




EMERGING RESEARCHERS

ESTONIAN AND GEORGIAN SCHOOL LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR TASKS, WORK-RELATED CHALLENGES, AND RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT

School leaders face complex responsibilities, increasing workloads, resource constraints, and stakeholder expectations that affect their professional performance. This study aims to understand how school leaders in Estonia and Georgia, two post-Soviet countries with different transitional trajectories and school governance models, perceive their main tasks, challenges, and resources. Data were collected through a survey of 39 Estonian and 49 Georgian school leaders in 2024. The leaders in both countries primarily perform the tasks related to curriculum development, its implementation, and teacher professional growth with distinct approaches. The comparative analysis shows that Estonian leaders emphasize goal setting, collaborative culture, and teacher development in their work; Georgian leaders prioritize student-related activities, monitoring of the learning and teaching processes, and quality assurance. The results reveal that daily operations are one of the most time-consuming and challenging tasks for school leaders from both countries. Estonian leaders face challenges related to teacher recruitment, relations, and workload; Georgians deal mostly with resource constraints and curriculum implementation. To cope with their challenges, both groups rely on personal competencies and collegial support, but Estonian leaders have more diverse internal and external support than their Georgian counterparts. Our study offers understanding of how school leaders perceive their complex work, shaped by each country's historical transitions. The findings provide insight for the further development of school leadership policy measures and support systems.

KEYWORDS

school leadership; work tasks; challenges; resources; comparative study

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Introduction

Contemporary educational reforms have led to significant transformations in education and policy. Global educational policies “travel” from one country to another; during the policy-borrowing process, local policymakers transform the policies, and schools in turn recontextualize the political agendas (Ball, 1998; Fan & Popkewitz, 2020). In an age of international and regional competition, countries participate in large, cross-national assessments (Powell, 2020) such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) to generate comparative knowledge about school leadership and teacher work. Comparative perspectives enable countries to engage in mutual learning and to understand their own educational contexts (Dale, 2005) by analyzing the contextual factors that can determine conditions for school leadership.

The influence of school leaders in schools is remarkable. They affect student learning through leadership practices and support for teacher professional development (Lee & Hallinger, 2012; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Robinson et al., 2008). Leaders worldwide are experiencing increased workloads, multiple responsibilities, and turbulence in their work (Niesche et al., 2023; Reid, 2021; Riley et al., 2020), but some challenges are contextual. During policy learning and implementation processes, school leaders’ perceptions and their work can be shaped by institutional contexts like legal frameworks and system centralization levels; community contexts considering resources and needs; socio-cultural and economic contexts; and political contexts like power structures and school improvement trajectories (Hallinger, 2018). These contextual dimensions were shifted by opportunities and challenges for Estonia and Georgia, along with 13 other countries from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, when they regained independence in 1991. Transitional periods began for each state; the turn from socialist ideology towards neoliberal and national educational systems had to be reestablished across all areas, starting from governance structures and ending with school facilities (Silova, 2009). Estonia took inspiration from its Nordic neighbors (Kalmus et al., 2020). According to PISA, Estonia created a high-quality educational system through its commitment to high standards, a comprehensive school system, school autonomy, and student equity (Eisenschmidt et al., 2023).

Georgian schools underwent restructuring. They were granted autonomy, and a new curriculum, standardized exams, and teacher professional development systems were introduced, followed by a recentralization phase that increased state control over educational operations, including centralized textbooks, teacher training, and school police systems (Andguladze & Mindadze, 2015).

Estonia has served as a “positive reference society” (Waldow & Steiner-Khamsi, 2021) for Georgia; national policymakers recognized Estonia’s achievements in information and communication technologies and vocational education (MoESY, 2010). The initial collaboration between these two countries expanded to a partnership covering curriculum and school internal quality system development (UNICEF, 2019). The collaboration between Estonian and Georgian educators encompassed curriculum implementation, classroom assessment, and the factors contributing to Estonian students’ PISA success, facilitated by a knowledge transfer from Estonian experts and Georgian pilot schools. Consequently, the launch of the national reform showcased policy borrowing and lending between the Estonian and Georgian educational systems (MoESY, 2017).

Both Estonia and Georgia underwent transformations in their political, economic, and educational systems. Their paths towards European integration, international benchmarking, and New Public Management approaches such as principles of decentralization, school autonomy, curriculum updates, and teachers’ professional expertise have been pivotal for national policymaking (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018). Both countries are still undergoing changes related to school leadership, including the redefinition of the principal’s roles and working conditions.

Our study addresses continuing and breakthrough topics in comparative education (Cowen, 2023) for small states aiming to deliver high quality education, such as Estonia and Georgia. School leadership is a complex interplay of relations, tasks, and situations (Spillane, 2006); as a continuing topic, it is in transition in both countries, to be restructured by global trends and local interpretations. Small states, considering their scale, resources, economy, and geographical location, have unique opportunities and vulnerabilities dealing with pressures and implementing reforms (Crossley et al., 2011). Two breakthrough themes, governance and modes of control (Cowen, 2023), shape leaders’ perceptions and work differently due to their disparate educational governance models. Estonian school leaders work in a highly decentralized system in which local authorities are accountable for educational quality and leaders have significant autonomy (Tirri et al., 2021). In contrast, the Georgian education system has been on an autonomy-control pendulum. School leaders operate in a school governance environment in which principal recruitment, teacher selection, and professional development

are more centralized despite some previous decentralization initiatives (Gorgodze, 2016); an earlier series of reforms brought many changes in state funding, curriculum, assessments, and teaching materials (Tabatadze, 2024).

The study aim is to explore and compare how Estonian and Georgian school leaders perceive their leadership tasks, particularly in terms of which tasks they deem important, how much time they allocate, and what work-related challenges and resources they experience.

Addressing leadership comparatively in Estonia and Georgia will contribute to the school leadership field by mapping the meaning of local leaders considering the contexts and conditions from two post-Soviet countries.

