



Getting Heads Together

*A review of the range of complex issues
facing school heads across varied EU
settings*

A report for the ERASMUS+ Getting Heads Together
Project (Output O1-A1)

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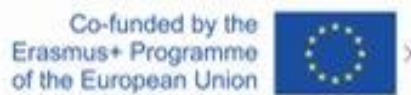


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A review of the range of complex issues facing school heads across varied EU settings

For O1-A1 Review the range of complex issues facing school heads across varied EU settings and create report

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to outline the findings from a small-scale survey conducted with school leaders across Poland, UK, Greece, Lithuania and Turkey. The report will outline the purpose of this survey, which was to establish the relevance and prevalence of complex issues within school leadership across our partner institutions. The design of a small-scale survey will be described, along with the features of the design that ensured the survey was valid and reliable. Key results from the survey include how a) despite being less common, complex issues/wicked problems took up more time b) complex issues can occur across school leaders' responsibilities, with a particular concentration on culture and special educational needs.

Purpose

The premise of the Getting Heads Together project was to support school leaders in developing their approach to sense-making. Output O1-A3 established that

- School leaders can face a range of complex issues, and these complex issues can be considered 'wicked problems'. As part of their role, school leaders will have to understand and act on 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973).
- Understanding and acting in the face of these problems will demand school leaders engage in sense-making (Holt and Cornelissen, 2014; Ancona, 2012) and this will be affected by their stage of Adult Ego Development (Gilbride, James and Carr, 2021).

During the preparation phase for this ERASMUS+ project, we decided to establish an output (O1-A1) that could help the team to comprehend the complex issues within school settings and gain further information on how they manifest within a school. The purpose of the output was therefore to:

- Understand how common complex issues are within a school. We used Rittel and Webber (1974) definition of wicked problems and tame problems to help us define a complex issue.
- Support programme design. We wanted to get the experience of a range of school leaders in how they experience complex issues/wicked problems. In particular, we

wanted to see if particular aspects of their experience as school leaders had more wicked problems than others. We believed that such data would help inform the design of materials for the programme

Design

A questionnaire was designed. Appendix 1 is a copy of the English version of the questionnaire. The focus of this questionnaire was to:

- To determine, using the definition of wicked problems, how common complex issues are. We looked at two aspects:
 - How common complex issues/wicked problems are
 - How much time and resources complex issues/wicked problems took.
- In what situations are complex issues/wicked problems are more likely to occur.

We ensured the questionnaire could produce reliable, valid results.

1. Providing a fixed definition of Wicked and Tame problems - we directed participants to
 - a. Read these definitions when they were provided
 - b. To use these definitions to inform their answers - we explicitly directed participants to ensure they used this definition in generating their responses
 - c. Provided the definition of wicked problems at repeated points throughout the questionnaire - this prevented participants from forgetting the key aspects of the theory.
2. Ensured that the responsibilities within the survey was representative of the types of responsibilities that school leaders' have:
 - a. We worked with a group of school leadership advisors - a combination of serving school leaders from senior and middle leadership positions, academics and course providers.
3. That the questionnaire was easy to comprehend and the purpose of the questions was clear.
 - a. We worked with a panel of school leadership advisors - a combination of serving school leaders from senior and middle leadership positions, academics and course providers

Results

Sample

70 individuals from the UK, Greece, Poland, Lithuania and Turkey took part in the survey. Partners approach school leaders within their institution and beyond to take part in the survey. The distribution across different surveys were as follows.

Country of Origin	Raw Number	Percentage
UK	30	43%
Greece	9	13%
Turkey	5	7%
Poland	11	16%
Lithuania	15	21%

	% of Sample
I am the Headteacher/Principal/Head of School	40
I am a Senior Leader/Manager in the school (Deputy or Assistant)	40
I am a Middle Leader/Manager in the school (e.g. Head of Department/Phase Leader/Curriculum Leader).	10
I am a Executive Headteacher (responsibility for more than 1 school) or a CEO of a school trust	5
Other	5

Only 5% of individuals were from non-senior positions. Further examination found few notable differences between these four roles and the answers given on the questionnaire, especially in light of the sample size. For this purpose, the sample was treated as a single uniform sample.

