# Educational leadership and innovation management in a changing social landscape. Perspectives on education in Romania and Finland

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*Abstract*

*In a rapidly transforming global context, innovation management and educational leadership have become indispensable for reimagining the future of education. The capacity of educational systems to adapt to social, economic, and technological change depends on their ability to integrate innovation as a systemic and cultural process. Educational institutions must cultivate flexibility, resilience, and a shared vision of learning that prioritizes quality and relevance.*

*This article examines how leadership and innovation interact to drive educational transformation, using a comparative analysis between Romania and Finland. Drawing on international and Romanian literature, it highlights leadership as a catalyst for change, the importance of professional autonomy, and the systemic conditions that enable innovation. The findings suggest that educational innovation requires more than new methods, it demands visionary leadership, coherent policy, and a deep cultural shift toward trust and collaboration..*

## 1. Introduction

This research article aims to identify to what extent global trends in educational innovation and leadership transformation influence national education systems, particularly in Romania and Finland. It also seeks to determine whether these global tendencies display specific features characteristic of post-transition Eastern European countries. These two countries were selected because they represent distinct yet comparable cases in terms of educational reform trajectories, governance structures, and openness to pedagogical innovation and international collaboration (OECD, 2016; Sahlberg, 2021; European Commission, 2020; Cucoș, 2021; Vlăsceanu, 2020).

In this context, it becomes relevant to examine several key aspects regarding how educational leadership supports innovation at institutional and systemic levels. Specifically, the study aims to explore how schools and

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educational authorities in Romania and Finland conceptualize and implement innovation through leadership strategies, organizational culture, and policy coherence. The analysis also addresses how teachers' professional learning and autonomy influence schools' capacity to adapt to societal change and technological transformation.

The literature review section will synthesize both international and national perspectives, identifying the theoretical foundations of educational innovation and leadership, as well as contributions from Romanian and Nordic scholarship. It will examine how innovation is defined as a pedagogical and organizational process (Cristea, 2013; Drucker, 1993; Serdyukov, 2017) and how leadership facilitates the translation of ideas into sustainable educational practices (Fullan, 2021; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022; Pânișoară, 2022).

The comparative analysis will then highlight how Finland's trust-based, decentralized education model contrasts with Romania's bureaucratic and policy-fragmented structure. It will identify the main differences in curriculum flexibility, teacher professionalization, and governance approaches, as well as the lessons that Romania can draw from the Finnish and Estonian experiences in embedding innovation into practice (OECD, 2023; Yefimenko & Boronos, 2025).

From a methodological standpoint, the paper employs a comparative literature review approach, analyzing 26 peer-reviewed academic sources and institutional reports published between 2010 and 2025. This method allows for the integration of conceptual, empirical, and policy perspectives, thereby generating a holistic understanding of how leadership and innovation interact within educational systems.

The results of the study emphasize the critical role of educational leadership in fostering institutional innovation, building professional trust, and ensuring coherence between reform objectives and local implementation. The conclusions underline the need for Romania to strengthen leadership capacity, enhance teacher autonomy, and cultivate a culture of reflection and shared responsibility to achieve sustainable educational transformation aligned with global innovation trends.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Educational Innovation and Leadership in Romania and Finland. National and Contextual Perspectives

Educational innovation has become a central theme of 21st-century education systems, reflecting the need to adapt to rapid technological change, social transformation, and economic uncertainty. In both Romania and Finland, the interplay between innovation, leadership, and policy has shaped the capacity of education systems to modernize and respond to global challenges (OECD, 2016; Sahlberg, 2021; Cucoș, 2021; Vlăsceanu, 2020).

In Romania, after 1990, education reform was strongly influenced by the transition from a centralized to a democratic governance model. Early reforms focused on legislative restructuring and curriculum diversification, often emphasizing alignment with European standards rather than pedagogical innovation (Păun, 2021). Subsequent national strategies, such as Romania Educată and Strategia pentru Învățământul Superior 2015–2020, included goals related to quality assurance, teacher training, and digitalization (Iucu & Marin, 2022; Drăghicescu & Munteanu, 2023). However, these efforts have often been fragmented, lacking coherent implementation and evaluation mechanisms. Educational leadership, in particular, remains largely administrative, with limited autonomy and innovation support (Pânișoară, 2022).

Conversely, Finland's education system has evolved as a paradigm of trust, professional autonomy, and continuous improvement. Since the 1970s, successive reforms have established a culture of collaboration and decentralized governance, where teachers and principals play a key role in innovation (Sahlberg, 2021; European Commission, 2020). Finnish leadership emphasizes shared decision-making, reflective practice, and moral purpose, creating conditions for sustained pedagogical experimentation (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022).

