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How School Leaders Can Gain Role Clarity and Grow Their Leadership Identity?

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Abstract

Over the past decades, principals have experienced an increased pressure emanating from the responsibility for managing change and building organisations, whilst striving to improve students' learning outcomes (Abrahamsen, Aas, & Hellekjær, 2015; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Leadership learning programmes appear to emphasise the requirements of the job rather than leaders' individual capabilities, moral purpose and the need to take an active role in learning (McKinsey & Company, 2010). In the design of programmes, there seems to be a challenge in finding the balance between system and reform needs and school and individual needs. Despite these challenges, there is consensus in the literature that principals and school leaders need to comprehend the macro-contextual and micro-contextual influences on their work, as well as to develop knowledge and skills to understand their schools and leadership roles (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Fullan, 2011). A fundamental but often forgotten perspective in leadership learning programmes is how to facilitate learning

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processes and help school leaders to gain role clarity and grow leadership identity. In this paper, we examine and discuss the way that newly appointed school leaders in Norway participating in a leadership learning programme can gain role clarity through investigation into role expectations and group coaching. We provide findings that shed light on aspects of how school leaders develop role clarity through taking an active role in learning within their workplaces and together with the school leaders participating in the leadership learning programme.

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Introduction

The major approaches employed by governments to ensure ongoing educational reforms are identified as old public administration (OPA), new public management (NPM) and organisational learning (OL; Olsen, 2002). Discrepancies within and between these approaches create their own pressures on schools and their leaders. Anxiety comes from the fact that the cumulative demands, fragmentation and incoherence could undermine the capacity of schools (Mulford, 2003). Whilst arguing that NPM has emerged as the dominant approach in educational governance, recent research has suggested that a closer examination should be made of OL. Under the influence of NPM, the restructuring of public schooling has been characterised by elements that all have in common a strong dependence on effective school leadership through school self-management, the expansion of the powers of school principals and increasing pressure for outcomes-based assessment (Dempster, 2002a).

In order to meet the multiple expectations placed on education, as well as to have engaged teachers, it is argued that schools need to become learning organisations. Within schools that are learning organisations, new types of relationship evolve between students, teachers and leaders, based around a trusting and collaborative climate, a shared and monitored mission and ongoing, relevant professional development (Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998; Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002). School leaders can be a major influence on school-level factors and on the management of conflicting external pressures. A skilled and well-supported school leader can help promote a sense of ownership and purpose in terms of the way that teachers approach their job (Louis & Leithwood, 1998). One of the most significant findings from studies of effective school leadership is that the authority to lead need not be located in a single leader, but can be dispersed within the school and shared between and among people, i.e. a distributed perspective (Gronn, 2009; Spillane, Parise, & Sherer, 2011). According to Mulford & Silins (2003), the real challenge for schools is no longer how to improve but how to sustain improvement. Then, sustainability will depend upon the school's internal capacity to maintain and support developmental work, and supporting improvement requires the leadership capability of many rather than a few. Despite the strong link between OL and distributive leadership, the principal is still the formal leader in schools and plays a significant leadership role when it comes to focusing on individual staff support, promoting an atmosphere of caring and trust among staff, establishing a school structure that promotes participative decision-making, working toward whole-staff consensus on school priorities, having high expectations for students and for teachers in terms of being effective and innovative and encouraging staff to reflect on what they are trying to achieve with

students and how they are doing it (Mulford & Silins, 2003; Robinson, 2010).

In the current literature on the continuing professional development of school leaders, three broad conceptualisations are identifiable (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lieberman, 1998). These are knowledge *for*, *in* and *of* practice. One perspective reflects leaders who have the role of implementers of knowledge that is generated by experts and formulated by policymakers, which they bring back to their schools and put into practice. In response to this point of view, there is acknowledgement of leaders' skills and knowledge about how new ideas can be transformed in the specific school culture. A third way takes issue with both these perspectives and suggests that professional learning is context specific and that leadership knowledge is both local and public at the same time (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2002).