Main Themes

Question 1: What is the prevalence of wicked problems compared to tame problems?

School leaders were asked what the prevalence of complex issues/wicked problems compared to easier, or tame, problems.

	Rare	Highly Unlikely	Unlikely	Sometimes	Likely	Highly Likely	Common
Tame/Less Complex problems	0	0.6	0.6	12	15.4	24.6	46.9
Wicked/Complex problems	1.1	1.7	4.6	20	21.7	28.6	22.3

Table 1: Prevalence of Tame to Wicked Problems

In summary, school leaders recognised that they were more likely to come across problems that were tame, or less complex, than problems that were wicked.

However, when asked about how much time each problem took, school leaders recognised that wicked problems took more of their time.

	All	Most	Some	Little	Very Little	None
Tame problems	0.6	31.8	51.1	13.1	2.8	0
Wicked/Complex Problems	1.1	48.9	34.1	11.4	4.5	0.6

Table 2: Prevalence of Tame to Wicked Problems

Table 2 summarises that more school leaders reported that complex issues/wicked problems took up more time (48.9 vs 31.8%) compared to less complex/tame tasks.

Question 2: Are there specific types of tasks more or less likely to be complex issues/wicked problems?

We surveyed school leaders on whether specific responsibilities within their leadership role were more or less likely to contain complex issues/wicked problems. Table 3 describes the extent to which school leaders identified each responsibility as more likely to be complex/wicked or less complex/'tame'.

	More Likely to Contain Wicked Problem %	More Likely to Contain Tame Problems %	Do Not Answer/Do not have responsibility &
Teaching and Learning	46	54	0
<p>Illustrative Comments: Tame if evidence informed approach is taken and this is the whole school culture, but wicked in terms of improving T&L where colleagues are not invested in this improvement</p> <p>Managing performance and expectations become a wicked problem as staff work and see things in different way</p> <p>Consistency is one of the most difficult this fo grapple with.</p>			
Student Achievement	45	57	0
<p>Illustrative Comments: I would expect that culture and teaching and learning raise wicked problems and if these are sorted then student outcomes will be tame!</p>			
External Inspectors	43	53	4
<p>Illustrative Comments: second guessing what the outcome of inspections might be can be a long term wicked problem.</p> <p>I believe external authorities and accountabilities can offer both tame and wicked problems. However, this can be context dependent, too.</p>			
Collaborative working	45	55	0
<p>Illustrative Comments: Once again it comes down to how you make staff feel and if you can get them to understand why you have partnered them with certain staff</p>			
HR	49	45	6
<p>Illustrative Comments: complexities of managing staff absence and the legalities that has to be adhered to carefully can make this into a wicked problem</p> <p>Tame due to finite number of possible solutions.</p>			
Child Safety	42	57	1

Illustrative Comments:

The enormity of getting something wrong or missing something.

I spend a lot of time challenging and this requires understanding of how different agencies work and the people working in them.

Finance	40	52	8
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Illustrative Comments:

Careful management of finances leave little room for manoeuvre.

Again at times very challenging. Trying to balance budgets with decreasing funding.

Health and Safety	25	74	1
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Illustrative Comments:

Over last 12 months this has been complex with covid.

We are a PFI and it has brought problems but it doesn't spend a lot of my energy any more.

Pastoral Care	53	45	2
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Illustrative Comments:

Behaviour Management	55	44	1
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Illustrative Comments:

Can be linked to lack of outside services and sourcing appropriate provision

It's easy to get compliance but harder to get sustainable behaviours.

Performance Management	30	69	1
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Illustrative Comments:

This can become wicked if addressing underperformance as it may impact on pupil outcomes.

