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Giving voice to problems faced by school leaders in Portugal

Mireia Tintoré Espuny ^a, Rosário Serrão Cunha ^b, Ilídia Cabral ^b and José Matias Alves ^b

^aFacultad de Educación, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya-UIC, Barcelona, Spain; ^bFaculty of Education and Psychology, Research Centre for Human Development, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Worldwide, leadership stories are narratives of principals facing very different problems. The purpose of this study was to identify the current problems faced by Portuguese school principals, through these actors' voice. Nineteen public school Portuguese principals participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed, coded, and categorised using Nvivo11 Pro. The analysis revealed that Portuguese principals have the same problems as their colleagues worldwide, but there are problems specifically related to the Portuguese educational system: problems from the process of school clustering and the leader-centred system of school management of this country. A framework to analyse the emerged problems and practical recommendations are proposed for school leaders, researchers, and policymakers to improve educational leadership.

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School leadership; leadership improvement; principals' problems; context; Portugal

Introduction

Leaders around the world share common problems (Kegan and Lahey 2016), however, the characteristics of each context may affect the kind of difficulties, their perceived significance and the type of responses to them (Drago-Severson and Maslin-Ostrowski 2018).

In the last decade, researchers studying principals' problems around the world have increased notably, for instance: Abaya (2016) in Kenya; Brandon et al. (2018) in Canada; Brooks and Sutherland (2014) in the Philippines; Demir (2016) in Turkey; Martínez-Ruiz and Hernández-Amorós (2018) in Spain; or Montecinos, Bush, and Aravena (2018), in Chile. Nonetheless, it is still needed to broaden the scope of this research topic to include different contexts and cultures.

CONTACT Rosário Serrão Cunha  rb Cunha@porto.ucp.pt

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Particularly in Portugal, little research has been conducted concerning the problems and challenges that Portuguese principals' experience (Flores and Derington 2015; CNE 2016). Therefore, through the present study, we seek to contribute to the literature by adding knowledge of the Portuguese context and by providing empirically supported practical suggestions for principals, future leaders, and policymakers which contribute to the development and improvement of school leadership and management.

Theoretical background

Problems: a definition and a typology

A problem is 'a situation that is unsatisfactory and causes difficulties for people' (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/>, retrieved 12 September 2018).

Not all the problems faced by schools and school leadership teams are the same, which makes proposing adequate solutions particularly hard. Some authors have attempted to categorise problems to better comprehend the different existing kind of problems (e.g. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009). More recently, Alford and Head (2017), have suggested conceptualising problems not only centred on the *problem* itself, but also focused on the *actors* involved, and with this combination create a typology of problems.

Alford and Head (2017) created a two-dimensional matrix of nine cells combining problems in the vertical dimension and people involved in the problems in the horizontal dimension. As Camillus (2008) contended: 'it is the social complexity of wicked problems as much as the technical difficulties that make them tough to manage' (100), and Alford and Head (2017) framework shade light on precisely this social complexity. On the one hand, problems were categorised in three stages: from a *less wicked* situation where 'both problem and solution are clear' (402) to a *complex* situation where the problem is apparent, yet the solution is not, and finally, the *most wicked* situation where 'neither problem nor solution is clear' (402). On the other hand, people who affect the tractability of the problem can create three types of situations: a *tractable* situation where it is clear who has the power and knowledge to solve the problem, and there are no conflict of interests between these people; then a *moderately intractable* situation with multiple parties, each one with only some of relevant knowledge although the participants are broadly in consensus; and the *least tractable* situation where multiple parties are conflicting in values and interests, and there are gaps in knowledge.

Each one of the cells in Alford and Head's framework contains a type of problem with a specific name 'for case by case analysis' (403) going from the *tame problem* to the *very wicked problem* passing through the *complex problem*. Apart from the nine-cell matrix, the authors added some sub-categories designed 'to cover all the key factors in each dimension (...). The more these factors are present, the more the problem can be described as *wicked*' (405).

