

## When the Demand for Educational Research Meet Practice – A Swedish Example

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>There seems to be an assumption that an enhanced scientific foundation, in form of an application of research results, leads to better quality in schools and also to better student outcomes. The objective in this article is to explore how this demand can emerge in an action research project as well as in school principals' daily life. This is done in form of a case study where a group of principals enters a partnership with a researcher in their quest to apply a scientific approach in their own and, in their teachers' professions. This study provides a pertinent example of how this demand can emerge in practice. The theory of practice architectures (Kemmis &amp; Grootenboer, 2008) is used as an analytical framing. The research questions are as follows: 1) How do the principals understand and realise the demand of a scientific approach in their roles as pedagogical leaders? 2) What happens when a group of principals and a researcher enters a partnership? 3) What practice architecture affect the partnership between the principals and the researcher? 4) What practice architecture affect the principals' pedagogical leadership actions in their schools?</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b> <i>Received</i> December 06, 2020</p> <p><i>Accepted</i> February 13, 2021</p> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 10px auto;"/> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Action research, Pedagogical leadership, The theory of practice architectures, Scientific approach, research, Proven experience</i></p>

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## Introduction

Education and schools have always caught the interest of politicians and other stakeholders, and the current situation is no exception. In the political arena, school issues have become increasingly important and can be fundamental for the decision of which political party people choose to vote for in a general election. That Swedish politicians want to participate in and influence what is happening in schools and classrooms is clear from the recent extensive reforms and as a result of this growing political influence, the road has been paved for solutions that use efficiency and social control as benchmarks. The intention of several of the reforms has been to influence school practice so that it reflects a more scientific and systematic approach. There seems to be an assumption that an enhanced scientific foundation, in form of an application of research results, leads to better quality in schools and also to better student outcomes (Kvernbekk, 2013). This assumption exists in many countries, not only in Sweden (Levinsson, 2017; Persson & Persson, 2017). This is an interesting development that raises some issues. Science itself has its basis in several different theoretical approaches, so what, explicitly, are the expectations anticipated in the 'modernized' Swedish Education Act from 2010 (Novak, 2019) with a phrase that points out that education should be based on research and proven experience (SFS, 2010: 800, chapter 1, p.5)? The Educational Act does not provide any guidance in how to interpret or realise this phrase (Persson & Persson, 2017; Rapp, 2017). This ambiguity is turning the demand into a challenge, especially for the principals and the teachers that are expected to apply a scientific approach and to use knowledge from relevant research and proven

experience in their daily practices. Moreover, why is confidence in research so great today and what are the ideas behind this belief?

The research interest in this study emerged in an action research study where principals and a scholar explored 'pedagogical leadership' (ForsstenSeiser, 2019). The objective in the present article is to study how the demand for research and proven experience can emerge in practice. Focus group discussions (Yin, 2012) were used as the method of data collection. The study is designed as a participatory action research study (Kemmis et al., 2014a), carried out in a close partnership between five principals and a researcher, investigating the principals' quest to apply a scientific approach in their own and in their teachers' professions. This study provides a pertinent example of what happened when this demand was put into practice, in form of actions. The theory of practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) is used as an analytical framing. The research questions are as follows: 1) How do the principals understand and realise the demand of scientific approach in their roles as pedagogical leaders? 2) What happens when a group of principals and a researcher enters a partnership? 3) What practice architectures affects the partnership between the principals and the researcher? 4) What practice architectures affect the principals' pedagogical leadership actions in their schools?

## **Background**

### **Reforming School Systems**

A scientific foundation has become a hallmark in many different national school systems. So, what are the concepts behind the idea that teachers' and principals' practices should have a scientific approach in their professions, in form of applied research or proven



experience? There are multiple publications that examine and problematise such discourses (see for example Arnqvist & Blossing, 2012; Håkansson & Sundberg, 2012; Kvernbekk, 2013; Levinsson, 2017; Rapp, 2017) which is positive as the demand for educational research should be met by research that critically explore and questions the presumptions that underpin the very same demand. However, my intention is not to make a contribution to, or a comprehensive review of, the existing literature. Instead I would like to explore how this demand can emerge in practice and for this purpose I have selected a limited number of references.