Dempster (2002a) argues that principals' professional development can be described as a balance between learning what the system requires of individual leaders and what practising professionals require from themselves and their colleagues. A combination of system reconstruction and a focus on people results in a professional transformation orientation, which includes constructive social, system and organisational critiques, questions taken-for-granted understandings and analyses, reshapes personal and collective professional knowledge and reconstructs schooling and school leadership in alternative ways (Dempster, 2002b).

In a comparative document analysis of principal learning programmes in Sweden and Norway, the two Nordic countries with national leadership programmes for already active school leaders, the findings suggest that both programmes reflect international research,

and in addition, balancing democratic participation with managerial decision-making is characterised as making up the Nordic profile (Aas & Törnsen, 2016). The Nordic school leadership profile involves performing leadership within long-established democratic societies, which build on equal and collaborative relationships between leaders and staff and doing this in parallel to meeting system level accountability demands. In practice, this implies balancing the democratic idea of involvement and exerting influence with the necessary decision-making. Aas and Tӧrnsén (2016) suggest that the challenge for school leaders of handling the 'balancing act' calls for providers of leadership learning programmes to supplement system needs with a focus on individual needs beyond formal roles. Strengthening individuals to carry out the multifold and, at times, competing demands, appeals for self-awareness not only in the leadership role but also as a human being. In alignment with the argument from Dempster (2002b), this implies gaining role clarity: learning what the system requires of individual leaders and what practising professionals require from themselves and their colleagues. Role clarity refers as such to the sufficiency of information regarding the expectations associated with one's role within the organisation (Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2011). For leaders new to their positions, obviously, the acquisition of role knowledge is important, but it is also very demanding, particularly when the role is complex or when the organisational context is very dynamic (Van Wart, 2011), which is the case for school leaders. Developing critical thinking skills and the knowledge, ability, strength and courage to understand and balance aspects of hard control with the values of care and trust will be central to leadership learning and role clarity among school leaders. As a consequence, communication skills, the importance of personal involvement, emotional engagement and knowledge about how to

build trust need to be part of professional leadership development and role clarity (Aas, 2017). Understanding the role is a necessary step in growing one's own leadership identity (Aas & Vavik, 2015) and encompasses the process by which individuals come to be seen (by themselves and by others) as leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

A *fundamental but often forgotten perspective* in *leadership learning programmes* is, however, how to facilitate learning processes in terms of helping school leaders to gain role clarity and grow their leadership identity. With this background, we pose our main research questions: *How can newly appointed school leaders participating in a leadership learning programme gain role clarity through group coaching?* Two sub-questions are generated: *1) Which coaching topics have the school leaders prepared to be coached on, and how are these expressed by the leaders? How are the coaching topics developed through the group coaching, and what characterises their development?* Empirically, the study is grounded in a Principal Learning Programme in Norway, situated at a university for newly appointed school leaders (Hybertsen et al., 2014). The study sheds light on and discusses *fundamental* aspects of how school leaders can understand and gain role clarity through participating in the programme with integrated group coaching sessions, and it contributes to knowledge on how role clarity might be helpful in growing their leadership identity.

First, we give a literature overview of coaching and group coaching in professional leadership learning. Then, we explain the context of the study, the Principal Learning Programme, and the group coaching methodology utilised in the programme. Further, we outline the methodological approach before presenting the research findings, which are briefly summarised before moving on to the

discussion. Finally, we conclude the study and point out a direction for future work.

Coaching in Professional Leadership Learning

In recent times, coaching has gained a position as one of the tools used in leadership development programmes for school leaders (Bush, 2009). Studies reporting on the benefits of coaching used for professional development (Silver, Lochmiller, Copland, & Tripps, 2009) and for developing leadership performance (Goff, Guthrie, Goldring, & Bickman, 2014; Huff, Preston, & Goldring, 2013) are growing. Mostly, coaching is seen as offering support to school leaders in terms of putting issues and concerns into perspective, increasing their efficiency and helping them become innovative (Mavrogordato & Cannon, 2009). The knowledge produced through coaching is considered socially constructed and negotiated to the point that the status quo is explicitly questioned (Crow, 2012). When this approach is linked to professional learning for school leaders, there is the prospect of transformational leadership that encourages proactivity, even that which challenges the status quo and systemic issues (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Tolhurst (2010) suggests that coaching can be beneficial to individuals as well as the organisation as a whole. Benefits for individuals include increased levels of personal confidence, competence and personal agency. Organisational benefits of coaching include increased staff capability in responding to new roles or tasks and improvements to the organisation's practice.