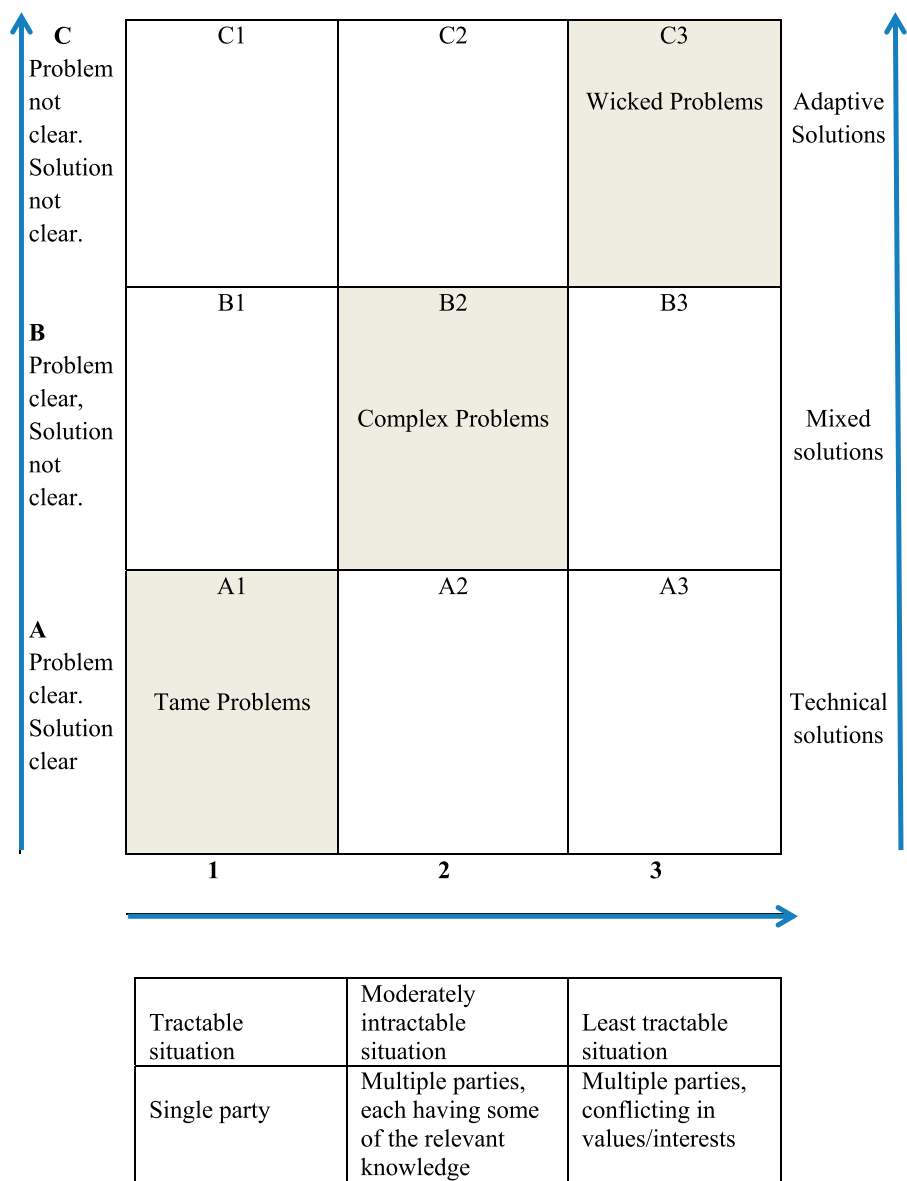


Figure 1. Types of problems and situations. A Framework. Source: by the authors, based on Alford and Head (2017) and Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009).

Figure 1 is an adaptation of the Alford and Head’ framework (2017), also considering Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky’s study (2009), and aims to transmit the matrix to comprehend the different possible challenges graphically. We propose to focus on the explanation of the central categories of problems which range from the easiest to solve to the hardest to solve: (i) tame or technical problems, (ii) complex problems, and (iii) wicked problems.

Tame or technical problems are issues that can be solved by principals or with the help of experts from the school or community. In this situation, 'neither knowledge nor interests are fragmented' (Alford and Head 2017, 404) between the principal and other parts, and consequently, it is relatively easy to reach agreements and solve the problem.

Contrastingly, the problem and solution are not apparent when facing a *wicked problem*, and multiple parties are conflicting in values and interests. Solutions are created as people work on them, demanding new approaches and requiring leaders to improve their cognitive and emotional skills to solve the problem, both for the technical and social challenges these impose (Drago-Severson and Maslin-Ostrowski 2018).

Complex problems are in the middle, between tame and wicked problems. Complex and wicked problems are 'multi-framed, cross-boundary and hard to solve' (Yawson 2013, 12). These call for new leadership skills and knowledge, which require 'flexibility, adaptability, speed, and experimentation' (Beinecke 2009, 2).

Principals' problems in the international literature

Literature review corresponding to all continents and more than 30 different countries allowed the authors to understand that problems tend to be related to (a) teachers (b) non-teaching staff, (c) educational authorities, (d) principals, leadership and management (e) families and community, (f) students, (g) society.

Problems with teachers are plentiful, including difficulties in managing low teacher commitment and internal motivation, having good teachers with a mindset that matches the schools' vision, getting teachers to work as a team, and also problems such as the insufficient number of teachers, underqualified teachers, problems caused by teacher unions or bad teachers' attitudes and behaviours towards the principal (e.g. Bolívar 2018; Dinham et al. 2018; Slater, García Garduño, and Mentz 2018). Difficulties with improving teachers' teaching practices and students' achievement are also amongst the most common obstacles of principals (e.g. Cowie 2011; MacBeath et al. 2018).