Tame but only because ours is based around our professional learning

Complaints	56	43	1
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Illustrative Comments:

Can be complex and hard not to take personally

(tame) only because we have put the thought into our culture, behaviour systems, teaching and learning and structures

even now I still can't manage to resolve some that I perceive as being unreasonable without escalating higher up the chain			
Staff Development	45	55	0
<p>Illustrative Comments: Tame if structure, systems and buy in are in place, wicked if not done well</p> <p>Lots of people say they "do" coaching or training but it's easy to say it's done but harder to see the impact.</p>			
Collaboration with Parents	42	58	0
<p>Illustrative Comments: a large diverse, multi cultural school and that brings a level of complexity that you really need to understand</p> <p>Multi-agency working can sometimes be difficult to manage.</p>			
Culture	64	34	2
<p>Illustrative Comments:</p>			
Provision for Additional and Special Educational Needs	61	39	0
<p>Illustrative Comments: Huge because you are working often in tension with statutory cuts</p> <p>Send provision provides a massive headache between what is right for the child and what you can do in terms of agencies and funds</p> <p>Real difficulty in bringing together SENCO, parental and teacher perceptions and practices</p> <p>Tensions created on the right thing to do when staff and children are consistently hurt etc.</p>			

Table 3: Prevalence of Complex/Wicked Problems According to Responsibility

From Table 3, we determined that these responsibilities could fit into three categories.

Where Complex Issues/Wicked Problems Are Least Likely to Occur (i.e. when there was a clear majority +60%)	Middle Ground - As likely to be tame/less complex or complex/wicked.	Where Complex Issues/Wicked Problems Are Most Likely to Occur (majority +60%)
Health and Safety	Teaching and Learning Student Achievement	Culture Special Educational Needs

Performance Management	External Inspectors Collaborative working People Development HR Child Safety Finance Pastoral Care Behaviour Management Complaints	
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Table 4: Summary of Results from Table 3.

It would appear the following can be said in relation to whether or not particular responsibilities are more or less likely to have wicked/complex problems:

1. That the majority of a school leader's responsibilities can contain wicked problems/complex issues.
2. That it would appear that complex issues/wicked problems are most likely to appear in areas of school culture and Special Educational Needs..

A simplified qualitative analysis of the comments made by participants suggested that specific circumstances could increase the likelihood a responsibility becoming more complex/wicked:

- The individuals involved. An increase in either a) the number of b) the diversity of individuals involved could make a problem more complex. Furthermore, the involvement of external organisations/individuals could increase the complexity of a problem. Some suggested that this was due to the challenge that would arise in integrating multiple perspectives.
- The context of the problem/issue mattered. The context of the potential problem/issue usually included to what extent the issue occurred within a well defined system i.e. if the system for teaching was well-organised, school leaders were more likely to consider the problem as tame/less complex.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is two fold: First, it is to outline the key themes from the results of the survey. Second, it is to consider these themes what might mean for the project: Namely, to produce a series of training and resources that can support the sense-making development of school leaders

The summary of the themes are from these results are as follows:

Theme 1: Whilst complex issues/wicked problems appear to be less common than tame/less complex counterparts, wicked problems take up greater amounts of time

This theme informs us that complex problems can be more demanding on the time of a school leader. We can suggest that this is due to the challenging nature that such problems can cause individuals i.e. we need to make sense of them in order to act and such problems can create substantive challenges to our stage of adult development (Output O1-A3) This finding therefore

- a) Justifies the focus on complex issues/wicked problems within this approach to professional development
- b) We need to communicate that, whilst complex problems might not be common, they can impact an individual's resources and, therefore, require attention.

Theme 2: That complex issues/wicked problems can occur across a range of school leadership responsibilities

School leaders varied in whether they considered specific responsibilities to be more or less complex. What was apparent was that it was possible for complex issues to occur across a range of responsibilities - these responsibilities were both specific to education (e.g. teaching and learning) and those that could be found in any organisation (e.g. finances). Finally, responsibilities relating to culture and Special Educational Needs were more likely to be considered complex/wicked: both of these responsibilities were highlighted by Anderson (2017) and Morrison (2010) as particularly complex/wicked.