1 Theoretical background

1.1 School leadership: Tasks, challenges, and resources

School leadership is defined as the influential and motivational processes and practices through which educational visions and goals are shared, pursued, and collaboratively developed, emphasizing continuous learning and accountability (Bush & Glover, 2003; Dimmock, 2012; Fullan, 2020). The learning- and teaching-focused phenomenon emerges through organizational structures, dynamics, and interactions between stakeholders in the educational system (Spillane et al., 2023) and forms the conditions and culture to improve schools (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Leadership has an impact on students and teachers; leaders' decisions influence learning and instructional processes, schools' adaptiveness to change, student academic success, and the school environment for teachers and students (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2019; Vanlommel & Pol, 2021). School leadership practices function within systemic and school-level dimensions, such as national policy demands, degree of school autonomy, socioeconomic situations of student families, school location, resources, and teaching personnel (Scheerens, 2016).

According to the definition from Bunnell et al. (2017), tasks establish what school leaders are there to do and legitimize their work. Within their roles, leaders perform tasks based on learners' needs. They set directions, goals, and vision (Leithwood, 2012; Murphy et al., 2006), create conditions for student learning (Hallinger, 2011), monitor instructional processes, develop curriculum (Gurr & Drysdale, 2022), and invest in teachers' professional growth. School leaders motivate the teaching staff, and this influence extends to cultivating a collaborative organizational culture for the whole school (Leithwood, 2012). Contemporary school leadership reflects the expanded role of the leader, as leadership tasks encompass parent involvement and community engagement, and building relations with the community

contributes to the school climate and influences student success (Grissom et al., 2021). School leaders establish a foundation for student learning through the effective management of time, resources, people, and curriculum (Thomson & Greany, 2024).

Task engagement is accompanied by challenges (Bunnell et al., 2017). School leaders, while enacting their fundamental and complex job, face myriad demands. On a daily basis, they deal with the challenges related to teaching and learning, and respond to the needs of students, parents, and the school community. They have to allocate resources efficiently, support the professional development of teachers, and maintain partnerships (Day et al., 2020). The school governance model influences how leaders perceive their challenges. In centralized educational systems, leaders experience a lack of autonomy, insufficient governmental support, and vague policies; in decentralized systems, leaders perceive the issues arising as attributed to recurrent systemic changes. In both systems, leaders similarly frame the problems as being in the areas of limited capacity building for themselves and the staff, underperformance, and weak workplace relations (Tamadoni et al., 2024). The work volume, various duties, time pressures, and mental loads make leaders' professional and personal lives harder as they compromise their overall health and well-being while fulfilling their roles (Wang, 2022). The demands that school principals confront are time and work pressures; because of the lack of support at the organizational and supervisory levels, they cannot fully focus on educational leadership (Skaalvik, 2023). These pressures contribute to the work environment. School leaders consider it difficult to focus on curriculum-related tasks alongside urgent daily tasks and frequent interactions with the staff (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). The perceived challenges and lack of available support create a significant imbalance, resulting in a workplace environment that becomes overwhelming and can lead to burnout (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). This may negatively affect job performance and lead to early resignation (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Georgian research (Bitsadze & Japaridze, 2014) demonstrated that teachers experience burnout – more specifically, emotional exhaustion and reduced professional achievement – linked to school climate and large student numbers. A study conducted during the pandemic showed that Estonian teachers experienced stress to some extent; notably, greater collegial support was associated with lower stress levels (Pöysä et al., 2023).

The balance between job demands and resources influences how individuals manage everyday tasks (Demerouti et al., 2001). The research evidence suggests that school leaders rely on cognitive, social, and psychological resources like workplace relations, autonomy, feedback, clear goals, information, and knowledge (Bakker et al., 2023; Leithwood, 2012; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Skills like delegation (Wang, 2021), team building (Geiger &

Oehrtman, 2020), and competencies in curriculum leadership and organizational management (Vázquez-Toledo et al., 2024) are strategies employed by school leaders to counteract the excessive workload. Studies have indicated that personal, tangible, and social resources determine a leader's responses to highly challenging situations (De Voto et al., 2023; Drago-Severson et al., 2019; Kennedy & Walls, 2022). Coaching and mentoring were identified as essential resources that help the school leaders in their demanding roles (Wang et al., 2021). Resource management is associated with the improvement of learning and teaching processes through teacher professional development opportunities, data-informed practices, and quality materials (Tan et al., 2024).

Global trends influence the national context of school leadership in terms of policies and practices. Defined by policy directives and normative acts, leaders carry responsibilities for multiple domains, ranging from basic operations and legal compliance to student academic achievements and parental engagement (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Increased educational accountability demands, competition between countries for educational outcomes, and enhanced research capabilities have led to frequent empirical investigations of school leadership, leadership models, and leaders' effects on student outcomes (Gumus et al., 2018). Among cross-cultural comparative studies, international assessments have appeared on the radar to connect global and local educational policies, serving the following purposes: to scrutinize successful and underperforming educational systems, to interrelate them with school autonomy and leadership, and to interpret the issues of educational quality and equity (Dimmock, 2020). Trends and changing policies prompt the reconsideration of school leaders' roles and tasks (Tan et al., 2024). Roles, as expected behaviors and functions within formal and informal positions, emphasize administrative management and instruction-focused leadership that are often contested in literature and actual practices (Bowers, 2020). In Estonia, there was increasing focus on the roles and expectations of school principals when they were granted higher decision-making power (Kukemelk & Ginter, 2016). According to TALIS, Estonian principals have used distributed leadership patterns in their work, reporting collaboration with teacher-leaders for personnel professional growth, co-leading instructional processes, and engaging teachers in decision making (Printy & Liu, 2020). School leaders' roles in Georgia changed from managerial to instructional and became oriented toward participative leadership (Thessin & Bitsadze, 2019). To strengthen professional and school development for the new roles, school leaders participated in extensive training financed by a US foreign aid agency (TPDC, 2016).

1.2 The context of educational leadership in Estonia and Georgia

Leadership is contextual. To understand the circumstances that shaped and influenced school leaders' work, and which themes, issues, and solutions arose for Estonian and Georgian schools, we briefly examine each country's context.

1.2.1 Estonian leadership context

Since the restoration of independence in 1991, Estonia has been establishing its national educational framework, transferring school ownership to local municipalities (Eisenschmidt et al., 2023) and shifting to a deregulated educational system that relies on educational leaders' professional competence, with decision making at the school level (Årlestig & Johansson, 2020). The system was restructured to align with European educational frameworks such as the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021). School, as the learning organization concept and as the enhancer of data- and evidence-based processes, has served as a core mechanism in the Estonian education system (Kitsing & Kukemelk, 2020).