Similarly, an insufficient number of non-teaching staff, difficulty with staff recruitment and retention, and reduced staff performance, are some of the problems mentioned in the literature related to non-teaching staff (e.g. Demir 2016).

Problems related to educational authorities and countries policies are noticeable in the literature, mostly concerning lack of autonomy, political pressure to achieve standards, high accountability, weak support from authorities and constant modification of curriculums and educational policies (e.g. Serrano and Martín-Cuadrado 2016; Martínez-Ruiz and Hernández-Amorós 2018).

Principals are increasingly reporting the challenge of improving distributed leadership, as this model of leadership is becoming more necessary as well,

considering problems with work overload, high accountability and greater expectations from the public (e.g. Poon-McBrayer 2017; Brandon et al. 2018).

Problems with families and school community are, for example, reports of lack of parental support and effective communication with the school, more demanding parents with elevated expectations from the schools, indifferent attitudes of families towards school, and lack of support and engagement of the school communities with the school (e.g. Day and Sammons 2014; Abaya 2016).

Problems related to students can be indiscipline and absenteeism, or problems incorporating immigrant students and multiple language classrooms (e.g. Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd 2015).

Finally, lack of social recognition of schooling, of the teachers' role and principals' work from the general society also appears in the literature (Serrano and Martín-Cuadrado 2016; Dinham et al. 2018).

Portuguese education system

Since the current investigation focuses on the problems faced by Portuguese principals, it seems necessary to describe the educational context in the country. The Portuguese Education System has a network of public and private schools, which operate under the central administration of the Ministry of Education. Financial support of public schools depends on the Ministry of Education. The General Directorate for School Administration (GDSA) manages teachers, their career progressions, and their allocation to public schools on a national basis. The management of non-teaching staff depends on the municipalities.

In Portugal, teachers from public schools are state's employees, being recruited and placed through a national tender. Therefore, public schools and their principals have no influence on the teachers' placement process and are unable to choose their teaching staff; principals can only allocate the teachers the school cluster has, within the cluster (OECD 2018a).

Most Portuguese public schools are organised in what is called *Agrupamentos de Escolas* (schools' groups or clusters). A school cluster is an organisational unit with its own administrative and management bodies, made up of different public educational establishments from pre-school establishments to schools with one or more educational levels or cycles. The number of schools that comprise each group or cluster may vary, and some clusters have more than five schools, spread across a relatively wide distance. Although the great majority of Portuguese public schools are aggregated into clusters, there are also some high schools with more than 1000 students that have not been aggregated to any other school.

The School principal is the first person responsible for the development of the school's educational project and the local execution of the educational policy measures. Consequently, the principal is accountable for the provision of

education public service and the management of the public resources available. Being responsible for the administrative, financial, and pedagogical management, the principal also assumes the presidency of the Pedagogical and the Administrative Councils.

Method

Methodological approach

This study is integrated into a broader project (Life histories of Portuguese Principals), so the primary objective of the investigation was to collect and analyse life stories of Portuguese principals. Therefore, a qualitative methodology was found to be best suited, using a narrative inquiry approach (Creswell and Poth 2018). Eight researchers conducted a total of nineteen face-to-face interviews. The interviews were semi-structured with a detailed protocol of questions. Field notes, observations, a workshop, and information from the schools' websites were also used to triangulate the data and provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of the study (Creswell and Poth 2018).

For the present study, only information concerning problems and retrieved from the interviews were analysed.

Participants

The participants were selected purposefully (Fraser 2004) to appoint information-rich contributors (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Principals were chosen through recommendations of Portuguese researchers of this investigation, since they have practical knowledge of the school leaders, owing to a close relationship between the university and schools in Portugal (Alves et al. 2014). Some of the criteria considered were concerning the excellent reputation within the community or the system (following Gurr 2017).

The schools were urban and suburban public schools, which encompass from pre-school to high school, from different geographical areas of Portugal, and also different types of schools (non-clustered and clustered with more and less than five schools). Due to the purposeful sampling, and although in Portugal, women are only 43% of the principals (OECD 2019), participants chosen for this research were mostly women (13 women and six men). This unbalanced selection can be explained since many women school leaders have reported success experiences.

The average age of the principals was high (58 years), and seven principals were 60 or more years old, which is in line with the tendency of ageing school leaders detected for Western countries in the literature (ETUCE 2012; OECD 2016a). The Portuguese profile of public-school leaders (OECD 2019) also mentions an average age of 54 years old for Portuguese school leaders.

The average years of experience as a principal was also high (16 years) being the average in Portugal of 11 years (CNE 2016). Participants had significant job

experience but were simultaneously reaching retirement age, as well as the maximum number of years allowed by the law to be principals. Most of the principals in this study have been re-elected more than once and are going to be replaced in the next few years, in line with trends found in other Portuguese schools.

