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Between Change and Constraint: School Principals' Conceptual Framework of European Educational Project Management

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Abstract: Objectives: This paper analyses the conceptual frameworks of European educational project management and explores the perspectives of school principals in Galați County on the implementation of such projects in the institutions they lead. **Prior Work:** The study builds on established international frameworks, alongside the contributions of Romanian specialists, tracing the evolution of the concept from a technical-operational approach towards a systemic perspective focused on impact and value. **Approach:** A qualitative analysis of the specialised literature is combined with a survey administered to the principals of the county institutions with legal personality, examining project typology, management competencies, constraint factors, success criteria and the sustainability of results. **Results:** The representation principals hold of the project is systematically asymmetric: transformative attributes are recognised almost unanimously, while constraint attributes remain under-represented, and strategic competences rank fifth of seven in the profile of the project manager. Principals whose schools have already implemented European projects recognise significantly more of these attributes. **Implications:** The findings highlight the need for coherent institutional support from educational authorities for training school principals in project management. **Value:** The study documents the conceptual framework with which school leaders actually operate, an intermediate variable that research focused on participation barriers has left unexamined.

Keywords: Erasmus+; eTwinning; strategic competence; risk perception

JEL Classification: I21; I28; M12

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1. Introduction

European educational projects act as a mechanism of transfer, through which practices validated in international educational systems are taken over and adapted to the institutions of our country. Such projects offer relevant opportunities for the professional development of teaching staff and for building the competences of the pupils involved, but they are also an instrument of institutional development, since they introduce into the school procedures of planning, monitoring and impact evaluation, their effects being measured in changes of professional practice. Implementing a European educational project entails a competitive application, an approved budget subject to external audit rules, non-negotiable reporting deadlines and the obligation to demonstrate measurable impact, that is, a way of working specific to project management. The role of project manager is assumed by a member of the teaching staff and, in most cases, this is the principal of the school, who holds attributions regarding the institution's involvement in the programmes of the European Union in the field of education and vocational training, these being qualified as an instrument of institutional development and of improvement in the quality of the education provided. Participation in European projects is therefore not an optional personal initiative, but an attribution of the position, as stipulated by the professional profile of the school manager, which envisages the modernisation and financing of the school through four mandatory directions: accessing European non-reimbursable funding, cooperating with schools from the European Union and coordinating mobilities, applying modern and inclusive teaching methods, and using a foreign language for integration into the European space (Ministry of Education and Research, 2026).

The present paper analyses the conceptual framework with which school principals in Galați County operate when they implement European educational projects, as well as the way in which this framework relates to the actual practice of implementation.

2. State of the Research

2.1. The Evolution of the Concept of Project Management

The specialised literature defines the project through limitation. Weiss and Wysocki (1992) describe it as a complex, unique and finite activity, with limited resources and budget, which involves a number of persons and results in a product or a service,

while Görög and Smith (1999) emphasise the determined duration and the constraints related to costs, in view of a defined result. The guide developed by the Project Management Institute (2021) takes up the same elements, defining the project as a temporary endeavour undertaken to create, with limited resources, a unique result. From these definitions six attributes emerge, which constitute the analytical grid of the present paper: temporal boundedness, the unique result, team-based implementation, the budget, the assumed risk and the change produced in the institution where the project is implemented.

The concept of project management has, in its turn, gone through three stages in its evolution. In the technical-operational stage, it was defined through the classical functions of planning, organising, directing and controlling resources, in view of attaining a short-term objective (Kerzner, 1982, p. 4).

The stage of standardisation and institutionalisation shifts the emphasis towards the triangle of constraints. Opran and Stan (2014, p. 25) describe project management as a process of planning, organising and leading the activities and resources of a project, under restrictions of time, resources and cost, specifying that a change in one of the three factors entails a change in the other two. The instrument used in our research operationalised these constraints through time, human and material resources, and costs respectively.

After the year 2000, project management is analysed as an organisational system, the emphasis moving from control towards human resources and leadership, while success comes to be defined through the value and the impact produced. The body of knowledge developed by the Association for Project Management (2019) includes, alongside planning, organising, monitoring and controlling, the motivation of all those involved in attaining the objectives. In the Romanian literature, Mocanu and Schuster (2004, p. 12) underline, in the same sense, the importance of human resource management within a complex activity carried out in a dynamic environment.

