.2 per cent of the respondents, whereas those with less than two years of experience accounted for 15.5 per cent. Thus, the study mainly involved experienced management personnel.

The influence of demographic factors on the competencies was assessed by means of the T-test. A summary view of the results obtained is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Examination of significant differences in the competencies of school principals according to the demographic profile (p-value / result)

Profile	Instructio nal	Profession al	Collabora tive	Resource managem	Change managem	Goal achieveme	Team coordinati	Use of digital
Gender	0.001 / R	0.007 / R	0.01 / R	0.29 / A	0.006 / R	0.01 / R	0.95 / A	0.08 / A
Age	0.001 / R	0.002 / R	0.02 / R	0.26 / A	0.001 / R	0.002 / R	0.37 / A	0.60 / A
Position	0.33 / A	0.68 / A	0.96 / A	0.59 / A	0.25 / A	0.55 / A	0.62 / A	0.58 / A

Profile	Instructio nal	Profession al	Collabora tive	Resource managem	Change managem	Goal achieveme	Team coordinati	Use of digital
Education level	0.01 / R	0.01 / R	0.02 / R	0.05 / A	0.001 / R	0.001 / R	0.95 / A	0.001 / R
Location	0.07 / A	0.32 / A	0.45 / A	0.02 / R	0.08 / A	0.01 / R	0.08 / A	0.001 / R
Work experience	0.001 / R	0.07 / A	0.001 / R	0.10 / A	0.02 / R	0.03 / R	0.30 / A	0.07 / A

Note: R — the null hypothesis is rejected (a significant difference exists, $p < 0.05$); A — the null hypothesis is accepted (no significant difference is detected).

The factor of gender produced statistically significant differences in four areas — instructional supervision ($p = 0.001$), professional development practice ($p = 0.007$), collaborative ability ($p = 0.01$) and change management ($p = 0.006$). On the contrary, no significant gender difference was found for the indicators of resource management, team coordination and use of digital resources. This finding indicates that, in pedagogical and communicative respects, certain distinctions exist between female and male leaders. The age indicator was likewise expressed by significant differences in a number of areas: instructional supervision ($p = 0.001$), professional development ($p = 0.002$), collaboration ($p = 0.02$), change management ($p = 0.001$) and goal achievement ($p = 0.002$). This picture empirically confirms that, with advancing age, managerial skills and strategic thinking deepen. It is particularly noteworthy here that the age factor does not exert a significant influence on the use of digital resources — this shows that the mastery of contemporary technologies is connected not only with age but also with personal aspiration and inclination to learning.

In all areas relating to the position indicator, a value of $p > 0.05$ was recorded. In other words, the formal position held by the leader does not exert a significant influence on the level of his or her competence. This conclusion is an important result, confirming that, in the formation of competence, personal experience and intrinsic motivation are more important than formal factors.

Analysis by educational level showed that significant differences exist in six out of seven areas. The most pronounced differences were observed in the indicators of change management ($p = 0.001$), goal achievement ($p < 0.001$) and use of digital resources ($p < 0.001$). Thus, principals holding a master's degree surpass holders of a bachelor's degree in the application of contemporary management methods and technologies.

Territorial location produced significant differences in the areas of resource management ($p = 0.02$), goal achievement ($p = 0.01$) and use of digital resources ($p < 0.01$). This result is explained by the disparities between regions in infrastructure, material provision and the level of digitalisation.

Work experience formed significant differences in four areas — instructional supervision ($p = 0.001$), collaborative ability ($p = 0.001$), change management ($p = 0.02$) and goal achievement ($p = 0.03$). It is natural that, with the growth of experience, leadership skill and the culture of strategic thinking are also strengthened.

In conclusion, the results of the empirical research conducted have demonstrated that the leadership competence of general secondary school principals possesses a complex structure and is formed in different ways under the influence of demographic factors. Age, educational level and work experience play a decisive role in the formation of leadership competence. By contrast, the formal position indicator does not exert a significant influence. Territorial location, in turn, mainly produces differences in those competencies that are associated with resources and digital opportunities.

These results substantiate the necessity of building professional development programmes for school principals on the basis of a differentiated approach. In particular, it is expedient to group leaders according to age and work experience and to develop special modules for each category. It is also necessary to pursue a policy aimed at developing master's-level education and at strengthening digital competencies, taking regional differences into account.

The present study serves to enrich the empirical base concerning the competence of local school principals and creates a theoretical and practical foundation for further investigations.

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