Coaching provides a way to ensure that learning has direct relevance and meaning to a leader's work setting by helping leaders address issues and concerns regarding practice and make meaningful changes in their daily lives (Heck & Hallinger, 2014). This link with

the real world of praxis is also emphasised by Kolb (1984), Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) and Robertson (2008). Hunzicker (2011) suggests that adults as learners are motivated by solving problems that relate directly to their lives and by creating enduring solutions.

Most coaching approaches are dyadic (one to one); recently, group coaching has become another variant. Whilst coaching is a collaborative approach between the coach and the coachee, group coaching also includes co-coaches. The difference is that a learning community comprised of school leaders representing a variety of school cultures and contexts is formed (Flückiger, Aas, Johnson, Lovett, & Nicolaidou, 2017). As a result, group coaching provides a unique scenario for different collegial voices to support the development of school leaders' social and cultural competences (Britton, 2010; Thornton, 2010). Further, others such as Lee (2007), claim that collaborative engagement with a range of leaders from diverse contexts increases professional interaction, provides opportunities for school leaders to consider new ways of working as leaders of organisations (Passmore, 2009) and promotes awareness of how leadership can be performed differently in different school cultures (Aas & Vavik, 2015). In accordance with the principle that links professional learning to practice, Robertson (2016) argues that any collaborative engagement must be structured to facilitate double-loop and triple-loop learning and reflection *on* action, *in* action and *for* action. Double-loop learning refers to new ways of thinking and acting regarding issues (Argyris & Schön, 1978), and triple-loop learning involves the consideration of the organisational context, as well as a dramatic shift in perspective (reframing) and behaviour (redesigning; Hargrove, 2008).

Group coaching draws on a variety of theories and approaches spread across academic and professional fields (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016). As recognised by Rhodes and Fletcher (2013), coaching processes in education have their origins in business organisational contexts typified most recently in adaptations of the GROW model – goal setting, reality check, options available and wrap up – produced by Whitmore (2004). Brown and Grant (2010) developed the GROUP model – goal, reality, options, understanding others and perform – which takes into account that understanding others is a key factor in successful group coaching. The GROUP model follows the same initial phases as the GROW model, with the difference being that in the *understanding others* phase the focus is on how group dialogue provides opportunities for deep collaborative learning.

The facilitation of group processes has long been part of the repertoire of practices within organisational learning and development. A distinction should be made between the facilitation of group processes and group coaching. Group coaching is more goal focused than the process orientation of group facilitation, and the roles of the coach and the facilitator are slightly different. In group coaching, the coach focuses on the content that is being discussed within the group as well as the facilitation of the group coaching process (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016). An effective facilitation of group coaching includes four areas of facilitation: preparation of the group coaching sessions; introduction of the sessions; management of the group interaction; and summarising and synthesising the emerging ideas and actions (Rothwell, Herbert, & Rothwell, 2008). Whilst conducting this dual role, the facilitator is detached, focused on the team process, whereas the coach is engaged in the dialogue (Brown & Grant, 2010; Clutterbuck, 2007).

The participants in group coaching sessions acknowledge the importance of the other participants' efforts to provide positive support. This illustrates how the group coaching format can increase empathy through communicating with interpersonal sensitivity. Verbal encouragement from others can help the participants to achieve new goals and show them that they have the abilities to succeed (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015). The group setting allows the participants to influence one another and to collaborate and cooperate, thereby developing social competence. Relational responses and emotional reactions play an important role in the coaching environment (Brandmo, Aas, Colbjørnsen & Olsen, 2019). Due to the social aspects, mastering the coaching situation itself represents a learning opportunity. Moreover, professional competencies can be developed through giving and seeking authentic feedback from others and incorporating the group coaching methodologies into their own leadership settings (Flückiger et al., 2017).