National strategies have shaped expectations and priorities for schools. The Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 aimed to transform school learning approaches to become more learner-centered (MoER, 2014), and the Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035 (MoER, 2021) emphasized the necessity of principals' capacities in innovation leadership and evidence-informed practices. Alongside national strategies, governmental oversight over Estonian school quality assurance combines compliance with legislation, thematic examinations, and needs-based assessment with internal measures of self-assessment, staff development discussions, and stakeholder inputs over school development plans (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021). School self-evaluation is one of the characteristics of Estonian education; school leaders try to create an open environment for self-assessment and to assign data analysis tasks to the staff members, although there are some gaps in this process. On the side of the authorities, municipal officials need to provide clearer structures for self-evaluation; in the school leadership team, self-evaluation goals and expectations are not always effectively communicated (Vanari et al., 2025).

School leaders' professional responsibilities are defined according to the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (Estonian Parliament, 2010), which states that school principals are responsible for the financial and operational management of the schools, as well as the educational quality, staffing decisions, teacher salaries, and external relationships. Depending on the school size, vice principals can be hired to oversee school development, teaching and learning processes, information and communication technology, students' special needs, and extracurricular activities. The school leader is held responsible for the institution's functioning, including the coordination and effectiveness of the learning process (Estonian Parliament, 2022).

The principal is accountable to the board of trustees, which consists of representatives of the school owner, teachers' council, parents, students, school alumni, and stakeholder organizations (Kukemelk & Ginter, 2016). The board has an advisory role, supporting school leadership in school development plans, curriculum development, and other questions related to school policies (Estonian Parliament, 2010).

School leaders' professional development expands to competence and career models (MoER, 2023) and professional development support, including mentoring and training newly appointed principals and establishing a framework for principal self-evaluation and a feedback system (Santiago et al., 2016). Educational leaders in Estonia have one of the highest levels of autonomy among their European counterparts (OECD, 2019), particularly in curriculum development and adaptation, which involves leaders, teachers, parents, and students in planning (Eisenschmidt et al., 2023). However, school autonomy and the work duties of school leaders are accompanied by challenges entailing teacher collaboration, lack of clarity with external expectations, limited improvement-related feedback from the authorities, and curriculum development misalignment with school improvement objectives (Eisenschmidt & Vanari, 2025). Research has revealed that not all schools manage to reach their strategic aims. Principals were more focused on school climate and teacher perspectives than on student development; there was a gap between resource planning and daily operational decisions (Kukemelk & Lillemaa, 2010).

Since the Ministry of Education and Research reorganized the upper secondary school network, various challenges have emerged for Estonian school principals, including difficulties with managing teacher workloads, engaging teachers in decision making, and creating a fully supportive school environment (Tamkivi & Eisenschmidt, 2023). These policy changes also present issues with recruiting qualified teachers, meeting learning environment standards, and staying functional within a limited budget (Kukemelk & Ginter, 2016). School improvement efforts also vary in systematicity and effectiveness (Eisenschmidt & Vanari, 2025). The schools experience teacher shortages, which are being addressed through programs like Teach for Estonia and the Substitute Teachers Platform (Eisenschmidt et al., 2023).

1.2.2 Georgian leadership context

In 1991-2003, under difficult socio-political conditions, the Georgian state created the initial legal frameworks and implemented systemic changes in order to improve the educational system and its functioning. However, reform efforts were fragmented and lacked unified policy direction, and later reforms were carried out based on program goals initiated by international organizations like the World Bank and the Open Society Foundations (Kitiashvili, 2016).

Similar to other former socialist bloc countries that went through educational transformations, since 2004, the Georgian government has initiated a series of reforms aimed at education quality improvement, including a per capita funding model, national curriculum development, textbook approval processes, examinations and student assessment systems, infrastructure improvement, teacher professional learning and development initiatives, and school governance models (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018). The school governance model transformation was characterized by decentralization, deregulation, and the establishment of an educational management information system, with school infrastructure development and educational strategy implementation following later (Janashia, 2009). Regional educational resource centers and school boards with school councils were established; however, the implementation of the decentralization process did not align with the initial goal (Dzotsenidze, 2018). Decisions such as bringing in school police (school safety/resource officers), monitoring students, teachers, and leaders with surveillance cameras, and ranking schools based on school leaving examination results characterized the centralized school management (Chankseliani, 2014).

National policymakers shifted school management toward recentralization for three key reasons (Gorgodze, 2016). First, the initial decentralization efforts occurred in a radical and fast way, without strengthening school autonomy culture or providing sufficient structural and financial support, leaving schools unprepared for autonomy. Second, evidence-informed policymaking was abandoned, replaced by PR campaigns. School leader autonomy was diminished as centralized control mechanisms were implemented, such as activating the Ministry inspectorate, granting school police the authority over educators, connecting social media surveillance with employment decisions, and reducing communication channels for schools. Third, recentralization was favored since the political situation was unstable and electoral mobilization had been reduced under school autonomy, with school principals and teachers involved in administering elections. This led to populist governmental decisions aiming to regain control over schools and, ultimately, to secure electoral support (Gorgodze, 2016).

Since 2012, under new political leadership, renewed reform efforts have been introduced in Georgia. With the support of UNICEF and the Estonian government, the third iteration of the national curriculum was launched (MoESY, 2018). It was followed by the New School Model to enhance learning and instructional quality, develop leaders, and promote school-based professional development and teacher collaboration (MoESY, 2022b). Despite some challenges during the enactment, namely politicized school selection processes, exclusion of high-need schools, and the inadequate support of school leaders, participating schools collaborated on the New

School curriculum development, thereby improving school culture and preparing for the authorization process (CCIIR, 2024).

Alongside curriculum reform, new quality assurance mechanisms have been implemented gradually. In order to monitor school quality, school authorization was launched, with 22% of public schools participating in external evaluations by 2024 (MoESY, 2025). Systemic challenges lie in establishing the school authorization process as focused on improvement instead of mechanically compliant and punitive. The Ministry recognized the enhanced communication needs, differentiated support systems based on schools' experiences, and dynamic quality management within schools (NCER, 2023).