Both countries have launched national programs to enhance innovation capacity. Romania's policies (OECD, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2022) focus on digital transformation and lifelong learning but are hindered by low institutional trust and high bureaucratic constraints. Finland's policies, in contrast, integrate innovation into everyday school practices through the National Core Curriculum and professional learning networks. These initiatives embed principles of inclusion, curiosity, and collaborative learning into the education culture (Fullan, 2021).

Furthermore, the Estonian model offers an intermediate perspective. Emerging from similar post-communist constraints, Estonia has leveraged digital infrastructure, transparent governance, and teacher autonomy to position itself among Europe's most innovative education systems (Yefimenko & Boronos, 2025). This comparison illustrates that innovation is not dependent solely on economic resources, but on cultural readiness, leadership vision, and systemic coherence.

In both Romania and Finland, universities and teacher education institutions play a major role in fostering innovation by preparing reflective practitioners. While Finnish higher education integrates research-based teacher education, Romania still struggles to link pedagogical theory with classroom practice (Cucoș, 2021; Iucu & Marin, 2022). This gap remains a critical barrier to transferring innovation from discourse to practice.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that innovation and leadership are co-dependent processes. In Finland, innovation is embedded in systemic trust and professional autonomy. In Romania, it remains largely policy-driven and episodic, constrained by bureaucratic inertia and cultural hesitation toward risk-taking. Both the international and Romanian literature converge on the idea that sustainable

change requires leaders who are reflective, emotionally intelligent, and ethically grounded (Fullan, 2021; Cristea, 2013).

## 2.2 Conceptualizing Educational Innovation and Leadership

Educational innovation represents a multifaceted process that integrates pedagogical creativity, technological advancement, and organizational change. Drucker (1993) defined innovation as the "successful implementation of new ideas, processes, or products that create value." In education, innovation involves the reconfiguration of teaching, learning, and assessment to enhance relevance and learner engagement (Serdyukov, 2017).

From a pedagogical standpoint, Cristea (2013) characterizes innovation as a "superior pedagogical product" that results from a systematic process, preparation, incubation, and application within the educational community. This highlights that innovation requires both cognitive and cultural transformation, combining theoretical insight with the educator's creativity and adaptability.

Leadership acts as the catalyst translating innovation into reality. According to Fullan (2021), "deep change depends on leaders who can mobilize collective energy around moral purpose." Leadership in education thus entails vision, trust-building, and sustained professional learning (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022). Motivation plays a key role in teachers' engagement with innovation. Pink (2009) identifies autonomy, mastery, and purpose as the intrinsic drivers of human motivation, factors that are essential for fostering creative, self-directed professional learning cultures. Theories of distributed leadership emphasize collaboration, shared responsibility, and organizational learning as preconditions for sustainable innovation (Zoul, 2019; Casas, Whitaker & Zoul, 2018). Argyris & Schön (1996) introduced the concept of double-loop learning, suggesting that innovative organizations learn by questioning their governing norms, not merely adjusting actions. Applied to schools, this means innovation requires reflective leadership that challenges existing assumptions about teaching and learning.

Romanian scholarship contributes to this debate through works such as Pânișoară (2022), Cucoș (2021), and Vlăsceanu (2020), who stress that innovation cannot thrive in hierarchical, control-oriented environments. Effective leadership must encourage reflection, experimentation, and teacher autonomy. Conversely, Finnish and Estonian scholars (Sahlberg, 2021; Yefimenko & Boronos, 2025) show that innovation emerges naturally where professional trust replaces inspection and where teachers are recognized as knowledge producers.

Huberman (1978) demonstrated that innovation diffusion depends on individual agency and interpersonal trust within schools, those most open to experimentation tend to share characteristics such as autonomy, confidence, and collaboration.

Pink (2009) complements this framework through motivation theory, autonomy, mastery, and purpose are the primary drivers of innovation-oriented

behaviour in educators. These intrinsic motivators underpin the Finnish philosophy of teacher empowermen

A second theoretical layer concerns innovation as a system property. According to OECD (2016, 2023), innovation in education is sustainable only when supported by coherence among governance, policy, and practice. Educational leaders must therefore act as "boundary spanners," connecting institutional visions with local realities.