The Principal Learning Programme

Norwegian authorities, influenced by the OECD project, 'Improving School Leadership' (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008), launched a nationwide education programme in 2009 for newly appointed principals; here, the goal was to improve their qualifications as leaders and to support national policies. The National Principal Learning Programme was built around five curriculum themes that the Norwegian Minister of Education and Research tendered for: students' learning, management and administration, cooperation and organisation building, development and change and the leadership role (Hybertsen et al., 2014). Seven universities offer the programme on behalf of the Norwegian

Directorate for Education and Training. According to Huber (2011), one of the fundamental principles of professional leadership learning is using multiple learning strategies. A process of ongoing reflection and discussion that challenges the current way of thinking is valuable in building new practices. In the Principal Learning Programme (hereafter called PLP) offered at our university, group coaching is integrated, aiming at promoting reflection on personal agency, including developing role clarity, self-efficacy and ethical considerations (Aas, 2016; As & Vavik, 2015), which can lead to changes in leadership practices. School leaders attending the programme, not necessarily principals yet, are often still in the early phases of their school leader careers, hence their lack of understanding of the school leadership role and of developing their identity as a leader. Most often they have several years of experience as teachers, and thus many have challenges with the transformation process, from their role as a teacher into their role as a school leader. In the following section, we outline the group coaching methodology utilised in the programme.

The Group Coaching Methodology

In the PLP, coaching is delivered to groups of six students. Each coaching group has its own dedicated coach who follows it throughout the programme. The group coaches have participated in a joint training programme led by a leading external coaching expert. All the students participate in the coaching sessions by asking questions, sharing reflections and offering advice. Three full days of the twenty-day programme are devoted to coaching, which mean that the three coaching sessions are integrated into the programme. A specific group methodology is developed for the coaching process (Aas, 2016). One participant at a time serves as the group's focus,

whilst the other members are active participants. The structure of the coaching session is similar for each of the six students.

In advance of a session, the students perform preparatory work (for example, a 360-degree interview) that helps them to formulate a leadership topic to be coached on and to prepare for the session. The session begins with a short introduction, where the participant in focus (the coachee) addresses his or her leadership topic, which most often reflects a leadership challenge to come to grips with. Next, the coach and the other members of the group are allowed to ask clarifying questions. In this phase, a reframing and concretisation of the presented topic might emerge in parallel, and the objective of the coaching is framed through help from the coach. After that, the group members and the coach start a conversation about what they have heard, their understanding of the leadership topic presented and what sorts of reflections they have, and then they are supposed to give advice that can motivate and promote the future growth of the coachee. During this phase of the session, the coachee is sitting with his or her back to the group, concentrating on only listening, not preparing answers. Finally, the coachee faces the group and comments on the reflections of and advice from the co-coaches and elaborates on ways that he or she might handle the challenge in the future. This methodology is also piloted in the project Professional Learning through Feedback and Reflection (PROFLEC) that involved 10 countries and was led by Professor Dr Stephan Huber from the University of Teacher Education Switzerland, with funding support from the European Commission (Flückiger et al., 2017).

The students' preparatory work for the first coaching session is to map expectations in terms of their leadership roles and performance. By using 360-degree interviews, each student is asked

to interview different people in their organisation to learn what their colleagues expect from them as leaders. Based on their interpretations of the interview data, the students write a report that compiles expectations and point out one to three leadership challenges that they can frame as topics to be coached on and address when in the spotlight for coaching.