This shift towards value does not, however, suspend constraint, but presupposes it. Bârgăoanu (2004, p. 11) shows that project management involves a set of knowledge, competences, instruments and techniques through which a result is pursued, in compliance with financial, time, quality and technical constraints. The value of a project is therefore produced through the management of constraints, not in their absence, a premise from which the empirical analysis of the present paper starts.

2.2. School Principals and European Projects

A second direction of research examines school leadership in relation to the openness of schools towards implementing European educational projects, with or without funding. Comparative evidence shows that the pedagogical and distributed leadership of principals is associated with the school's participation in international cooperation and with the professional learning of teaching staff (OECD, 2020), while the evaluation of the eTwinning programme documents professional and organisational benefits for participating schools (Kearney & Gras-Velázquez, 2018). The difficulties encountered by schools in implementing European projects are frequently reported in school practice, yet they remain insufficiently documented in Romanian research, which makes their empirical investigation necessary. The Council Conclusions on European teachers and trainers (Council of the European Union, 2020) explicitly call for the integration of mobility and of European instruments into the development strategies of schools, while the Romanian professional standards for teaching staff (Ministry of Education, 2024) introduce project implementation and institutional development among the competences expected of the teacher.

3. Defining the Research Problem

Analysing the concept of project management in the specialised literature, we observe its development along two directions which, although complementary, leave an important area uncovered. The first direction, of a normative nature, describes what project management ought to be, offering definitions, stages, principles and instruments. The second direction, of an applied nature, offers guides and instruments for designing educational projects, while the actual difficulties encountered by schools in implementing them remain little researched. A first limitation thus takes shape: what needs to be explored and investigated with greater attention is precisely the link between the two, namely the way in which those who take the decisions represent the project and its management.

The second limitation concerns the way in which, in studies to date, the principals of institutions that implement European educational projects are treated. They are analysed, as a rule, as a unitary group, without distinguishing between those whose schools have already implemented European projects and those who have not had this experience. By comparing the way in which the two categories of principals describe the project, we can find out whether the understanding of the concept

precedes involvement in projects or, on the contrary, is built through it. If principals with experience describe the project differently from the others, then the European project is no longer merely an opportunity for the school's development, but also a context of professional learning for the principal who leads it. We therefore consider that the way in which principals understand the project explains, to a considerable extent, the way in which it comes to be implemented, monitored and completed.

The problem addressed in the present paper concerns the way in which the European project is understood by the principals of the institutions that implement such projects. Consequently, the study pursues four research questions: which are the attributes that principals consider defining for a project and which are the ones they omit; to what extent the same pattern is found in the success criteria and in the profile of competences attributed to the project manager; whether the way in which principals understand the project is associated with the institution's implementation experience; and what the actual practice of implementation looks like, in terms of project typology, difficulties, sustainability of results and intention to continue.

4. Research Methodology

The approach combines the qualitative analysis of the specialised literature, presented in the second section, with a quantitative, exploratory and cross-sectional survey carried out in Galați County, Romania. The target population comprised the principals of all 133 pre-university education institutions with legal personality in the county, namely kindergartens, lower secondary schools and high schools. The questionnaire was distributed online, through the network of the county school inspectorate, between April and May 2026; 44 valid responses were returned, which represents a response rate of 33.1%.

The sample is balanced by residence environment (23 urban, 52.3%; 21 rural, 47.7%) and covers the entire range of seniority in the position of principal: under 2 years 6.8%, 2-5 years 27.3%, 6-10 years 25.0%, over 10 years 40.9%. Thirty-five institutions (79.5%) had implemented at least one European project in the previous five years, while nine (20.5%) had implemented none. Half of the respondents (50.0%) had attended accredited project management courses, 18.2% non-accredited courses or webinars, 25.0% declared that they had learned exclusively from their own experience, and 6.8% had not undertaken any form of training in the field.

The instrument comprised 25 items, covering the institutional profile, the concept of educational project, implementation practices, difficulties, results and support needs.