Drawing on some references, a possible explanation for the demand of science lies in the application of market principles to the school system reflecting how, in a globalised world, the population's educational level is an important competitive factor (see for example Alvesson, 2013; Biesta, 2019; Bridges & Jonathan, 2008). Through the introduction of market principles, the idea has been to enable a school system that is permeated by diversity and freedom, a system where everyone has increased influence. In the UK, marketisation started under Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s. One basic idea of this neoliberal reform was to expose school providers (or owners) to competition, which was supposed to encourage them to strive for higher qualities in their schools. Another argument was that by sending funding directly to local schools, the parents and students would be guaranteed the best value for money. In addition, school providers would not be able to rely on government grants; instead, they would have to become entrepreneurs who generated their own resources. There are similarities between the changes to the Swedish school system (Novak, 2019) and what happened in the English school system during the Thatcher government. Market principles are believed to contribute to high student outcomes, which, in turn,

enable desirable good scores in international comparisons. Another similarity is that despite the extensive market-based reforms, there remains in both cases something of a quasi-system because the states still set clear goals and standards (Ivarsson Westerberg, 2016). Regular inspections and requirements for transparency are another way for the states to maintain control over schools (Ekholm & Lindvall, 2008; Novak, 2019). This has resulted in local schools continuously carrying out different types of evaluation as a form of voluntary self-control (Jankowski & Provezis, 2012). Bridges and Jonathan (2008) note that the result of the reform work in England was that an excessively controlling system replaced the previous state-controlled system, which is the same pattern that is now recognisable in Sweden. Biesta (2019) emphasises that the current circumstance is not some evil plot but more the outcome of a range of intertwined events that, step-by-step, moved from laudable intentions to problematic consequences.

One decisive step was taken when the question of judgment about quality of education became translated into questions how we can measure the quality of education. A second decisive step was taken when the question of measuring the quality of education turned into the question how we can measure the quality of educational outcomes. The question which outcomes should be measured, soon turned into the question which outcomes can be measured, and so the good intentions of the social justice argument eventually turned into the current 'age of measurement', in which the key question is whether we are (still) measuring what is being valued, or whether we have reached a situation where many just value what is being measured, and take the latter as a valid indicator of the quality of education (Biesta, 2019, p. 261-262)



To summarise, today's education is regarded as an important competitive tool in society and between nations. At the same time, there is an assumption that research is the necessary path for reaching high-quality outcomes. The trust in market principles has contributed to a great focus on what the school 'produces' and 'delivers', with the desire for results that can be presented in the form of comparative statistics. The extent to which students succeed in comparative educational tests has a prominent place on the political agenda, both nationally and internationally. This in turn affects teachers and principals and how they understand research and perform their professions.

### **Knowledge, Human Activities and Form of Science**

Research is an important part of teachers and principals' professional practices (Carlgren, 2015; Kemmis, et al., 2014a; SOU 2018:19). As educators, they are in the professions of learning, but at the same time appropriate educational research is not always visible in their practices and the provision of research can vary in quality and relevance. To explore this, we turn to history as history always plays an important part in social practices (Kemmis et al., 2014a). Plato was the first to classify scientific knowledge as safe, objective and therefore true. Aristotle extended the discussion by talking about knowledge linked to various human activities. I turn to Aristotle's thinking to discuss what forms of science have the capacity to improve teachers' and principals' professional practices.

Table 1.  
*Aristotelian Classification*

Knowledge domains	Episteme	Techné	Phronesis
Aim (telos)	To seek truth	To make something (craft)	To do what is right
Form of human action	Theoria	Poesis	Praxis (practical wisdom)
Form of science	Theoretical philosophy	Applied science	Practical philosophy

(Francisco et al, 2021. p. 3)

Aristotle classifies three different forms of knowledge; ‘episteme’, ‘techné’ and ‘phronesis’ which all result in various kinds of human activities such as teaching and leading (see table 1). Each human activity is developed by knowledge produced throughout its own ‘science’ (Carr, 2009). Aristotle’s classification is relevant in discussing what form of science may be implicitly included in the demand for a scientific foundation in education (2010:800, chapter 1 p.5). The first form of knowledge is episteme, which is about seeking knowledge for its own sake and for the purpose of achieving eternal truth. The distinctive form of human action related to episteme is ‘theoria’ or contemplative action, informed by ‘theoretical philosophy’. The second form is techné and the human action associated with techné is ‘poesis’. ‘Poesis’ is a kind of action that constitute technical expertise. The aim is to produce or make objects or artefacts. Poesis is informed by ‘applied science’. The third form of knowledge is phronesis and the human action associated with this is to act wisely, aiming at doing what is ethically right in specific



situations. The distinct form of human action associated with phronesis is 'praxis'. 'Praxis' is a morally committed action in which, and through which, values are given practical expression.