The group coaching provides opportunities for sharing experiences with others who have similar leadership challenges. The information from the 360-degree interviews represents a 'mirror' or a reflection repertoire for understanding how the leaders 'fit' their jobs (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990). Listening to others' experiences during the coaching session provides the participants with information on how their leadership roles could be performed differently. Exposure to the daily life stories of leaders from different schools develops, what Passmore (2009) calls, cultural competence, which includes the ability to respond openly to others' ideas and values and a willingness to question personal assumptions and the assumptions of others. The role of the coaches is to support participants in framing the objective of the coaching session with a view to improving their personal competencies as leaders in their school contexts (Brown & Grant, 2010). Action planning (Hunzicker, 2011) involves the design of a plan that will lead to the achievement of the aforementioned objective. During this stage, the coaches provide support to the participants in designing their action plans. Ongoing monitoring and support provide encouragement and motivation to keep the participants on track (Huff et al., 2013; Mavrogordato & Cannon, 2009).

Methodology

This study utilises a qualitative research strategy (Cresswell, 2002) in order to examine the phenomenon of how newly appointed school leaders can gain role clarity and develop their leadership skills. A collective case study design (Stake, 2005) is used to investigate the development of role clarity and leadership identity in the cases of 60 school leaders participating in the Principal Learning Programme in 2018-2019. The data consist of 60 school leaders' reports, in which they, as preparation for the first group coaching sessions in January 2019, had each identified and specified a coaching topic based on the 360-degree interviews conducted in November 2018. In addition, the data consist of a document from each of the 10 coaching groups (10 groups with 6 school leaders in each group), 10 documents in sum. These documents were written by the groups' coaches and documented the coaching topic of each school leader in the group as it developed and was agreed upon as an objective and guideline for their coaching.

Through the analytical work, we aimed at bringing together findings from the 60 cases via the following strategy: (1) within analysis and (2) cross-case analysis. First, the coaching topics as formulated in the reports were analysed and then coded, case by case. The codes represented key leadership role challenges. In each case, we used open coding, inspired by the constant comparative method of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We then grouped the codes in order to identify the broad topics that existed across the 60 cases. The analysis led to the definition of five categories into which the challenges could be sorted:

1) Being clear
2) Leading meetings
3) Conducting difficult conversations
4) Prioritising and delegating
5) Handling resistance

This information was used to inform further interpretation and conduct a detailed analysis of the 10 documents by applying the same strategy. First, the developed coaching topics, as formulated for each case within each of the five categories, were analysed and coded case by case. The codes represented *aspects* of how the coaching topic developed. We then grouped the codes in order to identify the broad aspects that existed across the 60 cases. The analysis led to the definition of three categories into which the aspects could be sorted:

6) Deepening knowledge of leadership challenges
7) Connecting leadership challenges to contexts
8) Orienting toward goal-driven improvement through acting

Although great caution must be exercised when making generalisations in relation to such a small sample of school leaders, we follow Stake's (1995) call for the use of naturalistic generalisation. Here, readers are left to generalise for themselves, based on conclusions arrived at through their personal engagement in life, or via vicarious experience that is so well constructed that one feels as if it has happened to oneself.

Findings

The presentation of the findings is organised under the five identified coaching topics as identified through the analysis: *being clear, leading meetings, conducting difficult conversations, prioritising and delegating* and *handling resistance*. How the coaching topics developed

through the group coaching and what characterised their development are exemplified by the use of relevant excerpts from the data, showing the *aspects* revealed in the analysis. The excerpts refer to the school leaders (from 1–60; 60 cases in total).

Being Clear

Being clear is the leadership challenge that most of the school leaders identified as wanting to be coached on (14 of 60). How the school leaders actually interpreted and understood the concept of being clear based on the interview data is more explicitly expressed in the coaching topic as it emerged in the first phase of the coaching session. The findings show that conducting clear leadership revolves around inspiring, supporting, motivating, clarifying expectations, holding accountable, being courageous and having the willingness and ability to take action, involving, delegating tasks and being democratic. For example, a principal from an upper secondary school emphasised how important it is to make the informal leaders among the staff become supportive instead of acting as opponents regarding school development work. He posed the question: "How can one manage to be clear and express obvious expectations, which must be complied with, without being considered to be too governing and authoritarian?" A deputy principal reported that the dominant feedback from the 360-degree investigation was that she needs to be clearer, and after the process in the coaching group, she formulated her topic to be coached on: "How to communicate more clearly regarding challenging tasks and processes facing me as a leader of school development. I experience a dilemma between expressing clear expectations and, at the same time, taking on my role as a coach and motivating the teachers to find their own ways". Yet, a deputy principal from an elementary school problematised how to appear

diplomatic and, at the same time, act as a confident, clear, and courageous leader. She also included the importance of prioritising tasks and leading in a democratic manner. Likewise, another department head framed a theme around developing the competence "to lead those who in my department do not want to be led, and having the courage to express what I mean, and stand by my decisions although they represent the contrary to teachers' wishes". Some also mentioned clarity in relation to leading meetings, in addition to other aspects regarding this task.