Procedures of the investigation

After being selected, principals were asked to sign the consent form and to fill out a survey with demographic and contextual data. Pseudonyms were created to identify the participants and their schools while preserving anonymity. The principals were interviewed at their workplace during the second and third quarters of 2018. Each interview lasted between 90 min and 4 h.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers; then coded and categorised with Nvivo 11 Pro software (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Saldaña 2012). Each step of the process was well-documented, with reflections collected in analytic memos.

Analysis of data was a complex procedure following a non-linear process that was always ongoing, emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished (Stake 2005). The four steps framework used by Miles and collaborators (2014) was applied: creating codes, organising and re-organising the codes in groups or sub-themes; organising and re-organising the themes and the codes, and interpreting the findings.

Findings

When facing a problem, it is useful to have a framework to support the analysis of the situation (Drago-Severson and Maslin-Ostrowski 2018). For this analysis, we considered the main categories represented in Figure 1 and the main actors involved in the creation and solutions of each problem.

During the investigation, all categories of problems previously found in the literature appeared, and the interviews revealed 92 different problems. Table 1 illustrates the classification of all the problems resulting from the interviews.

A closer examination of each of these categories and sub-categories of problems follows in Tables 2–5, which show only the most cited problems (cited by three or more participants) in each one of the seven categories.

In an ideal theoretical scheme, the 92 problems encountered could be classified in the different rows (A-B-C) of the theoretical framework (Figure 1) according to their level of complexity, and the agents that cause/are involved in these problems should be placed in columns (1-2-3). Agreeing to this scheme, column 1 (row A, B, or C) would reflect problems with principals since it is a single actor, and it is clear who has the power to solve the challenge. The problems related to society would correspond to column 3 (row A, B, or

Table 1. Categorisation of the totality of problems cited by the participant principals.

Category. Problems with:	Number of sources (n = 19)	Number of different problems	Number of references to the problem	Percentage of references to the problem (*)	Type of problem
Educational authorities	18	28	112	32%	Wicked 63%
Complex 36% Leadership & Management. Personal problems of the principal	16	31	102	29%	Complex 63%
Wicked 21%					
Teachers and teaching	17	9	64	18%	Complex 83%
Wicked 11%					
Families and community	11	8	24	7%	Complex 55%
Wicked 45%					
Non-teaching staff	9	6	21	6%	Complex 100%
Students	6	6	11	3%	Complex 100%
Portuguese society	5	4	13	3,7%	Wicked 100%

Source. Authors, based on the interviews.

(*) Percentages do not tally to 100 due to rounding of numbers.

Table 2. Problems with educational authorities reported by participants.

Subcategory of problems	More cited problems in this category	S.	R.
Problems with the school clusters	Difficulties related to the creation and development of the school cluster	7	10
	Geographical dispersion of the establishments of the school cluster	3	3
	Fragmentation and great differences inside the school cluster	3	5
	Problematic integration of teachers inside the school cluster	3	4
Problems with the lack of autonomy	Overdependence on the educational authorities	7	11
	Excess of bureaucratic tasks	7	12
	Excess of control and accountability	2	3
Problems with the placement of teachers	Difficulties experienced by teachers in their adaptation to school	3	3
	Difficulties to have teachers in some geographical areas	2	3
	High instability of teachers with no-possibility of school-based decision	7	20
Constant changes in policies		3	4
Authorities don't give enough training and support to principals		3	10

Source. Authors, based on the interviews.

S. = number of participants citing this problem (number of sources)

R = number of times citing this problem (number of references)

C) since there are multiple actors with very different objectives. Problems with the authorities would also fall into this category because the problems are socially complex, with many agents involved; there is no clear solution, and

Table 3. Problems with principals, leadership and management reported by participants.

Subcategory of problems	More cited problems in this category	S.	R.
Personal problems of principals	Personal worn-out	6	11
	Difficulties in balancing personal and professional time	4	9
	The non-existence of a professional career for the job. Lack of professional identity	2	3
Problems with the distribution of leadership	Difficulties in finding effective middle leaders	3	5
	Difficulties in promoting collaboration among middle leaders	3	3
	Difficulties in the relationship with middle leaders	3	4
	Difficulties in recognition of middle leaders by the school community	5	5
	Leaders don't know the reality of classes, and they don't give feedback	1	3
Technical/Functional problems	Lack of financial resources	6	10
	Lack of time for people	5	6
	Lack of time for pedagogical questions	3	5
	Lack of time to reflect	4	8
	Too theoretical training	3	3

Source. Authors, based on the interviews.

S. = number of participants citing this problem (number of sources)

R = number of times citing this problem (number of references)

Table 4. Problems with teachers and teaching reported by participants.

Category of problems	More cited problems in this category	S.	R.
Problems with teachers	Low collaboration among teachers	5	7
	Teachers demotivation	7	8
	Ageing of teachers	6	6
	Lack of professionalism of teachers	5	5
	Resistance to changes	4	5
Problems with teaching	Low school results	3	5
	Difficulty in giving students a quality education	4	5
	Teacher classes are not observed or given feedback	1	3

Source. Authors, based on the interviews.