As 'praxis' is human actions closely connected with education (Carr, 2009) practical philosophy is the science that emerge as the form that is preferable to guide teachers and principals' professions. But this is not always the case. The growing interest of finding the best or most effective method have led the way to research in form of 'applied science' as most frequent in schools. (Levinsson, 2013). One explanation to this is to be found in the implementation of market principles in the educational system. The influence of politicians has resulted in evidence-based research being regarded as the most important resource to improve quality in schools because studies of this kind are often linked to efficient teaching and improved student outcomes (Kvernbekk, 2013; Levinsson, 2017). However, evidence is a rather difficult and controversial concept within the educational research field and school improvement studies show that evidence is often not sufficient in complex social practices such as schools (Crossouard & Pryor, 2012; Flygare et al., 2011; Forssten Seiser et al., 2014; Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015).

Biesta (2019) has reservations about today's urge for evidence-based education, especially when the aim is to provide teachers with knowledge about what 'works' towards producing measurable outcomes. Kvernbekk (2013) on the other hand argue that evidence-based research should be included in educational practices, but used indirectly. Indirectly in this context means that evidence becomes essential in school first after teachers and principals identify a problem and then use previous studies and research results to analyse the problem and to plan actions with the help of evidence-



based results. According to this approach, evidence can improve teachers' and principals' decision making and ensure that the actions performed are justified and reliable. This contrasts with evidence-based research in the form of theoretical philosophy (see Table 1), that is assumed to work independently of the context or situation

To summarize, research can become something that gives information and knowledge about how to act wisely, but misapplied it could be understood as something that is supposed to constitute and determine teachers' and school leaders' professional practices. There are different research approaches that have the necessary prerequisites for developing 'praxis' (see Table 1) and according to Carr (2009), action research is one of them.

### **Action Research**

Action research is an approach that utilises a critical approach towards professional practice and the ability to produce knowledge (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) But as with research in general, there is a range of different approaches among action research practitioners, and different kinds of action research address different kinds of dilemmas and issues (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Carr and Kemmis (1986) have distinguished three forms of action research, building on Habermas's (1972) theory of knowledge-constitutive interests: technical, practical and emancipatory. In the field of 'technical action research', which is the frequent interest in many areas, the search for knowledge focuses on producing technical solutions for specific problems. This can be about providing resources for human survival, but in social contexts it is often about influencing individuals and institutions to act effectively. In other words, it seeks to achieve goals through well-utilised resources (Alvesson, 2013; Alvesson & Spicer,



2012). The researcher defines the problem and also designs the research process. An imminent risk in this kind of action research is that there is 'an outsider' that determines the character of the work. This form of research paves the way for technical applications where action research has been reduced to being just a method (Crossouard & Pryor, 2012; Forssten Seiser et al., 2014). This is a frequent approach and one possible explanation to its popularity could be its problem-solving character.

Unlike technical action research, 'practical action research' creates knowledge in the form of enlightenment, which is a form of knowledge that can inform and guide practitioners in ethical dilemmas. Within practical action research, the interest is in capturing a deeper understanding of phenomena, especially in the case of those phenomena that cannot be measured or read on the surface (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Practical action research aims not only to improve practice (as with technical action research) but also to enhance individuals' self-knowledge and awareness. In this approach, the collaboration between researchers and practitioners is greater than in technical action research, where the researcher's responsibility is to support and assist the practitioners in formulating research questions and encouraging self-reflection.

