

Paper

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School Leaders Professional Learning in Education and Practice: Processes of convergence or divergence

Stina Jerdborg, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Presenting Author: Jerdborg, Stina

International research presents school leadership as a key factor in the success of schools. So far we know much more about what characterizes successful principals' work (eg. Moos, Johansson & Day, 2011; Harris, 2012) than in what ways principals' knowledge and skills evolve, develop and become recognizable (Goldring, Huff, Spillane, and Barnes, 2009). In the OECD report *Improve school leadership* Pont, Nusche & Moorman (2008) advocate that school leadership development should be understood as a combination of formal and informal processes, where leadership training is ongoing and onward. This could be viewed as a recognition of a need for reconnecting communities, from a formal and international sphere to the informal spheres of local schools, as researchers argue the need for research on how principal education affects learning and activities (Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Jacobson & Bezzina, 2008).

A few studies investigate the transition from higher education to professional life in general (Abrandt-Dahlgren, Dyrda-Solbrekke, Karseth, & Nyström, 2014). Additionally, transfer of learning from principal education to working practice has been found best functioning when focused on developing leadership abilities, leading ethically and leading learning for teachers (Orr & Orphanos, 2011). Formal education for principals has, however, been found resulting in different outcomes depending on how the program was understood by participants (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Regarding principals' workplace learning, remarkable little yet is known (Hulsbos, Evers & Kessels, 2016; Veelen, Slegers, & Endedijk, 2017).

Moreover, a need for a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay between the school environment and the learning of school leaders is addressed (Veelen et. al., 2017). Previous findings (Jerdborg, in manuscript) have revealed principals' learner identities linked to diverse orientations to education and practice. Each learner identity was found to either enable or restrict the way the principal experienced practice through the scope of engagement. The present study follow-up previous findings by exploring how principals interpret and make sense of both their informal professional experience and their formal education to create a coherent professional identity. The research questions are:

- How do school leader education affect novice principals learning and activities in their practice in schools, and how does this influence the school organization?

- What requirements of practice are the principals faced with in their exercise of the profession, and how does this influence their formation of a coherent professional identity?

A practice and learning perspective is used for this study (Nicolini, 2013; Wenger, 1998). According to Wenger (1998), it is by practice a community establishes what a competent practitioner is, and accordingly the community acts as a locally negotiated regime of competence. It needs not be the same regime of competence as in education. For learning in practice to be possible, an experience of meaning must be in interaction with the local regime of competence (Wenger, 1998).

In this perspective, organizational management is a local practice within the organization (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) defines organizations as social designs directed at practice consisting of interaction of the designed organization and lived practice. However, practice is not the result of design but rather a response to it. It is therefore necessary to understand organizations in terms of relations among localities with their perspectives on how they belong to the organization, their interpretation of its charter, and their own forms of knowledgeability (Wenger, 1998).

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

In Sweden, novice principals are obligated to participate in education after getting an appointment as principal. The program is running over three years and the participants attend the program while working as principals. The program aims to develop the leadership of principals responsible for the quality of teaching and learning, but also to give knowledge about governmental requirements and laws.

This qualitative study is the second part of a project following fourteen compulsory school principals during their last year in principals' education while also working as principals. Individual interviews, group-interviews, and observations were completed at the sites of education. This study focuses on the same novice compulsory school principals and their respective school organization. Each school was visited for one day during which interviews were held and observations and informal talk were serving as compliment. The data consists accordingly of interviews and observations in working practice. According to Nicolini (2013) research should use a combination of research methods in order to understand a practice, and in addition zoom in learning, mediation, other people and other practices. Since practice is characterized by activity and processual character both meaning-making and objective materiality must be addressed (Nicolini, 2013).

The individual interviews made with each principal at their respective school lasted for 60-100 minutes. Each principal also selected 1-5 co-workers to ask if they cared to participate in complimentary interviews. These are teachers, teachers for inclusive education, assistant principal and administrative staff who participated in either individual or a group interview lasting for 20-45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observations followed the work of the principal and notes were taken.

Practice is a history of both narratives and participation. Practice itself gives life to stories and the possibility of mutual engagement offers a way for newcomers to enter through own experience (Wenger, 1998). In this study, narratives and participation are investigated within each school through four dimensions of

organizational design; participation-reification, designed-emergent, local-global, and identification-negotiability (Wenger, 1998).

To explore social processes of learning in organizations depending on opportunities for the negotiation of meaning, a perspective of an architecture of learning based on engagement, imagination, and alignment is used (Wenger, 1998). Additionally, the same perspective is used to explore the principals learning opportunities offered by practice as well as how these interact with the principals' understanding of principal education.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

School leader education is expected to affect novice principals learning and activities in diverse ways depending on interpretations made by the principals. At first, the interpretations are supposed to follow the learner identities that previously were found (Jerdborg, in manuscript). Then new interpretations are expected to follow and supposed to be intertwined with the school organizations locally produced perceptions of competence. These two sets of interpretations will draw each other, eventually to shape shared histories of contradicting and consistent meaning as processes of convergence or divergence. The way each school organization is expected to be influenced is depending upon both local history of the past and local predictions of the future, but also depending on if a shared reality is shaped or not.

The requirements of practice that the principals become faced with in their exercise of the profession are expected to include organizational interactions to be able to tune in and acknowledge the locally negotiated competence, and experiences of a necessity to establish arenas for negotiations of new meanings. This is in turn expected to call for a need for a continuous consideration on how to merge diverse sets of regimes of competence and to incorporate these into a coherent professional identity. Eventually, a need for changing or further develop the existing orientation to and understanding of education and practice will be found.

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