Leading Meetings

Leading meetings was a frequently repeated concept in the school leaders' reports and in their identification and framing of coaching topics. During the coaching, it became evident that to lead in a structured way, to develop a professional community, to listen actively and to ensure that a wide range of standpoints are expressed ahead of solutions being made were challenges related to leading meetings. Moreover, it became evident that this task also included handling resistance and critique. "It may be a balance between trust and control", a department head at a secondary school, uttered. In a similar manner, yet another department head at an elementary school realised: "My authority under some circumstances is useful, whilst in others it is less purposeful". More explicitly, he pointed out the great potential when it comes to decision-making, but, at the same time, he realised that there is a limitation when it comes to communicating with the teachers in plenary meetings, such as when leading them. The main challenge seems to be to obtain the best insights ahead of a decision in order to succeed with the development work at the school. A principal at an adult education centre saw the challenge as keeping the focus on professional development, and the construction

of his topic ended more explicitly: "How to handle resistance and critical voices in meetings in school development work." Likewise, another head of department in a secondary school emphasised that he needs to develop routines and techniques to get the most out of a conversation.

Conducting Difficult Conversations

Dealing with difficult conversations, as a challenge and a skill that the school leaders want to develop, was frequently brought up in the school leaders' reports and in their identification and framing of the coaching topics. A difficult conversation may be one that you dread having, and which contains the potential for conflict. In fact, a difficult conversation often occurs together with a lack of clarity, which has already been explored above. For example, as an elementary school principal explained: "I want to get coached on my ability to be explicit and clear in my communication with the employees, even though there is a risk that he or she may be hurt or feel criticised". The principal expanded further: "I need to be challenged in terms of how to take on the voice of a leader, especially in individual conversations with the employees". A deputy head teacher from an upper secondary school expanded on mentioning the challenge of having difficult conversations to implementing and enduring such conversations. Likewise, questions were raised by a principal from a secondary school: "How should I handle a difficult colleague? And how should I deal with and correct unwanted behaviour without insulting and creating barriers to further cooperation?". A deputy head from a private school also wanted to be coached on the conversation as the point of departure, further expanding it in terms of avoiding labelling people and speaking too strong or quick to respond, "learn to answer that I need more time to

think before answering". She added that she needs to be better at setting limits for herself. The last example has something in common with several of the other examples from this chapter: the leaders' immanent need to prioritise.

Prioritising and Delegation

Prioritising and delegation are closely connected. Prioritising what tasks can be delegated may be an important skill for a school leader, in order to create more time to plan and conduct leadership. In sum, the school leaders emphasised the potential of delegating so as to be in a position to be increasingly close and more hands-on regarding the development work in the schools, alongside prioritising to increase their influence and ensure higher accountability among staff. A principal of an elementary school emphasised the need to develop the ability to delegate and to let go of some of the perceived need for control as the primary goal for his coaching time. In addition, a deputy principal at an upper secondary school referred to stress and a guilty conscience. Others also reported the same problems. A department head at a secondary school "needs help to prioritise different tasks in order to have more time to plan various strategic projects". Yet another points at "priority skills", and "increasing the capability to say no". A head of department at an upper secondary school emphasised: "The situation now is that I am very frequently at the office working, even during weekends. I am struggling with prioritising tasks". The head wanted to be coached on prioritising tasks without having a guilty conscience, emphasising the need to prioritise all the different tasks. Further, the head added: "This challenge coincides with another challenge that became clear to me during conducting the 360-degree interviews: the preoccupation with being liked by my teachers". By having the courage to prioritise

differently, some of them may experience less facilitation from me, which in turn may make some of them dissatisfied. The last section deals with handling resistance.