S. = number of participants citing this problem (number of sources)

R = number of times citing this problem (number of references)

Table 5. Problems with non-teaching staff, families, students, and Portuguese society reported by participants.

Category of problems	More cited problems in this category	S.	R.
Problems with non-teaching staff	Insufficient number of administrative staff	8	13
	Insufficient preparation and training of non-teaching staff	3	3
Problems with families	Parents with a lack of resources and studies	2	3
	Demanding parents	4	7
	Parents that don't value school	5	8
Problems with students	Indiscipline, absenteeism and drop out	6	7
Problems with society	Society does not value the work done by school and teachers	3	5
	Excess of demands towards school	2	5

Source. Authors, based on the interviews.

S. = number of participants citing this problem (number of sources)

R = number of times citing this problem (number of references)

the problems evolve continually, so both problems and solutions require learning. Finally, in column 2 (row A, B, or C), we would incorporate the teaching and non-teaching staff, as well as the students and families. Each of these multiple parties in column 2 coincides with their goals but not in the solution.

In the real world, the classification is not so easy. For example, although we have just pointed out that the principal's problems ought to be categorised as tame problems (column 1, row A); a closer examination shows that these problems are more complex (for example, when the principal ends up getting burned or worn out). Furthermore, some other problems of the principal, for example, the difficulty of finding effective middle leaders or the lack of financial resources, include other parties and would imply that the problem would have to be placed to the right (columns 2 or 3).

With this perspective in mind, we try to provide an overview analysis of the type of problems found in this study (see the last column of [Table 1](#)). We have analysed each sub-problem in [Tables 2–5](#) and determined whether, in our opinion, these were a tamed, complex, or wicked problem. The percentages show the most abundant types of problems in each category and are the result of this analysis.

Problems with educational authorities

Problems with the educational authorities ([Table 2](#)) seem to be the core ones for the participant principals, more concretely, problems with teacher placement and with the lack of autonomy stand out within this category. The placement of educators creates subsequent difficulties, such as the high turn-over of teachers and their mobility, which also generates 'side effects' on student outcomes. This problem can be defined as a wicked problem because it is difficult to explain the reason for the high instability of teachers, its solution is not clear, and there are conflicts of interests (authorities, principals, teachers, families).

Problems related to the lack of autonomy of school principals emphasise that there is an excessive dependence on the educational authorities and an excessive number of administrative tasks (e.g. 'I dedicate 75% of my time to bureaucratic tasks. I have asked the Minister of Education to "legislate less". In general, I don't have time for people ... Celeste'). Principals also reported the lack of coordination between national and local authorities and the extreme burden of paperwork that this situation supposes to the schools. Lack of autonomy constitutes, for the Portuguese principals, a wicked problem because the more the authorities give autonomy, the more accountability is reclaimed from principals, and the more the number of bureaucratic tasks. So, the root of problem and solutions are not clear, and many stakeholders with different interests are part of the problem, as part of its solution.

Difficulties related to the creation of school clusters, mandatory policy for Portuguese public schools, represent 24% of the total number of references and are specific to the Portuguese context. Being a principal of a school cluster, or even the organisation of schools in clusters is little mimicked elsewhere, making this reported challenge almost unique of the Portuguese context. Despite all the difficulties associated with the creation of a school cluster – mostly in joining

schools that were separate before, with different school visions and ways of working – a significant number of principals described the process of creating and developing clusters as a path of lights and shadows with ultimately positive results

(e.g. Today I think we are a school cluster that has benefitted from the grouping process (...). I believe that this process has resulted, and after all these years (it has been years), now I think that *them and we* do not exist anymore, now there is just *we/us*. Isaura).

In this issue, the problem and the solution are apparent, but the quantity and complexity of interventions required to create a school climate of trust and knowledge sharing are also high. Principals in our sample seem to have solved the situation, showing that some complex problems can be solved, as time and energy is put into finding their solution, and actors with conflict can be partners.

In this category, problems with school clusters and the lack of support to principals from the educational authorities can be categorised as complex challenges, while problems with the lack of autonomy, problems with the placement of teachers and the constant changes in policies (63% of the problems with educational authorities) can be considered wicked problems.

Problems with leadership and management. Personal problems of the principal

Table 3 shows that participants tend to be severe with themselves, self-attributing many of the problems they mention. Principals are caught in between very different demands, and they manifest difficulties in balancing personal and professional time, or in managing their agenda and spending time with people instead of with bureaucratic tasks. The narratives reflect that the participants often accede to meeting the short-term and managerial demands, forgetting their most essential duties as educational leaders (e.g. 'Right now, it is not possible to think because we are swallowed by the whole machine that is all around us, completely.' Marta). This situation can be catalogued at least as a complex problem because it exposes the gap between theory and practice (Yawson 2013). Solutions are known, but behaviours go in another direction using short-term solutions. For example, principals know that people are important, yet they dedicate their time to other tasks generating more problems (personal worn-out and stress).