The professional framework for Georgian school leaders is defined by the law of Georgia on General Education (2005). The school principal's functions are related to school management, communication, regulations, personnel, curriculum, and the board of trustees. The legislation requires the school leader to have completed higher education and three years of work experience, with a minimum of one year in teaching. The responsibility of school management is in the hands of the school principal and vice principals, and the school curriculum should be developed in collaboration with the teacher council. The updated professional standard for school principals reinforces active collaboration with the school community, distributed/shared leadership, system leadership and knowledge, sincerity, openness, participation, responsibility, and democratic principles; moreover, it outlines the components for instructional process effectiveness (MoESY, 2022a). Yet the actual leadership landscape shows that while some school leaders prioritize more student-centered, participatory approaches, many others perceive leadership more as a procedural role rather than as a collaborative vision-building opportunity. School boards are similarly viewed as procedural, and the trustees lack the knowledge, motivation, and experience to make decisions (Huddleston & Araviashvili, 2022). In order to achieve collaborative leadership and to provide actual oversight and accountability for the school leaders, school boards need more authority and the ability to work effectively (Li et al., 2019).

Capacity-building initiatives for vice principals and teacher-leaders were introduced by the Teacher Professional Development Center (TPDC) to address principal-centered leadership (Sentočnik et al., 2016). To improve school leaders' decision-making skills and the school climate, strategic, and distributed leadership areas, and to increase stakeholder engagement in school management, Georgia connected with the Council of Europe's Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (TPDC, 2021). However, while school principals understand the value of distributing leadership among their colleagues, and they involve teachers in curriculum development and idea exchanges, teachers still have limited participation in school management

decisions (Khmaladze & Mesiridze, 2024). The national strategy emphasized the need for heads of schools to be strengthened in the domains of school and quality management and in educational leadership with the help of professional organizations, networking with associations, professional development, mentoring, and coaching programs (MoESY, 2022b). In response, teacher and school principal qualifications became a strategic objective, resulting in certification and election processes for public school principals and the development of specialized training modules (MoESY, 2025). In addition to training delivery, professional support mechanisms include international organizational collaboration, consultation services upon request, and communication about the national curriculum (TPDC, 2024).

1.3 Research questions

The aim of the study was to explore and compare Estonian and Georgian school leaders' perceptions of their leadership tasks, work-related challenges, and resources. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Estonian and Georgian school leaders perceive their work tasks in terms of importance and time allocation, and what kind of differences emerge in their perceptions?
2. What kind of work-related challenges and resources do Estonian and Georgian school leaders report?

To address the research questions, we employed a comparative research approach. Comparative research of educational leadership helps to create a knowledge base and reveal the contextual forces (Dimmock, 2020). We examined school leadership phenomena across two different national and geographical contexts. This serves the interpretive purpose of situating the research problem within its temporal and contextual scope, identifying hidden issues, uncovering commonalities and differences, and ultimately understanding the points at which perceptions of the phenomena converge and diverge (Manzon, 2014).

2 Methods

2.1 Participants and procedure

There are 530 schools in Estonia (Statistics Estonia, 2024) and 2,294 schools in Georgia (Geostat, 2024). Our study sample consisted of 39 Estonian and 49 Georgian school leaders ($N = 88$). By "school leaders" we mean the principals (also called headmasters or heads of schools in some countries) and vice principals (or assistant principals or deputy principals). In Estonia, we invited principals to participate via email through a school principal network

and a university training program that draws participants from different areas of the country. In Georgia, we used the national database of school leaders' contact emails for recruiting. The final Georgian sample consisted of 30 school principals and 19 other staff members in leadership positions.

The Estonian participants were slightly younger on average than their Georgian colleagues ($M_{\text{age}} = 47.1$, $SD = 8.65$ and $M_{\text{age}} = 49.8$, $SD = 9.80$, respectively). The majority of the participants were female ($N = 29$ for the Estonian sample and $N = 44$ for the Georgian sample). Most of the participants ($N = 34$ in Estonia and $N = 45$ in Georgia) held master's degrees. More Estonian participants reported being at the early career stage of their leadership positions than their Georgian counterparts (see Table 1).

An electronic survey was administered in the local languages (Estonian, Georgian) in June-September 2024. Responses were collected anonymously, and participants were required to agree with the consent form before accessing the questionnaire.

Table 1
Sample description

Demographics	Estonian sample ($n = 39$)	Georgian sample ($n = 49$)
Personal information		
Average age (years)	47.1	49.8
Gender		
Female	29	44
Male	10	5
Leadership experience in years in current school		
0–5	29	22
6–15	9	18
>16	1	9
School information		
School type		
Public school	33	41
Private school	6	7
School location		
Urban	31	30
Rural	8	19
School size		
Less than 500 students	15	24
500 students or more	24	25

2.2 Measures

The questionnaire included three sections: demographics, open-ended, and multiple-choice items. The questionnaire was developed based on a literature review (e.g., Gurr & Drysdale, 2022; Sebastian et al., 2018; Sun & Leithwood, 2015; Tan et al., 2024); with respect to school principals' tasks and time allocations, we considered the TALIS framework (OECD, 2020). The questionnaire was piloted with a small group of Estonian and Georgian school leaders; a few adjustments were then made to improve the question clarity.

Four open-ended questions were asked of the participants: 1) To name their main tasks at school, 2) To designate the biggest challenge at work among their tasks, 3) To identify what helps them to cope with the challenge, 4) To indicate who helps them cope with the challenge. These questions were followed by two multiple-choice items. Participants rated the importance of a set of proposed work tasks on a 5-point Likert-type scale, from the "least important" (1) to "the most important" (5). The proposed work tasks included: 1) daily operational activities, 2) curriculum and learning process development, 3) student-related activities, 4) activities relating to parents, 5) teacher recruitment and workload activities, 6) activities related to teaching and teacher development, 7) professional self-development, and 8) communicating with the school owner and other partners. Finally, the time allocation was measured with the help of a slider by asking the participants to estimate the percentage of their weekly working time spent on each of the proposed work tasks.

2.3 Data analysis

To analyze open-ended questions about Estonian and Georgian school leaders' perceptions of their main tasks, challenges, and resources, we employed a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Eight deductive subthemes were established under the "main tasks and challenges" theme that were the same work tasks that participants rated on the task importance and time allocation scales (see Table 2). Next, five subthemes were defined inductively under the "resources" theme to explore what and who helped the leaders to cope with these challenges. The subtheme "competence" included education, experience, skills, and professional development; responses about teams, colleagues, or supervisors providing assistance, financial support, or structural support were coded as "support"; answers indicating close, interpersonal relations were coded as "relationships." Data about receiving support from school staff, team members, or supervisors were coded as "internal"; types of help from authorities, local community, and parents were coded as "external."