Handling Resistance

Resistance may be both a healthy force for positive change and progress and also a negative force for development. The school leaders emphasised the need to strengthen their ability to motivate for change and to lead their schools' development work in order to contribute to obtaining high achievement for the students. In short, this involves leading the teachers' learning and, at the same time, responding constructively to their resistance to and hesitation regarding change. For example, as one head of department in an upper secondary school illustrated, reflecting on questions like "How can I deal with those who express scepticism in a constructive way?" and "How can I avoid defending my own convictions even before I have described the details … and also challenge those who express resistance and are reluctant?" The head was also convinced that choosing this focus is important, not only with regard to the teachers, but also to the leadership group at school. "It is a crucial success factor that all members in the leadership group participate and engage in". In a similar manner, another head of department was also preoccupied with resistance from teachers, and what she considers to be "unpleasant". She pointed out the need to "develop robustness as a leader in order to persist and develop to become a better pedagogical leader than I am today". A head of department at an elementary school indicated the need to develop courage as a leader, expressing a wish to avoid risk and take a safe position when decisions are to be taken. An assistant school leader in an elementary school emphasised the importance of receiving "constructive

criticism", without being negatively affected by it, and of being able to see the difference between the case and the person. Or, in other words, she emphasised the importance of not letting personal or individual circumstances overshadow the crucial aspects that are involved in the case itself.

Summary of the Findings

In sum, the findings show that the school leaders prepared and addressed coaching topics, derived from the leadership mirror (360-degree), and their interpretations of their colleagues' feedback and expectations included a great variety of perceptions and role expectations. At this stage, the topics represented general leadership challenges most often formulated as questions, expressed as ideas in terms of concepts, like being clear, leading meetings, conducting difficult conversations, prioritising and delegation and handling resistance. However, what remained largely unconsidered at this stage was what the school leaders' understanding of the meanings of the concepts actually was. As the school leaders' coaching topics developed through the processes of collective co-construction and sensemaking between the co-coaches and the coachee and the facilitation from the group coach, general ideas transformed into deeper and more concrete terms linked to the environmental settings and to the goals of improvements and actions. For example, communication occurred in both directions, embedded in the coaching topics, as exemplified in this excerpt: "… how to communicate more clearly in the challenging tasks and processes facing me as a leader of *school development*. I experience a dilemma between expressing clear expectations and, at the same time, taking on the role as a coach and motivating the teachers to find their own ways". These developments had the potential for gaining role clarity

by the means that priorities could be established, and training needs identified.

Discussion

Based on the summary of the findings, we raise three aspects for further discussion related to what characterises the developments of the coaching topics through which role clarity could be gained. First, we discuss the aspect of deepening the knowledge and the concretisation of leadership challenges, then the aspect of connecting leadership challenges to context and, lastly, the aspect of orienting toward goal-driven development through acting.

Role clarity: Deepening knowledge and concretisation

By using 360-degree interviews, the participants get a clearer picture of how they are perceived as leaders or 'fit' their jobs (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990) through feedback from actors in the school. This preparation work helps the participants to formulate their coaching topics and prepare for the group coaching sessions. The analysis shows that the participants' coaching topics, typically, are foremost expressed as general ideas. As the coach and the other members of the group start asking clarifying questions regarding the coaching topic, a deeper knowledge and a concretisation of the presented topic emerge and become the guidelines for what they will be coached on. The collaborative engagement is structured to facilitate reflection *on* action, *in* action and *for* action (Robertson, 2013) in order to support the transformation of general ideas into concepts that are embedded in the ideas. For example, the concepts of expressing clear expectations, communicating one's own opinions more clearly, holding accountable and being democratic were actually embedded in the idea of *conducting clear leadership*. The

variety of expectations reflects the ambiguity and complexity of the school leadership role that evolves from the focus on learning organisations based around a trusting and collaborative climate (Leithwood et al., 1998; Silins et al., 2002). The co-coaches' and the coach's verbal encouragement and efforts to provide positive support through structured enquiry can help the participants to see and formulate what needs to be changed to make a difference, help them to prioritise and show them that they have the abilities to succeed (cf. Aas & Fluckiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015).