Finally, contemporary frameworks on leadership (Fullan, 2021; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022) propose a holistic perspective that integrates intellectual, moral, and emotional dimensions. Transformational leadership inspires and sustains innovation not by authority, but through shared meaning and relational trust. This shift from control to connection, from management to mentorship is at the heart of the educational change needed in Romania.

## 3. Methodology

The objective of this research is to explore how educational leadership and innovation interact within school systems in Romania and Finland, and to identify the main similarities, divergences, and transferable practices that can inform sustainable educational change.

The guiding research question is How do educational leadership and innovation policies shape systemic transformation in Romania and Finland between 2010 and 2025?

This study employs a comparative literature review methodology, a qualitative approach designed to synthesize findings from multiple academic and institutional sources to identify recurring themes, gaps, and patterns in the research (Snyder, 2019). Data analysis employed thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), integrating qualitative evidence to identify patterns of leadership and innovation. This method was considered appropriate for this paper, as it allows the integration of empirical and conceptual studies addressing innovation and leadership from both international and national perspectives (OECD, 2016; Sahlberg, 2021; Pânișoară, 2022).

The research process consisted of three stages:
- Source identification and selection:

The databases Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate were used to identify peer-reviewed studies, national reports, and policy papers published between 2010 and 2025. A total of 82 documents were initially identified using keywords such as "educational innovation," "school leadership," "teacher professional learning," "educational governance," and "Romania" / "Finland." After screening for relevance and quality (peer-reviewed or institutional credibility), 26 key studies were selected for in-depth analysis.

Romanian sources include Cristea (2013), Cucoș (2021), Pânișoară (2022), and Vlăsceanu (2020), while international sources include OECD (2010, 2016, 2023), Fullan (2021), Hargreaves & Shirley (2022), and Sahlberg (2021).
- Data extraction and thematic coding:

Each selected source was analysed using thematic content analysis (Bowen, 2009). Codes were developed to capture recurring themes:

- Educational leadership models (transformational, distributed, participatory);
- Innovation dimensions (pedagogical, technological, organizational);
- Cultural and governance factors (trust, policy coherence, autonomy);
- Professional development and teacher agency.

Using these categories, data were compared across the Romanian and Finnish contexts to identify convergences and systemic contrasts.

- Comparative analysis and synthesis:

The findings were organized into comparative matrices contrasting Romania and Finland, and selectively, Estonia as a reference system. This step allowed a synthesis of how leadership styles and innovation ecosystems evolve in different socio-cultural contexts.

The period of analysis, mostly concentrates between 2010-2025, with few accent on early findings, was chosen because it captures both the digital transformation of education and the post-pandemic leadership adjustments. During this period, global research increasingly emphasized innovation ecosystems, resilience, and the ethical dimensions of educational leadership. It also considers some older papers dating back from the beginning of the idea of innovation, as basic work for innovation.

The comparative literature review allows identifying cross-national lessons and contextualizing innovation practices without the biases of single-case studies (Snyder, 2019). It also permits linking theory and policy by triangulating evidence from diverse academic traditions.

The research is limited by the availability of recent empirical data for Romania, as many national studies remain descriptive or policy-oriented rather than evidence-based. Additionally, while Finland's educational model is well-documented internationally, contextual differences limit direct policy transferability. The study, therefore, aims not to generalize but to extract adaptable principles for leadership and innovation in Romania's education system.

## 4. Comparative Analysis. Romania, Finland, and Emerging Models

Educational innovation and leadership manifest differently across systems, depending on historical legacies, governance structures, and cultural attitudes toward change. The comparison between Romania and Finland, and, to a lesser extent, Estonia, reveals how trust, autonomy, and coherence determine the degree to which educational systems can sustain innovation over time. While both systems share a European vision of inclusion, quality, and adaptability, their historical trajectories, governance models, and cultural foundations have produced divergent outcomes in innovation readiness and leadership practice (OECD, 2016; Sahlberg, 2021; Cucoș, 2021).

### *4.1 Systemic Context and Historical Trajectories*

Romania's education system is still shaped by post-communist institutional inertia. Centralized control, excessive regulation, and a low-trust culture limit local decision-making and professional autonomy (Vlăsceanu, 2020). Policy reforms often follow political cycles rather than educational needs, leading to fragmentation and reform fatigue (Drăghicescu & Munteanu, 2023).

By contrast, Finland built its education system on long-term consensus and cultural continuity. Since the 1970s, its policy vision has been characterized by stability, decentralized governance, and a professionalized teaching corps (Sahlberg, 2021). The Finnish model demonstrates that sustained innovation is possible only when policies, leadership, and values form a coherent ecosystem (OECD, 2023).