The implications of this are that

- a) Supporting school leaders in how they engage in sense making could assist their leadership capacities across a wide range of their role.
- b) In creating case studies, we will need to be aware that complex issues can occur across both generic and education specific leadership responsibilities.
- c) In creating case studies might wish to consider placing particular focus on case studies or resources around special educational needs and school culture.

Theme 3: That particular features of an issue might make it more complex.

School leaders were given the opportunity to provide freehand comments on the complex issues that they faced within their schools. It would appear that a responsibility could become more complex/wicked if: there was a broader number of individuals involved; there was a diverse range of individuals involved; if individuals from outside the school were involved; that the issue/problem arose outside of a well-structured/organised part of the organisation.

Some leaders concluded that these issues arose in trying to integrate a large number of diverse opinions and that this challenge could make a problem particularly complex. First, these themes are reflective of the literature in adult development. Integrating a large and wider number of perspectives so as to understand what is happening is hard (Gilbride, James and Carr, 2021). In designing the course materials and course structures, we will need to take in account

- a) To what extent are we training and supporting school leaders to integrate multiple and diverse perspectives
- b) To what extent are we training and support school leaders to work with a range of different roles in constructing a shared understanding of a problem
- c) To what extent are we supporting leaders to work in complex organisational circumstances.

Theme 4: To consider the relationship between problem and context more deeply within the design of resources.

Seeing no negligible difference between either a) the role that school leaders were undertaking and b) the country of origin was an interesting, but not surprising, discovery. The design of the questionnaire focused the participants' attention on the structure of the problem and to reflect on the features of a complex/wicked problem. Because this framework is universal across sectors and responsibilities (Rittel and Webber, 1974), it could explain the lack of difference between responsibilities and countries. In summary, the definition provided by Rittel and Webbers' (1974) work allowed for leaders across countries to share similar ideas around the responsibilities they have within their roles.

Achieving a shared understanding across roles and contexts using wicked problems is relevant for the design of resources and materials. It would appear that using wicked problems to discuss sense-making might be a way of achieving a shared understanding across groups that are likely to contain a variety of different contexts and roles. We should therefore seek to implement this framework in the design of cases and in sense-making activities.

However, there are several reasons why we need to consider the broader context in which complex issues/wicked problems within the design of the resources and training. First, theme 3 recognised that the direct context of the problem can affect how complex/wicked the problem is. Furthermore, context is an important facet in leadership decision making (Hallinger, 2005). It is therefore clear that the involvement of partners across our network will be important in ensuring that problem/issue specific materials.

Summary

- Through this questionnaire, we have established that supporting school leaders in the complex issues/wicked problems they have within their role is a relevant intervention.
- We have discovered that wicked problems take up more of a leader's time than non-complex issues.
- Furthermore, we have found that wicked problems are likely to occur across a range of responsibilities. There would appear to be a specific concentration of complex issues/wicked problems within Special Educational Needs and School Culture . In designing a programme around wicked problems, whilst we should be prepared to engage with a range of educational and non educational examples pertaining to

school leadership, Special Educational Need and school culture appear to be good topics from case studies.

- Any of these responsibilities can be made more complex when the leader has to handle a range of individuals, a diversity of different perspectives and when external individuals from outside the school become involved. Furthermore, if that particular aspect of the organisation was poorly structured, the complexity of the problem could increase. These findings have implications for how we design the case studies within the course, and what we questions we might need to ask and topics we might need to support leaders with.
- That the wicked problem framework can be a useful tool in helping leaders across different contexts and roles to share experiences about the types of responsibilities that they face. However, given the role context places in determining task complexity, we should work closely with partners to explore relevant contexts for course materials.

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