Item 4 was an open question through which respondents were asked to define the educational project; the 44 free-text responses were coded deductively, tracking the presence of the six attributes specified in section 2.1, as well as of aspects related to planning, objectives and pupils' learning, the coding scheme having been established prior to the analysis. Item 5 presented the six attributes as a multiple-response list, measuring aided recognition. Item 15 asked respondents to select at most three competences essential for a European educational project manager out of a set of seven; item 18 concerned the vertex of the project triangle perceived as the strongest constraint; item 19, the criteria for assessing success; and items 10, 17, 23 and 24, project typology, difficulties, sustainability and the intention to apply.

For the third question we calculated, for each respondent, how many of the six attributes had been selected at item 5, obtaining a value between 0 and 6, which we then used to compare the two groups of principals. Comparisons between groups used the Mann-Whitney U test, with the rank-biserial correlation as effect size, and Fisher's exact test for the individual attributes; the significance threshold was set at 0.05.

This research has limitations, since the sample is self-selected and circumscribed to a single county, Galați, so that the results are not generalisable at national level; the subgroup without implementation experience is small, which makes all comparisons involving it exploratory and reported with exact tests; and the design is cross-sectional, which does not allow a causal reading of the association between implementation experience and the number of attributes recognised.

5. Analysis of Results

5.1. The Spontaneous Definition of the Project

The free definitions of the educational project are organised around purpose and planning. Objectives appear in 59.1% of the responses, planning or organisation in 54.5%, while 47.7% explicitly frame the project as a form of pupils' learning. The constraint attributes are almost absent: temporal boundedness is mentioned by 29.5%, resources or budget by 9.1%, and risk by none of the 44 respondents. Change appears explicitly in 9.1% of the definitions, and the collaborative dimension in 15.9%. A single respondent formulated a definition covering five of the six attributes, describing the project as a conscious intervention, with clarified human, material and time resources, implemented in order to produce a desired change.

5.2. The Asymmetry between Change and Constraint

When the six attributes are presented to them as response options, principals recognise them in a considerably higher proportion, yet the order of preferences remains the same. The change produced in the institution and team-based work are selected by almost all respondents, while the attributes related to constraint, namely the limited budget and the assumed risk, are indicated by fewer than half of them. On average, principals recognise 3.82 of the six attributes (SD = 1.51), and fewer than a quarter of them (22.7%) indicate all of them.

Table 1. Recognition of the Project Attributes (N = 44)

Attribute	n	%	Rank
Produces a change in the institution	41	93.2	1
Involves a working team	40	90.9	2
Has a defined beginning and end	34	77.3	3
Pursues a unique result	23	52.3	4
Has a limited budget	17	38.6	5
Entails a degree of risk	13	29.5	6

Source: authors' own processing of the survey data.

The success criteria reproduce the same pattern: the achievement of objectives (90.9%) and the impact on the institution (88.6%) predominate, while compliance with deadlines is invoked by 50.0% and compliance with the budget by 45.5%. A contradiction emerges which deserves to be noted: asked which is the strongest constraint, respondents indicate time (40.9%) and resources (38.6%), that is, precisely the dimensions they incorporate least in the definition of the project and use least often in assessing the success of a project.

5.3. The Competences of the Project Manager

In the questionnaire, respondents selected the most important competences of a European project manager, placing the emphasis on communication with the team, the partners and the funders (88.6%) and on the technical competences of writing and reporting (81.8%), followed by leadership (72.7%) and budget management (65.9%). Strategic competences occupy, alongside digital ones, only the fifth place (54.5%), being placed below the operational skills of writing and reporting. This hierarchy coexists with a tension between confidence and capacity: 65.9% of principals consider that they hold the necessary competences, but 84.1% regard

training in project management as essential, and 29.5% declare that in their institution there is no person sufficiently prepared to manage a European project.

5.4. The Gap between Principals with and without Experience

Principals whose schools have implemented European projects recognise, on average, 4.17 attributes out of six (SD = 1.38), as against 2.44 (SD = 1.24) in the case of the others. The difference is statistically significant and the effect size is large (U = 252, p = 0.005, r = 0.60). The attribute-level comparison (Table 2) shows that the gap is concentrated on the constraint and structure attributes. Risk constitutes the clearest marker: no principal without experience identifies it as an essential attribute, as against more than a third of those with experience. The same pattern is found in the competence profile, strategic competences being selected by 62.9% of the principals with experience, as against 22.2% of the others (p = 0.057).