Table 2

Coding scheme of open-ended questions

Main themes	Subthemes
Main tasks and challenges	Daily operational activities
	Curriculum and learning process development
	Student-related activities
	Activities relating to parents
	Teacher recruitment and workload activities
	Activities related to teaching and teacher development
	Professional self-development
	Communicating with the school owner and other partners
Resources	Competence
	Support
	Relationships
	Internal (school staff, team members, supervisor)
	External (authorities, local community, parents)

To achieve reliability in the analysis process, intercoder agreement was reached: two researchers independently coded and analyzed the responses, they held consensus discussions and repeated coding sessions took place (Creswell, 2013).

To investigate how Estonian and Georgian school leaders' perceptions differed in prioritizing and allocating time across their work tasks, we employed descriptive statistics, t-tests, Mann-Whitney U tests for non-parametric data, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) using jamovi software (The jamovi project, 2024).

3 Findings

3.1 School leaders' main work tasks

Estonian and Georgian participants highlighted daily operations and curriculum development as their core tasks. For the Estonian sample, daily operational activities encompassed budget management, school building maintenance, documentation, and resource allocation. Curriculum development tasks were emphasized as creating a vision, designing an environment, and making a development plan. Some of the school leaders viewed their role as that of an enabler, creating conditions that support instruction and developing school culture, accentuating engagement with teacher teams and stakeholders.

Estonian participants equally often mentioned the tasks related to teacher recruitment, workload, relations, and teaching and teacher development. They portrayed their responsibilities in teaching as guiding the process and monitoring, like planning internal evaluation systems; organizing the work among personnel; promoting their staff well-being; and facilitating teachers' collaboration: "Managing the learning and teaching process; ensuring organizational effectiveness, including team, people, and relationship management; shaping the environment; resource management" (EST_27).

Communication activities and tasks concerning parents and students were occasionally identified. Estonian participants mentioned communication with school owners, parents, students, and interest groups. The tasks related to parents involved digital and in-person communication and working on parental engagement. Student-related tasks included the enrollment process, collaboration with the student council, and overall student engagement. Activities related to self-development emerged as the least reported task.

Georgian participants highlighted activities regarding curriculum development, such as supervising its implementation, developing a learning environment and school culture, and overseeing instructional processes and the quality standards in their schools. For daily operational activities, the leaders mentioned administrative tasks and regulatory compliance, financial, records, infrastructure, and resource management, quality assurance, and departmental coordination.

The Georgian sample often mentioned tasks in teaching and teacher development, such as their professional development and solving problems related to the instruction. One leader expressed the importance of vision in planning teachers' professional growth:

I try to develop the school based on long-term goals, vision, school culture, a sustainable system of cooperation, partnerships, and connections, and I have contributed to the introduction of student-oriented pedagogical approaches in the school. My greatest attention goes to the achievements and progress of students while trying to introduce innovative approaches. The professional development of teachers is a priority for me; I care about the development of the school community as a whole and so on (GEO_6).

Some school leaders mentioned tasks related to students, such as dealing with student academic progress, providing support, and creating a safe learning environment adapted to their needs. They noted teacher recruitment and workload and communication tasks with similar frequency: managing human resources, making staffing decisions, and developing staff schedules. The participants reported that they communicated with third parties by representing the school, working, and building relations with partners.

One of the least-mentioned tasks concerned parent-related activities; when stated, the participants indicated parental engagement in their responses. Only one leader from each country wrote about professional self-development tasks.

3.2 Importance of work tasks

Next, Estonian and Georgian participants evaluated the importance of a set of tasks (Table 3). Among eight proposed tasks, the Estonian sample considered the most important activities to be those regarding teaching and teacher development. This was followed by the task of curriculum and learning process development. They assigned equal importance to teacher recruitment and regulating their workload and to professional self-development. They considered tasks related to students and communication with the school owner and other parties to be similarly important. The lowest rates were given to the tasks of resolving parent-related activities and daily operational activities.

Georgian participants considered two tasks to be of the highest importance: student-related activities and curriculum and learning process development. Student-related activities were only moderately reported in the open-ended responses, and it was surprising to see the task so highly rated. The Georgian participants remarked most about learning process activities; we thus expected it to have one of the highest ratings. Equal rankings were assigned to teaching and teacher development and professional self-development engagement. These were followed by work tasks connected with communication. The school leaders equally prioritized daily operations and parent-related activities. Handling daily operations was a task frequently specified by Georgians, but it did not receive a high rating for importance. Teacher recruitment and workload activities emerged as the least-important rated tasks.

Comparisons of Estonian and Georgian samples show that school leaders in both countries gave high ratings to curriculum and learning process development. Estonian school leaders deemed activities on teaching and teacher development as the most important; their Georgian colleagues assigned the highest priority to student-related tasks. Overall, Georgian participants gave higher ratings of importance than their Estonian counterparts to all the proposed key tasks. The biggest differences in ratings were the task of handling daily operational activities ($t(85) = 5.01, p < .001$) and the task of resolving student-related activities ($t(86) = 6.09, p < .001$); Georgian school leaders rated these of higher importance than their Estonian colleagues did. ANOVA results indicated that the school type, location, or size had no significant effect on school leaders' work tasks.

Table 3
Importance of the work tasks across Estonian and Georgian samples

Variable	Estonian sample (n=39)			Georgian sample (n=49)			<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min-Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min-Max</i>		
Daily operational activities	3.32	0.84	2–5	4.29	0.94	2–5	5.01	<.001
Curriculum and learning process development	4.18	0.72	3–5	4.59	0.7	3–5	2.70	.008
Student-related activities	3.74	0.88	2–5	4.71	0.61	2–5	6.09	<.001
Activities relating to parents	3.46	1.00	1–5	4.29	0.85	2–5	4.20	<.001
Teacher recruitment and workload activities	4.10	0.88	2–5	4.12	1.07	1–5	0.09	.926
Activities related to teaching and teacher development	4.41	0.72	3–5	4.45	0.82	2–5	0.23	.816
Professional self-development	4.10	0.75	2–5	4.45	0.89	1–5	1.94	.056
Communicating with the school owner and other partners	3.74	0.94	2–5	4.33	0.88	1–5	3.01	.003

Note. *M* = Arithmetic mean; *SD* = Standard deviation; *t* = t-statistic; *p* = p-value.