Estonia, though geographically and historically closer to Romania, managed to overcome similar post-Soviet constraints by investing in digital infrastructure, trust-based teacher training, and transparent governance (Yefimenko & Boronos, 2025). This contrast illustrates that transformation depends more on strategic coherence and leadership philosophy than on economic resources.

### *4.2 Organizational Culture and Leadership Practices*

Leadership culture represents one of the most significant dividing lines between Romania and Finland. Finnish schools cultivate a trust-based organizational culture in which principals act as facilitators rather than controllers (Sahlberg, 2021). Leadership is distributed: decision-making involves teachers, students, and parents. Regular reflection meetings and joint curriculum design sessions foster ownership and innovation (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022).

In Romania, leadership is still perceived primarily as administrative management. Principals focus on compliance with inspectorate requirements and the execution of ministerial orders, leaving little room for visionary leadership (Pânișoară, 2022; Cucoș, 2021). Studies from Revista de Pedagogie (Drăghicescu & Munteanu, 2023) indicate that 70% of teachers perceive their leaders as "bureaucratic rather than transformative."

Institutional trust, the invisible infrastructure of innovation, is notably weak in Romania (Vlăsceanu, 2020). Decision-making is centralized, and schools have minimal autonomy in resource allocation or personnel management. Finland, conversely, operates on the principle of "intelligent accountability," where responsibility is internalized through professional norms rather than external inspections (Fullan, 2021).

Estonia's model further confirms that autonomy combined with digital transparency can produce remarkable innovation outcomes. Through open data, participatory governance, and professional collaboration platforms, Estonian schools have cultivated what Yefimenko & Boronos (2025) call a "culture of agile adaptation." Romania can draw lessons from this approach to rebuild trust through shared leadership and digital openness.

### 4.3 Curriculum and Pedagogical Approaches

In Finland, the curriculum operates as a dynamic, competence-based framework that empowers teachers to design locally adapted learning experiences. The Finnish National Core Curriculum (2014, updated 2020) emphasizes transversal competences as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and self-regulation, aligning education with real-life contexts and student autonomy (Sahlberg, 2021; OECD, 2023). Teachers function as curriculum co-designers, engaging in continuous reflection and peer collaboration.

By contrast, the Romanian curriculum, though periodically revised, remains largely prescriptive and subject-centered. Reforms such as the Romania Educată strategy and the National Curriculum Framework (2017–2021) have introduced key competences aligned with European recommendations, yet implementation remains fragmented (Iucu & Marin, 2022; Pânișoară, 2022). Teachers often report limited flexibility in adapting content to learners' needs due to centralized control and frequent policy changes (Drăghicescu & Munteanu, 2023).

While Finland promotes "learning to learn," Romania's approach remains closer to "learning to perform." As Fullan (2021) argues, systems that value inquiry over compliance generate deeper learning and sustainable innovation. Estonia represents an intermediate case, where the LÕK 2022 curriculum reform has merged digital and creative competences across subjects, showing that innovation can be achieved even in resource-limited contexts through coherence and stakeholder engagement (Yefimenko & Boronos, 2025).

Thus, while Finland operationalizes autonomy through trust, Estonia does so through technology and transparency. Romania's challenge lies in transforming autonomy from a legal declaration into a lived professional culture.

### 4.4 Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teacher education constitutes the foundation of innovation capacity. In Finland, teacher preparation is fully research-based: all teachers complete a master's degree that integrates pedagogy, research methodology, and practicum in real classrooms. Continuous professional development (CPD) is embedded into school life, supported by state funding and peer mentoring (Sahlberg, 2021). The result is a profession characterized by high status, autonomy, and collective responsibility (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022).

Romania's teacher training system remains fragmented between theoretical pedagogy and limited practicum exposure. While national programs such as CRED, Curriculum Relevant, Education Open to All (2019–2022) aimed to strengthen digital competences, evaluations show that training remains heavily formalistic and disconnected from classroom realities (Cucoș, 2021). The professionalization of teachers is often hindered by low remuneration, limited mentorship, and inconsistent quality assurance (Vlăsceanu, 2020).

Nevertheless, recent pilot projects, such as the Teachers for the Future program (World Bank & Ministry of Education, 2023), signal progress toward integrating reflective practice, coaching, and school-based innovation labs. Earlier research by Huberman (1978) also emphasized that educational change depends on "change agents" within schools, individuals with the capacity to model new practices, inspire peers, and sustain innovation through personal commitment and professional networks. As Pânișoară (2022) notes, Romania's challenge is not the absence of initiatives, but their continuity and alignment across institutional levels.