Habermas's (1972) third knowledge interest is the emancipatory. This interest aims at achieving a sort of liberating knowledge. Within this approach, independence and critical reflection is essential. If technical action research is primarily about improving practice, and practical action research complements a focus on individuals' understanding, then 'critical action research' differs in that its main intention is to gain a critical approach. In other words, the aim is to develop an understanding of how individuals

are shaped (and shape others) based on habits, adaptations, ideologies and traditions (Kemmis et al., 2014b). Improving practice is seen as a possible side effect, but this is not the main purpose. Critical action research not only generates practical knowledge but also creates the ability to create knowledge. In this form of action research, practitioners and researchers share the responsibility for the process. The researcher's task in critical action research is to gradually transfer the research process to the participants, as the ideal is that the participants themselves should lead and implement the work. Within schools, critical action research is about empowering teachers and principals in their professional roles by developing a critical approach. When Carr is arguing that action research is an approach with qualifications for developing 'praxis' (see Table 1), this is the form of action research he is referring to. This is also the form that was the ideal in the current study.

### **Pedagogical Leadership**

Current expectations and demand linked to principals' pedagogical leadership are very high in Sweden today and can explain the participating principals' common interest to improve their pedagogical leadership (Forssten Seiser, 2019). The strategy they choose to explore was to enhance a scientific approach in their leadership and in their schools. In Sweden, 'pedagogical leadership' includes moral and social ideas in the meaning of community and solidarity and with a sense of participation, engagement, collaboration and critical thinking (Forssten Seiser, 2019; Stålhkrantz, 2019). On the other hand, the concept has lately been elaborated in closer conjunction with the New Public Management movement which involves professional accountability, competition and efficiency (Jarl et al., 2017; Moos, 2011; Säljö, 2016). Irrespective of



orientation, during the more than 70 years that pedagogical leadership has been used in Sweden, it has always been emphasized as the solution par excellence - regardless of what problems the school has faced. Despite its respectable age, the concept is viable and has definitely not lost its relevance (Svedberg, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory of practice architectures is used as an analytical tool to frame this study and analyse what happened in the partnership between the researcher and the principals and in the principals' pedagogical leadership when they tried to apply a scientific approach in their leading practices. According to the theory of practice architectures, a practice is understood as a socially established human activity constituted by the sayings, doings and relating that 'hang together' in the project of a specific practice.

The theory holds that practices are prefigured by the practice architectures present, or brought into, a site. In other words, the practice architectures are what constitute the enabling and constraining preconditions for the conduct of a specific practice. The practice architectures operate and are realised in three intersubjective dimensions: (1) in the semantic dimension, (2) in the physical dimension and (3) in the social dimension (Kemmis, et al., 2014a). This means that when individuals interact with each other and the environment within a specific practice the interaction takes place in ways that already have been arranged and that affects how the interaction occurs. How these arrangements emerge depends on the intersubjective dimensions. In the semantic dimension, cultural-discursive arrangements appear through language and speech. With other words, these practice architectures enable and constrain the

'sayings' in and about a site. For instance, what form of research results and concepts are commonly and frequently used in the discussions (and which are not) between the researcher and the principals. In the social dimension, social – politic arrangements reveal how people relate to each other as well as to artefacts inside and outside the practice. These practice architectures enable and constrain the 'relatings' in a site. For instance, what or who decided what forms of research (see table 1) are seen as preferable for teachers and principals to use. In the physical dimension, material – economic arrangements become visible in the work that takes place. These practice architectures enable and constrain the 'doings' in a site. For instance, what strategies are used in the applications of research in educator's professions.

The practice architectures, which can exist beyond the intentional actions of individuals, shape practice and are shaped by them, but the theory maintains that practices are human-made and socially established, and therefore highlights the role of participants in practices and in shaping practices (Kaukko & Wiklinson, 2018).

### **Data and Methods**

Five principals entered the action research partnership with me as a researcher; three men and two women. The principals represented both elementary and upper secondary schools and the group met at the local university once a month for one and a half year. Each meeting lasted for three hours and the common project in the group was to learn about and, to improve their, 'pedagogical leadership'. Focus group discussions, which are a form of qualitative interview (Yin, 2012) were used as the main method of data collection. Twenty hours of recordings from the meetings were



transcribed and analysed with the theory of practice of architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008).