3.3 Time allocations for work tasks

Time allocation distributions across the eight key tasks are depicted with descriptive statistics in Table 4. Estonian participants reported that they spent the highest average proportion of time per week on dealing with daily operational activities, the second most time-consuming task was resolving activities related to teaching and teacher development, followed by curriculum and learning process development tasks, professional development, and student-related activities. The school leaders spent relatively similar amounts of time on teacher recruitment, workload, and communication. The least amount of time was allocated to resolving parent-related tasks.

Georgian participants reported that they allocated the highest proportion of their time to student-related tasks, the second most time-consuming task was related to daily operational activities, followed by communication with others, curriculum and learning process development, and professional self-development. On average, they reported spending a slightly larger portion of time on resolving activities of teaching and teacher development than on parent-related tasks. The least amount of time was allocated to tasks of teacher recruitment and workload.

Mann-Whitney U tests demonstrated the differences between Estonian and Georgian participants' time allocation in following areas: the Estonian

sample indicated spending more time on handling daily operations than their Georgian colleagues ($U = 652.50, p = .011$). In contrast, Georgian participants allocated more time to student-related tasks ($U = 497.50, p < .001$), to parent-related tasks ($U = 664.50, p = .015$), and to communication with other partners ($U = 533.50, p < .001$). There were no significant differences in time spent on curriculum ($U = 875.00, p = .502$), teacher recruitment and workload ($U = 775.50, p = .132$), teaching and teacher development ($U = 729.50, p = .058$), or professional self-development ($U = 903.50, p = .665$).

ANOVA results revealed three significant effects of the covariates on time allocations. First, participants who led public schools spent more time on daily operational activities than private school leaders ($F(1,82) = 4.45, p = .038, \eta^2p = 0.05$). Second, rural school leaders allocated more time to curriculum development than urban school leaders ($F(1,82) = 4.28, p = .042, \eta^2p = 0.05$). Finally, large school leaders (with 1001+ students) spent the most amount of time on student-related tasks, followed by medium school (501-1000 students) and small school leaders (<500 students), ($F(1,82) = 4.16, p = .019, \eta^2p = 0.09$).

Table 4

Time allocation for main work tasks across Estonian and Georgian samples

Variable: time allocation (%) per task	Estonian sample (n=39)			Georgian sample (n=49)			U	p
	M	SD	Min-Max	M	SD	Min-Max		
Daily operational activities	20.38	9.44	8.68–53.1	15.3	6.60	0–40	652.50	.011
Curriculum and learning process development	12.66	6.53	1.44–30	13.10	5.16	3.26–26.25	875.00	.502
Student-related activities	11.38	5.32	2.63–20.69	15.95	4.53	0–30	497.50	<.001
Activities relating to parents	8.54	4.49	0.88–19.61	10.26	3.80	0–15.25	664.50	.015
Teacher recruitment and workload activities	10.21	6.22	2.36–27.66	7.76	4.52	0–17.79	775.50	.132
Activities related to teaching and teacher development	14.12	7.38	0.88–28.46	11.49	4.17	3.28–19.95	729.50	.058
Professional self-development	12.16	7.09	0.88–37.44	12.4	6.64	1.09–41.1	903.50	.665
Communicating with the school owner and other partners	10.55	6.08	2.84–26.32	13.72	4.08	3–23.87	533.50	<.001

Note. M = arithmetic mean; SD = standard deviation; U = U-statistic; p = p-value, $p < .05$.

3.4. School leaders' challenges and resources

The participants were asked what the biggest challenge was for them at work. The findings revealed that Estonian school leaders mostly reported tasks concerning teacher recruitment and workload, daily operational activities, and learning process development. Similar patterns emerged from the responses of Georgian school leaders, who mostly referred to challenges in the learning process, daily operational activities, and concerning teaching and teacher development.

Estonian participants indicated challenges related to teacher recruitment, workload, and relations: managing relationships, communication, building a team, and working with people. The daily operational challenges included administrative routines, managing financial and human resources, balancing and prioritizing tasks, and maintaining focus to meet daily demands. Regarding dealing with the learning process, Estonian school leaders reported challenges in implementing changes, instructional leadership, student support, and teacher collaboration. Communication challenges were cited several times; they revolved around staff, team dynamics, parents, and conflict management. The responses included unique challenges, such as the transition to Estonian-language instruction, negotiations with the local government, and teacher shortages: "Maintaining smooth relationships, progressing towards a common goal so that the learner is supported" (EST_6).

The Georgian sample recognized several challenges connected with organizing and managing the learning process, such as curriculum implementation, quality, and improvement, for example: "Improving learning and teaching process, raising the intrinsic motivation of students, parental engagement" (GEO_47).

In contrast with Estonian participants, Georgian participants did not report staff-related challenges. They listed the following examples of challenges related to their daily operations: quality assurance and monitoring, deficiency of resources (infrastructure, finances), and sustainable management. One school principal pointed out the vulnerability of the position due to external inspection. Some school leaders predominantly reported challenges concerning teaching and teacher development, such as monitoring teaching processes, teachers' professional development, collaboration, and teamwork. Though mentioned less frequently, additional challenges were acknowledged: creating a student-centered environment, managing relations with new generations of students, and parental engagement.

Next, exploring what resources the school leaders relied on in their work, five categories of resources emerged from their responses: 1) competencies, 2) support and 3) good relationships, 4) internal resources, and 5) external resources.

Estonian school participants mostly mentioned competence and support, with relationships indicated rarely. Within the category of competence, they

listed professional development opportunities, their own knowledge, and personal skills like communication and experience. It was notable that some of the leaders emphasized self-development independently. The participants' responses showed the types of support that they received; they often named several together: (1) internal support, meaning the team and colleagues with whom the school principal works closely to reach the same goals, (2) external support, such as from a university, from a mentor or coach, or from a professional network, meaning other school leaders with whom experience sharing or mentoring are valuable, (3) supervisory support, help provided by the municipality officials, and (4) structural support related to funding, staffing, development programs or data analysis; these were much less frequently indicated. For instance, one Estonian school principal noted ways to cope with the challenge: "Raising awareness, discussions with fellow school leaders in learning circles, a colleague as a development partner from a school with a similar background, cooperation with universities, and also discussions with our own teachers at school" (EST_27).