Table 2. Recognition of the Attributes according to Implementation Experience

Attribute	With experience (n = 35)	Without experience (n = 9)	p (Fisher)
Involves a working team	97.1%	66.7%	0.023
Produces a change in the institution	97.1%	77.8%	0.101
Defined beginning and end	85.7%	44.4%	0.018
Unique result	54.3%	44.4%	0.716
Limited budget	45.7%	11.1%	0.121
Degree of risk	37.1%	0.0%	0.041

Source: authors' own processing of the survey data.

5.5. Typology, Difficulties and Sustainability

Analysing the research data, out of the 35 institutions with experience, 57.1% carry out eTwinning activities, 54.3% other European programmes and 42.9% Erasmus+ mobilities, while the principal is directly involved in coordination in 68.6% of the cases, which confirms that the managerial function is not entirely delegated. The difficulties reported by principals are the following: lack of time (68.2%), excessive bureaucracy (61.4%), lack of training (52.3%) and lack of qualified staff (52.3%). The results of the projects continue partially after the end of the funding in 65.7% of the institutions and entirely in 31.4%, while the perceived impact is high (M = 4.43

on a scale from 1 to 5). Despite the difficulties reported, institutional interest remains strong: 81.8% of principals intend to apply or already have a project in preparation, an interest which coexists with the training deficit signalled by more than half of the respondents.

6. Discussion

We consider that the relation between implementation experience and the way in which principals describe the project offers indications as to how managerial competence is formed. The understanding of the project is not explained by the training undertaken alone: half of the respondents attended accredited project management courses, yet the average number of attributes recognised remains below four out of six. Instead, this understanding appears closely linked to the actual experience of implementation. The finding supports the theories of professional learning through practice (Schön, 1983; Eraut, 2004; Kolb, 2015), according to which the practitioner reconstructs his or her understanding of a task as it is carried out and reflected upon, rather than as a result of theoretical instruction.

From this perspective, the European project appears not only as an opportunity for the school's development, but also as a context of professional formation for the principal who leads it. We specify, however, that our research does not allow a causal conclusion: it is also possible that principals who already understood the project in managerial terms were more inclined to initiate such undertakings.

We nevertheless observe that experience does not entirely compensate for the lack of training. Strategic competence remains weakly recognised even among principals with implemented projects, while risk, although treated as a distinct topic in the Romanian specialised literature (Gherguț & Ceobanu, 2009, p. 163), is included among the defining attributes of the project by only 29.5% of the respondents. Practice alone therefore restructures only in part the way in which project management is understood.

The data were collected before the publication of the Professional Profile of the School Manager (Ministry of Education and Research, 2026), which places strategic orientation among the general competences of the principal. Our results thus indicate a gap between the newly formulated normative requirement and the way in which principals currently represent the competences needed to lead a European project.

7. Conclusions

The study has documented the conceptual framework with which school principals in Galați County approach the management of European educational projects. Their representation of the project is systematically asymmetric, strong on change and collaboration and weak on constraint, uniqueness and risk; the same asymmetry governs the success criteria and the profile of competences attributed to the project manager, where strategic competence occupies the fifth place out of seven; and the number of attributes recognised is significantly higher where the institution has implemented European projects. In parallel, the practice of implementation shows a high institutional interest and a direct involvement of the principal, but also a training deficit signalled by more than half of the respondents.

Two practical implications follow. Training addressed to principals should not be limited to the technical operations of writing the application and reporting, already recognised as essential, but should explicitly address the constraint dimension and the strategic articulation between the project and the institutional development plan, which are not recognised as such. Another important aspect concerns entry support for schools without project experience, mentoring offered by experienced institutions being possibly more effective than additional declarative instruction.

The present research opens three directions for further investigation. The first would be replication in other counties and a comparative analysis across regional contexts, which could establish whether the asymmetry documented here is local or systemic. The second would involve a longitudinal design, measuring the way in which principals understand the project before and after a first implementation cycle, which would clarify the direction of the association identified. The third concerns the development of a continuing professional development programme dedicated to the explicit formation of strategic competence among the teaching staff who implement European educational projects, given the marginal place it occupies in principals' representations.

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