Role clarity: Connecting leadership challenges to contexts

The participants experience a great variety of perceptions and role expectations that to some extent are tension laden. They describe tensions between the perceptions and expectations of the superintendent (focusing on loyalty to the steering signals and the budget) and of the teachers (focusing on the pedagogy and their students' learning). Next, they underline relational and emotional aspects between the principals and the teachers as a main issue. From a systemic perspective, these findings align with what Fullan (2011) argues, in that the principals are expected to be the actors between the school staff and the local district administration, meeting and resolving expectations of the levels above and below them.

Further, our study shows how the school leaders use of the feedback from their colleagues as data and the first stage of the coaching sessions help them to understand how different expectations could be linked to and seen as aspects of their environmental context. For example, this is the case when it comes to providing individual support to the staff, promoting an atmosphere of caring and trust among staff and establishing a school structure that promotes participative decision-making (Mulford & Silins, 2003;

Robinson, 2010). According to Dempster (2002b), these competing demands appeal for knowledge and critical thinking and strength and courage to balance aspects of hard control with the values of care and trust, a process which is facilitated during the coaching session. These competing demands might be one explanation of why many of the school leaders address the development of communication skills as their main leadership challenge and as their topic to be coached on as a part of their development as professionals and role clarity (cf. Aas, 2017).

Role clarity: Orienting toward object-driven development through acting

Researchers have considered that coaches help leaders to address issues and concerns regarding practice that can make meaningful changes in their daily lives during the process of formulating and reformulating the object of change (Heck & Hallinger, 2014). The analysis shows that all the school leaders addressed leadership issues and concerns relating to their work settings as topics to be coached on. The co-coaches' capacity to pose relevant investigative and clarifying questions regarding the topic being addressed shows the subjects' relevance and meaning to their work settings, at least with regard to supporting the creation of the object of change. It is evident that this kind of support is not only about engagement with a range of school leaders, providing opportunities for school leaders to consider new ways of working (Passmore, 2009), but rather, it is about collective structured co-construction oriented toward constructing objects that may function as guidelines and motives for what to change and how to act to develop and make differences in schools. This may work as a kind of engagement and support that may provide encouragement and

motivation for outlining an action plan that is possible to implement in their own schools (Huff et al., 2013; Mavrogordato & Cannon, 2009). The variety of leadership challenges and objects of change that characterise the coaching topics developed demonstrate how leadership can be performed differently in different school cultures (Aas & Vavik, 2015), but, at the same time, the challenges reflect the insecurity that newly appointed principals struggle with in understanding and developing their leadership roles, gaining role clarity and growing their leadership identity.

Conclusion

Multiple expectations placed on education, alongside the restructuring of public schooling under the influence of NPM, have increased the pressure on school leaders. When schools are seen as learning organisations, new types of relationship among the actors evolve. Based on this situation, we have argued that a *fundamental but often forgotten perspective* in *leadership learning programmes* is considering how to facilitate learning processes, helping school leaders to gain role clarity and grow their leadership identity. In this study, we have examined how group coaching can promote and help school leaders to understand and gain role clarity. The analysis demonstrates that group coaching can be one way of supporting the school leaders' role clarity process, underlining the effect of the collective learning that happens in a group of colleagues (Aas, 2015; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017). Insight gained through such group coaching sessions seems to be crucial for school leaders with regard to building capacity for understanding and constructing their leadership roles. One implication of the study is that providers of leadership learning programmes should focus on how the

programmes can contribute to helping the school leaders to understand and construct their leadership roles and grow their leadership identities. We also recognise the need for further research that can document and inform about the complexity and challenges involved in gaining school leadership role clarity. In that respect, interview data could be of great assistance in better capturing school leaders' perceptions and experiences of gaining role clarity through leadership learning programmes.

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