The school leaders referred to relationship resources only three times; in those responses they acknowledged values, vision, and honesty in their connections with colleagues.

Estonian participants' responses revealed that internally they were supported by their teams to a large extent, including their development teams, the head of studies, working groups, other teachers, administrative personnel, and the board. Externally, Estonian participants highlighted that the municipality, other school leaders, mentors, parents, even family members and friends helped to cope with their challenges.

Georgian participants listed competence-based resources, including their professional experience, continuous development, knowledge gained from training, leadership, and communication skills. One Georgian principal explained coping methods for her challenges: "I try to understand more, learn more, ask for advice, and also, gaining experience helps me" (GEO_28).

Georgian participants relied on support-based resources with different layers: team, dedicated personnel, administrative structures, collaboration on vertical and horizontal levels at school, and material resources. Similar to Estonian school leaders, resources from relationships were mentioned in the responses quite rarely: Georgians described their commitment to students, and their close and trust-based relationships with students and teachers.

Georgian participants' responses demonstrated that their key internal resources are teams, colleagues, administration, and the quality assurance group. They described external support much less. In contrast with Estonians, there was not a balance of external and internal resources. The Georgian sample indicated educational authorities, an external professional development program and mentor, and the school community.

4 Discussion

The purpose of our study was to explore and compare Estonian and Georgian school leaders' perceptions of their work tasks, work-related challenges, and resources. As countries in transition, Estonia and Georgia have pursued different school governance and policy trajectories, creating distinct contexts that have an impact on school leadership, a continuing topic in comparative research and educational practice. While Estonia has served as a positive reference society for Georgian educational policymaking and learning (MoESY, 2017), our study reveals how school leaders from both countries perceived their work differently.

4.1. Comparative perspective of school leaders' main tasks

Regarding the first research question, we found some similarities and differences in how Estonian and Georgian school leaders perceived their tasks. Working with teachers was an important task for the participants from both countries, but their approaches diverged. Estonian leaders were concentrated on teacher learning and support, collaborating with teachers and creating working conditions for them. In comparison, Georgian leaders indicated classroom observations, providing feedback to teachers, and monitoring the teaching processes, and they put less emphasis on collaboration with teachers.

School leaders' approaches reflect institutional environments where different professional expectations, roles, and competencies can be determined by historical-political shifts in school governance. The Teacher Professional Development and Career Advancement Scheme requires school leaders in Georgia to ensure that teacher competency is in compliance with professional standards and to internally monitor and evaluate professional development activities (Government of Georgia, 2019). Notably, the initial decentralization reform of Georgian schools did not succeed, as school autonomy culture was not supported, and centralized control mechanisms were introduced (Gorgodze, 2016). The recentralization process, particularly the top-down policy, could influence Georgian leaders' practices to focus more on monitoring as a part of teacher evaluation and less on collaboration. As a previous study conducted in Georgia revealed, a centralized system of teacher development can result in more formal activities between teachers and school leaders, instead of in a deep level of professional relations at school (Kirvalidze & Lobzhanidze, 2023). School principals may perceive their leadership roles as more bureaucratic and formal rather than collaborative (Huddleston & Araviashvili, 2022). In Estonia, school leaders with a clear vision of school development promote a collaborative school culture (Poom-Valickis et al., 2021). As a counterbalance, teachers need to have sufficient time and

competence to engage in collaboration and school development activities (Oppi et al., 2022). Even in supportive contexts, sharing responsibilities and joint work do not happen easily. Our findings confirm this complexity, as the Estonian school leaders in our study encountered teacher collaboration as a challenge.

Estonian and Georgian school leaders' perceptions about curriculum and learning process development converged when they emphasized curriculum tasks as one of their core activities. Their descriptions diverged as Estonian participants highlighted leading and managing the learning process, establishing conditions for it, and setting goals, visions, and a collaborative culture. In comparison, their Georgian colleagues prioritized direct work on the curriculum and its quality. Moreover, Georgian leaders focused their attention on supporting students and their achievements, and on the learning environment, such that student-related tasks were allocated the most amount of time on a weekly basis. This could be explained by several factors. First, most of the Georgian sample also held teaching positions; hence, they were involved in instructional content and with students. Second, a new iteration of the national curriculum was implemented in Georgian schools, requiring learning and teaching processes to be oriented toward students and expanding teacher responsibilities and curricular activities (CCIIR, 2024). Third, school authorization processes in Georgia could influence school leaders to focus on school development, changes, and student achievement. In contrast, student-related tasks received less emphasis by the Estonian school leaders in our study and were rated as one of the least time-consuming tasks. On the other hand, they allocated the greatest amount of time to teacher-related tasks and rated them as most important. This distancing from students is in accordance with earlier findings that Estonian school leaders focus less on student learning in the school development goals and improvement plans (Poom-Valickis et al., 2021; Vanari & Eisenschmidt, 2022). Furthermore, there is no legal requirement for the school principal to have teaching experience; instead, the required qualifications are a master's degree, management competencies, and proficiency in Estonian (MoER, 2022). Therefore, Estonian leaders' perceptions can be influenced by the legislative framework, such that they may position themselves more in leadership roles (e.g., representing the school, working with teachers) and focus less on students.

Administrative tasks consume significant time from school leaders, as the international data has demonstrated (Gümüş et al., 2024). Estonian and Georgian school leaders assigned low priority to daily operational activities. However, it turned out to be the most time-consuming task for them. The literature has indicated a competition between administrative and instructional leadership tasks (e.g., Murphy et al., 2006; Thomson & Greany,

2024), showing that school leaders need to employ administrative tasks as serving the quality of instruction; such tasks should be the second priority. Leadership literature has evolved from emphasizing “management” to prioritizing “leadership,” whether leaders operate in centralized or decentralized school environments; administrative responsibilities contribute to the execution of school leadership practices (Bush & Glover, 2014).

The areas of external communication and parent-related activities received similarly low importance ratings from Estonian and Georgian participants as compared to other leadership tasks. While both groups acknowledged that they worked with parent engagement, Estonian participants indicated spending less time on communication with parents than their Georgian colleagues. The external imperative for Estonian schools is to include parents in school boards (Estonian Parliament, 2010); however, student performance problems and equity issues in Georgia (Andguladze & Mindadze, 2015) could motivate leaders to work on parent engagement.