In contrast, Finland's OAJ professional learning network and Estonia's Innove Agency have institutionalized teacher learning communities where innovation emerges organically through collaboration, reducing dependence on top-down reform (OECD, 2023).

Estonia offers a particularly relevant comparative model for post-transition education systems seeking to build innovation capacity through digital transformation and teacher empowerment. Over the past two decades, Estonia has moved from structural reform to cultural consolidation by integrating technology, autonomy, and professional trust into a coherent national education strategy (Yefimenko & Boronos, 2025).

The Estonian Education Strategy 2035 and the Digital Education Action Plan (2020–2027) have redefined the role of teachers as facilitators of knowledge creation rather than transmitters of content.

### 4.5 Policy Framework and Innovation Support

National education policies determine whether innovation remains rhetorical or becomes structural.

Finland's Education Policy Review 2030 (OECD, 2023) integrates innovation into governance through coherent policies connecting curriculum reform, teacher education, and research funding. Innovation is seen not as a separate initiative but as a continuous system property supported by collaboration between ministries, municipalities, and schools. It's education governance operates on long-term consensus among political parties, municipalities, universities, and teacher unions (European Commission, 2020). Educational reforms are iterative, evidence-based, and stable across administrations. The National Agency for Education ensures that local initiatives feed back into policy evaluation, forming a continuous learning cycle (OECD, 2023).

Romania's policy framework remains fragmented. Although several strategic documents emphasize modernization, such as the National Strategy for Smart Specialization (2021–2027) and Digital Education Vision 2030, implementation suffers from discontinuity and weak monitoring (Iucu & Marin, 2022). Policy changes frequently accompany political transitions, preventing long-term coherence. The governance model, however, is characterized by discontinuity. Policy documents often lack implementation mechanisms or evaluation frameworks (Stan, 2022). For example, The Education Law 1/2011has been amended over 50 times since 2011, fragmenting strategic coherence. Schools

operate under overlapping regulations that encourage procedural compliance but stifle innovation. In July 2023, Romania adopted the Law on Pre-University Education and the Law on Higher Education (together known as the Education Package 2023) replaced the previous Education Law 1/2011. The reform is part of the Romania Educată strategy (Presidential Initiative, 2018–2030), aiming to modernize governance, curriculum, and teacher professionalism. This law has already been amended several times, affecting coherence and fluency.

Drăghicescu and Munteanu (2023) argue that this structural instability creates "innovation fatigue," as educators perceive reforms as transient. Furthermore, insufficient dialogue between the Ministry of Education and local communities prevents scaling up pilot innovations.

Estonia's model, again, demonstrates the benefits of meta-learning in policy. Periodic independent evaluations inform ongoing adjustments, ensuring that reform remains adaptive and coherent. Romania could benefit from institutionalizing a similar system of evidence-based feedback.

Serdyukov (2017) noted, innovation in education requires an ecosystem approach, alignment between leadership, resources, and policy stability. Finland's example demonstrates that sustained investment in trust and professional capital yields innovation that endures beyond political cycles. Romania's challenge, therefore, is not the lack of reform but the absence of continuity and moral leadership to sustain it.

### 4.6 Cultural Mindsets and Educational Values

Educational transformation is not only structural but deeply cultural.

Finland's education system rests on collective trust, equality, and learner well-being (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022). Collaboration replaces competition; schools serve as inclusive communities that nurture creativity and civic responsibility.

Romania's educational culture remains influenced by performance-based conformity. Learning is often associated with memorization, while innovation is perceived as deviation from norms (Cucoș, 2021). Cristea (2013) emphasizes that innovation begins "in the educator's mindset," a moral and intellectual stance toward change. Drucker (1993) similarly defines innovation as "creative responsibility," implying both personal agency and institutional courage.

Estonia's educational culture demonstrates how mindset shifts can occur through digital empowerment and transparent governance, creating a sense of collective ownership over reform.

### 5. Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis highlights that the dynamics of educational leadership and innovation across Romania, Finland, and Estonia are shaped not only by structural policies but also by the cultural logic underpinning each system. The results reveal three interconnected trends: the centrality of trust in sustaining

innovation, the professionalization of leadership and teaching, and the emergence of digital ecosystems that redefine how learning and governance interact.