The principals complained about the high demands of the job and the lack of preparation for it. The non-existence of a professional career for the principalship and the consequent lack of professional identity of principals are also mentioned. In Portugal, school principals are still legally considered teachers, meaning that after four or eight years of mandates, they likely go back to being teachers. The loneliness of the job was also reported, and six out of the

19 principals manifested personal exhaustion. Although this category of problems involves only one agent, the principal, it can be categorised as complex because principals ought to negotiate with multiple parties to improve their situation, since the solution does not depend solely on their actions.

Participants in this study must also deal with challenges with the distribution of leadership. Principals' narratives showed difficulties finding effective middle leaders, and when they are found, principals revealed difficulties in promoting collaboration among middle leaders and difficulties in recognition of middle leaders by the school community. This can be a tame or technical problem, and principals must deal with middle leaders, other teachers and the community to solve this challenge. It is a clear example of a technical and social challenge, with these two dimensions completely intertwined, both in causing the problem and in its solution.

Finally, within this category, there are many problems related to the principalship: lack of resources (financial, material and human), the lack of incentives for the job, or the inadequacy of the scarce programmes to improve leadership. Although some of these problems can seem technical issues, in fact, they can be defined as complex problems because of the multiple interests of the participating actors and the difficulty in finding adequate solutions as shown in the voices of the participants.

Problems with teachers and teaching

Problems with teachers were shown to be less pressing for the interviewed principals, but they are also relevant, as can be observed in [Table 4](#). In this study, principals brought problems such as teachers' demotivation, the ageing of teachers, the low levels of collaboration among them, and the resistance to changes (e.g. 'The demotivation of teaching staff is apparent in teachers' expectations of progression in their careers and in their being worn out by the intensification of workload for teachers and situations of behavioural issues of students.' António). Resistance to change is apparently a tamed problem that requires technical solutions (Yawson 2013) yet it can be a wicked problem if the resistance signifies a lack of engagement on the part of teachers and displacement of responsibility (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009), multiplying one problem into plenty other hard to define and *control*.

Most of the references to problems with the teaching and learning process referred to the low quality of teaching and the lousy learning outcomes and are related to complex problems with teachers. (e.g. a principal can aspire to have a stable teaching body to address students with special needs, but teachers perhaps do not want to remain in a school with plenty of students with difficulties).

Moreover, most of the problems cited previously can affect teaching and learning. The principals seem to have the feeling that they could work better

if they did not have to spend so much time on bureaucratic tasks. Their responses, again, seem to express a feeling that they should be concerned with people and the primary mission of the school: teaching and learning, instead of being occupied with an excess of bureaucratic responsibilities – hence the solutions for the vast majority of these problems are quite unclear and complex.

Problems with non-teaching staff, families, students, and Portuguese society

The scarcity of non-teaching staff and the need to improve their training comes first within this category of problems

(e.g. we have the problem of non-teaching staff, which all schools complain about, which is the shortage of non-teaching staff that leads to very tight management, high age of non-teaching staff and non-substitution. This also has some effects on the quality of the work that we want to present. Ricardo).

Then, the lack of parental involvement in school, and the high number of exigencies on principals and teachers are the most cited problems related to the families. Lack of discipline leads the section related to problems with students that also incorporate school dropout, absenteeism, and demotivation of pupils. The lack of social recognition of schools and principals is the main problem related to Portuguese society (Table 5) and can be considered a wicked challenge.

The problem is not clear and the solution is not apparent, and it is *a least tractable* situation that involves a great variety of actors. Nevertheless, a change in the social perception of principals and teachers can contribute to the improvement of educational outcomes (such as in Finland).

As a final point in the presentation of findings, this study found that most of the problems are interconnected, and it is difficult to classify them in a cell; it is also found that complex or wicked problems abound. These two types of problems require a lot of reflection and analysis to be solved; therefore, preparation, time, collaboration, and study are essential.

Discussion

Results have shown that the most critical category of problems in Portugal is the tension with the educational authorities. Within this category, there is a specific problem of Portuguese principals: the difficulties related to the creation and development of the school clusters. The lack of autonomy and the allocation of teachers have the most cited problems within this category. This result coincides with data obtained from the last surveys on Portuguese education (CNE 2016; OECD 2016b). The SCHAUT indicator of PISA, which measures the

autonomy of principals, pointed out that Portugal is one of the countries with less autonomy, although the situation is improving recently. Flores and Derrington (2015) concluded that in Portugal, the autonomy to hire or dismiss teachers or to manage the curriculum scarcely exists. Moreover, the OECD (2018b) stated that in Portugal most of the educational decisions are taken at the state or central level, and only 15% or less of decisions are taken at the school level.