4.2 Comparative perspective of school leaders' challenges and resources

Regarding the second research question, we found that the biggest challenges for Estonian participants were related to teacher recruitment, teacher relations, and workload. This is consistent with earlier research findings indicating that school leaders experience teacher and support staff shortages and struggles with full teacher engagement, collaboration, and professional development needs (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021). As our study showed, Georgian school leaders barely reported staff-related challenges. This is likely due to their professional context, such as not experiencing a teacher shortage (OECD/UNICEF, 2024).

In our study, the school leaders from both countries pinpointed challenges with the curriculum and learning process based on their contextual factors. Estonians underscored issues with implementing instructional leadership, change management at the school level, teacher collaboration, and learner support. Their perceptions aligned with earlier research (Tirri et al., 2021). Georgian school leaders in our study encountered challenges with curriculum. This difficulty likely stems from the new curriculum reform and the tensions related to implementing it. Despite the policymakers' aim to position school leaders and teachers as co-creators in the reform, the evaluations showed school leaders' passive approach to curriculum leadership, their perceived ambiguous role, and limited autonomy (NCER, 2023).

In the area of daily operations, the participants' responses reflected their distinct contexts: Estonian school leaders struggled with efficiency, management, and task balance; Georgians were concerned with the quality of schooling, budgets, infrastructure, and lack of resources. The resource deficiency has implications for instructional processes at schools. Across national

thematic studies, Georgian school leaders and teachers consistently recognized issues with school infrastructure, learning spaces, labs, preparing teachers for experimental pedagogy, and e-resources (Parliament of Georgia, 2022). The last resource deficiency echoes the TALIS results (OECD, 2020) indicating that some Georgian principals identified the digital technology shortage as a challenge in the learning process.

Overall, the challenges reported by our study participants from Estonia and Georgia, particularly work relationships and teacher development, administrative and organizational tasks, and leadership role complexity, are convergent with the school leaders' pressures identified in international research (Tamadoni et al., 2024; Tintoré et al., 2022; Wang, 2022).

To cope with their biggest challenges, the study findings showed that Estonian and Georgian school leaders primarily relied on their own competencies as a resource, such as professional knowledge, experience and continuous development, and leadership skills, especially communication. This is consistent with Leithwood's (2012) emphasis on cognitive and social resources. In addition, our study participants from both countries relied on support from colleagues. This demonstrates the importance of workplace relations (Bakker et al., 2023). However, the scope of support differed between the participants from both countries, as the study results revealed. Estonian school leaders reported diverse support sources: internal teams, namely leadership and development teams, heads of studies, working groups, and administration, which could reflect these leaders having established effective support networks in their schools. Estonian school leaders' external support sources were the municipality (the school owner), the universities, mentors/coaches, and professional networks. This approach parallels distributed leadership practices that encourage networking among schools to collaborate (Azorín et al., 2019). Georgian school leaders' support sources were more homogenous. They mentioned internal teams, like colleagues, quality assurance teams, and administrative staff, with a minimal reliance on the municipality and resource center. This resonates with TALIS 2018 findings: under 50% of Georgian participants thought that they needed more support from the authorities (OECD, 2020). Unlike their Estonian colleagues, Georgian school leaders in our study did not mention universities among their external resources. This finding reflects a limited engagement between universities, resource centers, and leader preparation programs, as was indicated by Bitsadze (2019). In contrast, the Estonian examples show that school improvement programs are designed at the universities for school support (Eisenschmidt et al., 2024).

Thus, Estonian and Georgian leaders in our study configured their methods of addressing their challenges that show patterns of using personal resources (Leithwood, 2023) and engaging their colleagues in shared leadership to increase

education quality (Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020). The contextual patterns revealed that leaders' access to resources was shaped by local leadership and regional practices and by available support from external stakeholders.

4.3 Limitations and further research

Our study has some limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results. Since our study sample size was only mid-range (Braun et al., 2021), it is not representative of the entire school leaders' populations in Estonia and Georgia. We also have self-reported time allocation data, so it is possible that we encountered recall bias. The next limitation is that we cannot make any causal inferences in relation to the study concepts. The relationship resources, like commitment and trust-based and honest connection with colleagues, were mentioned rather rarely by both Estonian and Georgian school leaders. Either they do not consider them to be essential resources for coping with their biggest challenges, our survey question was not leading enough to receive more information regarding that aspect, or the instrument lacked the questions to explore the topic more. Future research would benefit from a more thorough examination of school leaders' specific demands and resources and a more explicit exploration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness factors. More information could be collected to investigate school leadership activities.

4.4 Practical implications

Based on our findings, we propose that school development, continuous principal, and in-service preparation program providers align with the current realities of school leaders from both Estonia and Georgia. As our study, in accordance with Daniëls et al. (2019) highlights, educational leaders need to handle a multitude of tasks and daily operational activities, prioritize curriculum and instruction, focus on students, and establish positive relations with parents. These activities should be fully covered in the development programs, providing structured, need-based professional growth and capacity building to the school leaders and their teams, especially in time, financial, and resource management. Moreover, given that administrative tasks consume significant portions of leaders' work time in both contexts, we highlight two primary needs: improved material-technical infrastructure, additional personnel for the school leadership team, and school-site professional development to help the school leaders in efficient operations management.

School leaders from Estonia, Georgia, and other countries with similar educational contexts may find our study insightful, prompting them to raise critical questions about leadership approaches and to reflect on these questions: How do leaders allocate significant time to student learning and teachers' professional growth? What are the most time-consuming tasks that

divert attention from more important duties? How do school leaders support learning and instructional processes? Other reflection topics arising from our findings relate to competencies, support providers, working relationships with teacher teams, school communities (especially parents), authorities, and fellow school leaders.

The educational systems in Estonia and Georgia would benefit from establishing feedback systems with school leaders, notably, to receive timely inputs regarding reform implementation, engagement, and challenges. Furthermore, as the Estonian school leaders in our study reported less time allocation and lower priority to student-related tasks, their professional development programs should include competencies for student development and a school-based assessment system.

Georgian leadership policies should consider strengthening the supportive role of resource centers and promoting their partnerships with national-level institutions, universities, and schools. Through partnerships, school leaders could receive mentoring and research guidance for curriculum challenges based on their needs. We also recommend that Georgian policymakers ensure that centrally proposed education changes are accompanied by school leader empowerment, especially in strengthening collaborative leadership, curriculum implementation, and funding for infrastructural resources.

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