In Finland, innovation has become an organic feature of the education system because leadership operates within a high-trust culture. School principals and teachers act as partners in a shared moral and professional mission, and autonomy is exercised responsibly within a coherent policy framework (Sahlberg, 2021; Fullan, 2021). Educational leadership here is developmental, not managerial, it guides, inspires, and cultivates reflection. Innovation therefore arises not from external mandates but from professional collaboration embedded in daily practice. Teachers perceive themselves as researchers, continuously improving instruction and assessment. This approach explains Finland's sustained adaptability to social and technological change, even in times of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2023).

In contrast, the Romanian education system remains constrained by a legacy of hierarchical governance and low institutional trust. Leadership is often understood as administrative supervision rather than pedagogical coordination, and reform efforts frequently change direction with political cycles (Vlăsceanu, 2020; Pânișoară, 2022). Despite policy ambitions, the implementation of innovation at school level is uneven. The Law of Education no. 198/2023, however, signals an important paradigm shift. It redefines school leadership as a professional field requiring formal certification, decentralizes resource management, and introduces digital learning hubs (HubEdu) and micro-credentialing for teachers. If effectively implemented, these measures could enable the transition toward a trust-based model similar to that in Finland and Estonia. Yet, without consistent policy follow-up and investment in teacher capacity, the reform risks remaining declarative.

Estonia's experience confirms that systemic transformation is achievable even in post-Soviet contexts. The Estonian model combines strong digital infrastructure with participatory governance. Its Education Strategy 2035 institutionalizes feedback loops between schools, local authorities, and the Ministry of Education, ensuring coherence between policy and practice (Yefimenko & Boronos, 2025). Teachers are digitally literate and professionally autonomous, and leadership training focuses on collaborative problem-solving. This has produced a culture of transparency and peer accountability, aligning Estonia's performance with Nordic standards despite lower GDP levels.

Across all three systems, teacher professionalism emerges as the decisive factor. In Finland, every teacher graduates with a master's degree grounded in research and reflective practice, while in Estonia, professional development is supported through digital platforms and peer mentoring networks. In Romania, although the CRED program (2019–2023) introduced competence-based training and digital pedagogy, its long-term impact is constrained by limited local support and inconsistent follow-up (World Bank & Ministry of Education, 2023). The current challenge is not the absence of reform initiatives but the lack of institutional coherence and sustainable leadership to embed them.

Another key insight is the relationship between organizational culture and innovation sustainability. Finnish and Estonian schools cultivate collaborative cultures where experimentation is valued, and errors are viewed as opportunities for learning (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022). In Romania, the persistence of an evaluation culture centred on compliance and inspection inhibits creative risk-taking (Drăghicescu & Munteanu, 2023). Nonetheless, emerging projects such as Școli-pilot pentru inovare educațională (2022–2024) show that change is possible when teachers are empowered and leadership is participatory.

Overall, the results confirm that innovation is less a structural outcome and more a cultural process shaped by leadership philosophy, professional trust, and policy coherence. The convergence of evidence supports Drucker's (1993) view of innovation as "creative responsibility" and Cristea's (2013) idea that innovation begins in the educator's mindset. Sustainable reform requires leaders who create the conditions for learning, not control; teachers who act as agents of change, not executors; and systems that promote reflection, not conformity.

## 5. Conclusions

The results of the comparative and conceptual analysis highlight that educational leadership and innovation are interconnected dimensions that depend on systemic coherence, professional autonomy, and a culture of trust. The findings indicate that Romania, Finland, and Estonia have experienced distinct, yet converging, trajectories toward educational modernization and innovation. While Finland's model is characterized by sustained policy stability and professional trust, Estonia demonstrates that coherent governance and digital transformation can accelerate innovation even in post-transition societies.

Romania's recent policy developments, especially the Law of Education no. 198/2023, show a gradual shift toward decentralized governance, professionalized leadership, and competence-based curriculum reform. However, the persistence of bureaucratic constraints and limited local autonomy still restricts innovation at school level. Strengthening leadership capacity, ensuring policy continuity, and cultivating reflective professional cultures remain the main challenges for transforming policy intent into institutional practice.

At the same time, the comparison between the three systems suggests that innovation is not the privilege of well-funded contexts but the result of coherent collaboration among teachers, leaders, and policymakers. Countries that succeed in aligning policy with professional agency, through trust, transparency, and long-term commitment, create sustainable frameworks for educational improvement. Therefore, innovation in education should be understood as a continuous process of organizational learning, supported by leadership that promotes reflection, collaboration, and adaptability to change.

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