Furthermore, problems in the relationships with educational authorities are consistent with the literature, and other academics have detected the same issues in other geographical sites. For example, Dempster et al. (2004) and Dinham et al. (2018) in Australia; Demir (2016) in Turkey; Paletta and Bezzina (2016) in Italy. In Spain, Gairín and Castro (2010) and Bolívar (2018). MacBeath et al. (2018), in Scotland; and in Chile, Montecinos and colleagues (2018).

Problems with educational authorities have their origin and solution outside of the school; in general, the problems are clear, but the solutions remain unclear and possibly do not depend on the principals. The path for the principals dealing with these kinds of problems is to be capable of managing them with creativity, breaking traditional thinking schemes, improving dialogue with the authorities, and looking for alliances and support among educational leaders.

Problems with leadership and management are the most cited problem in academic literature and the second in the current research. Academics from very different locations describe the difficulties of principals, the intensification and unpredictability of their job, their high responsibilities, or the challenge of implementing higher standards, all these with a lack of adequate funding and sometimes with inadequate infrastructures and declining resources. Problems related to the distribution of leadership and the promotion of middle leaders are also increasingly cited in the literature (e.g. Cowie 2011; Daggett 2014; Demir 2016; Dinham et al. 2018) given the relevance of this kind of leadership to improve schools (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2019).

Principals' problems require much reflection on the part of the headteachers and, at the same time, request the necessary help to improve their skills in topics such as self-management or the management of time and stress. Practical problems of the principalship such as the lack of time, lack of resources or the insufficient preparation for the job are also cited by academics in other contexts (Daggett 2014; Day and Sammons 2014; Abaya 2016).

The third more critical problems according to the participants were problems with teachers (the demotivation of teachers, the ageing of the teachers, and the lack of collaboration among them, the resistance to change, and the lack of professionalism).

Academics worldwide coincide in the description of teachers-related problems such as the difficulties of getting good teachers (Cowie 2011) or the high turn-over of teachers (Demir 2016; Paletta and Bezzina 2016). Also, principals need to address the motivational challenge, and engage teachers in projects of change, developing at the same time the capacities of the teaching staff to face

changes, enrich the curriculum, and improve classroom management. Principals can help teachers to develop their capacities or commitment, increasing communication, and enhancing collaboration. It seems that teachers' interests differ from principals' interests in some ways, making this problem a complex one.

Non-teaching staff officials should be able to perform all administrative work and help principals. Increasing the number of non-teaching staff or increasing their productivity with adequate training are two different ways to improve their performance. The Ministry is the only one who can solve the shortage of staff combined with the excess of tasks. Nonetheless, the lack of preparation can be addressed by principals, contributing to the non-teaching staff working more effectively.

The challenge with the negative attitude of parents towards school and learning is to incorporate families and the nearby community to the school, creating networks and partnerships involving parents, alumni, and the whole school community in projects. The participants have described some initiatives in this sense: the creation of a 'Schools for Parents', partnerships with local enterprises, time for reflection on specific problems, inviting families and the community to visit the school and see all the projects taking place, or specific training for mothers in vulnerable environments.

It is crucial for solving poor behaviour and absenteeism of students to provide strategies to teachers and work together with families and support services of schools. Principals must be sure that all students succeed, developing schools as learning communities while managing behaviour and attendance.

These categories of problems detected by the team of researchers also appear in the academic literature, showing that challenges are very similar all over the world (Day and Sammons 2014), but, as in the case of Portugal, context matters: each geographical, political, or socio-economic context has its own specific problems.

To summarise, it is possible to say that Portuguese principals share with other principals all over the world the same problems. The relevance given to each one of these problems is sensitive to the context, and in this study, the results indicate that currently, the main problem of the Portuguese principals of our sample are the relationships with the educational authorities. Within this category, a specific problem of the Portuguese context and not reported in other countries is the difficulty of creating and managing the school clusters. Another essential problem coincides with the unipersonal system of management, which increases the feeling of heavy workload and creates significant pressures for the principals.

In the end, each school and each principal have their specific problems and problems that are equal to other schools. Usually, solutions are not easy. To solve any problem, leaders need creative thinking and breaking conventional thinking schemes (Riel and Martin 2017). The participants in the research have sufficiently demonstrated this creativity in solving severe problems thinking 'out of the box' or using what some of them called *normative infidelities*.

Conclusion

This study aspires to contribute to the literature by bringing insights into Portuguese principals' problems and offering a framework to analyse the problems. The general topic is relevant as it is crucial to know the problems faced by principals if we want to solve them. Furthermore, analysing Portuguese problems adds to the existent literature due to the lack of research concerning this country in the current educational leadership body of knowledge.

Although this study was conducted to examine the problems experienced by Portuguese principals, the fact that the critical issues the researchers founded in Portugal coincides with problems found in the literature allow us to intuit that the recommendations for one case can also be applied in other, taking into account each context.

After the analysis of the literature and the interviews, we conclude that the principals' job has become increasingly complex and demanding. There is a lot of political and social pressure on principals to attain the academic performance and high standards, and this accountability is not balanced with more support from the educational authorities or the community.

Spreading the word about the problems experienced by principals – in this case, the problems of Portuguese principals – can help the headteachers and the researchers worldwide in some ways. First, principals can realise that all headteachers experience the same or similar problems, and this fact can help them to be less worried and anxious about their situation. Second, the use of a framework to categorise the problems can help principals, researchers and policymakers to better understand and reflect on the problems, beginning with a formulation of the 'working hypothesis as to where in the matrix the particular situation sits' (Alford and Head 2017, 403). Due to the complexities of these kinds of problems, it is not easy to categorise them and, in the end, researchers or practitioners are making judgements not only on the type of challenge but also about its possible causes and on how to handle each issue. Third, principals and researchers can discover methods to surmount the problems or at least to think about them, although 'the purpose is not to 'solve' the problem but to obtain an opening picture of which aspects of the situation merit further investigation' (Alford and Head 2017, 403).

Following our research, it seems that a vast majority of the problems that affect Portuguese principals are complex and wicked: principals know what to do to solve their daily problems and have the possibility of gaining the required skills to solve the more complex problems if they receive the adequate preparation. Having arrived at this point, it is necessary that principals study their situation, prioritise the problems, and prepare the intervention according to the circumstances.

The principals can actively contribute to solving the problems which affect their daily job. Principals can directly act on themselves, on teachers and teaching, on families and school community, on students, and non-teaching staff. Reflection, collaboration, creativity, and communication are critical strategies for principals if they want to solve these problems. Moreover, as it has been said, problems are interconnected, and working towards solutions to one of these problems can help to solve other related problems facing the school.

Nevertheless, a percentage of the problems (problems with educational authorities and problems with society) is attributed to external factors, out of the area of influence of the principals. As it is well known that the more wicked the problem, the more difficult the solutions, principals can contribute to the required changes by improving communication and links with policymakers and society, making them aware not only of the current problems but also of the work done. According to MacBeath and colleagues (2018), regular consultation with principals might be an excellent strategy to inform decision-making processes of the policymakers, but this action requires trust between the two sectors, and trust is based on mutual knowledge, as well as having a standard of values and goals.

Given the number of problems, leadership training for principals is required (Brandon et al. 2018). Leadership programmes should focus on: (a) improving the instructional leadership of principals via self-regulation and self-management, (b) helping principals to improve the motivation, training and working conditions of teachers and non-teaching staff, (c) incorporating parents and the external community to the school by developing partnerships and links.

The challenges that principals face in their daily work deprive them of time to do much else. Therefore, it is essential to help leaders develop strategies of self-management if we want to improve school outcomes. Furthermore, as 'instructional and distributed leadership are regarded as important for creating and sustaining professional learning communities and for creating a climate conducive to student learning' (OECD 2016a, 15), training on these issues is necessary.

Time also matters. Problems reported by the principals in the current research may have been influenced by the situation of the economic crisis during the last decade (2007–2017) and by the educational laws during the period, especially those referred to the process of creating school clusters, the system of allocation of teachers and the leader-centred system of school management.

Although tailor-made responses are needed for each situation and time, our proposals can help principals and researchers far beyond the Portuguese context. This statement can also work in the opposite direction, that is, the answers to the problems given in other parts of the globe could serve – after contextualisation – to solve problems that affect the Portuguese principals.

Indeed, as there is a resemblance between the problems experienced by principals worldwide, we can venture that the answers to them can also be similar. For example, given the lack of autonomy and the excess of accountability

described by principals in Portugal (Flores and Derrington 2015), Australia (Cowie 2011; Dinham et al. 2018), Italy (Paletta and Bezzina 2016), or China (Cowie 2011; Cheng, Wu, and Hu 2017) the solution of driving toward leadership for learning proposed for the Italian case by Paletta and Bezzina (2016) can also be a universal solution.

We are aware of the limitations of this study. Since this was a qualitative study with a limited number of participants and with predominantly self-reported data, there is no intention to generalise the results.

Considering the results presented, we conclude that Portuguese principals describe similar challenges and problems as their colleagues around the world. Specific to Portuguese principals seems to be the relevance of the problems with the educational authorities, and problems related to the organisation of schools in clusters, with reported difficulties in the creation and management of this type of school. This research has also shown that the context is of considerable importance when considering the issues besetting school principals. With this knowledge in mind, leadership development programmes can be improved based on the needs and problems of the context.

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ORCID

Mireia Tintoré Espuny  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4993-3691>

Rosário Serrão Cunha  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2570-9422>

Ilídia Cabral  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2141-044X>

José Matias Alves  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9490-9957>

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