### **Analysis**

The recordings from the focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed in three types of analysis activity: (1) data condensation, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The first activity is a selective and focusing process that makes the data stronger and more solid. This was carried out in relation to the intersubjective dimensions; the semantic, the physical, the social. Actions (saying, doings, relatings) related to the partnership constitute this data. This coding led to the second type of analysis activity, where the data from the three dimensions were organised and compressed in a matrix (table 2). A process of transformation, in a chronological order, was identified and visualized in form of three stages: the establishing, the testing, the examining, where the name of each stage characterises what happened during different periods of the transformation. As a complement, the stages were analysed with Kemmis' and Carr's (1986) forms of action research (table 2). In the third analysis activity, thick descriptions (Yin, 2012) were constructed describing identified actions and practice architectures. The narratives focus on the principals' understanding of how to understand and realise the demand in the Educational Act (2010:800, chapter 1, p.5) and what happened in the 18-month long partnership. The final descriptions involve research questions three and four, focusing on the practice architectures that enabled and constrained the actions concerning the partnership and the principals' leadership actions in them strive to enhance a scientific foundation in their schools.

Table 2.

*The Action Research Process*

THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS	INTERSUBJECTIVE DIMENSIONS			Dominating form of action research and knowledge interest
	The semantic (sayings)	The physical (doings)	The social (relatings)	
<b>The establishing stage</b> 0-6 months	The dominant understanding of how to realise the demand for a scientific foundation in schools is connected to implementing evidence-based teaching and leading methods	The researcher is the active part by planning and leading the regular meetings that are held at the university.	There is a knowledge hierarchy in the group, the researcher is seen as an expert and scientific knowledge is regarded as 'the truth'	<b>Technical</b>
<b>The testing stage</b> 6-12 months	The principals reflect on how educational research can be used to improve the quality in practice	The principals are active at the meetings, reporting the action that is carried out in their schools	Everyone's knowledge is respected and everyone is allowed (and expected) to contribute in the dialogues	<b>Practical</b>
<b>The examining stage</b> 12-18months	The dominant understanding to apply a scientific approach is to act systematic: plan, act, analyse, evaluate	The results from the principals' actions are critical and collective examined and jointly analysed in the group, conclusions are drawn	The power relations in the group are equal. 'Practical' and 'theoretical' knowledge is regarded as equal important in the study	<b>Critical</b>

**The Eighteen-month Long Partnership**

To respond to the first and second research questions the partnership between the researcher and the principals is described in form of a narrative. Quotes from one of the principals, expressed in the different stages of the partnership, are included in the description.



The first six months of the partnership, 'the establishing stage', was devoted to explore how different scholars perceive and describe principals' pedagogical leadership. This was, among other things, carried out by reading and discussing academic texts, selected and presented by the researcher. During this initial time, there was an expectation that the researcher should teach the principals how to become a successful pedagogical leader.

*The fact that we are at a university, and doing this, makes it trustworthy, and gives the work credibility (Principal 1)*

This expectation resulted in the researcher taking the active part and doing most of the talking at the meetings. Another significant pattern was that the principals often took notes when the researcher spoke. The interactions in the group were very supportive and even when there were obviously dissimilar understandings or opinions no critical questions were raised at this stage of the process. When the principals talked about the demand in the Educational Act (2010:800, chapter 1 p.5) they often ended up in sharing examples of different teaching methods that were claiming to be evidence-based.

After approximately six months of partnership, the activity pattern at the meetings transformed into 'the testing stage'. The change appeared after the group had reached an unforced consensus about what area they should address to improve their pedagogical leadership. The focus should be on enhancing a scientific foundation in their schools by applying a scientific approach in their leading. Therefore, the principals were called on to, based on their own understanding, execute various actions to apply a scientific approach in their pedagogical leadership. This turned out to be difficult and the result often unsuccessful as the dominating activities was trying to implement evidence-based teaching methods in their schools. The



teachers were often unwilling to change their way of teaching, based on the premise that this method is evidence-based.

*You think that you can implement a teaching model... If we all do the same thing, the result will be the exactly the same... But that is not the case!*  
(Principal 1)

Unexpectedly, these failures led to a positive improvement in the interactions in partnership. The failures contributed to everyone becoming engaged and interested in how and why the actions had turned out the way they did. Every action was jointly analysed and evaluated in the group, and collective conclusions were also drawn. One conclusion was that a majority of teachers question and challenge teaching methods that are introduced by the school's principal. How is that? The principals' actions dissolved the knowledge hierarchy that was previously dominant in the partnership and from this stage everyone's advice or knowledge were equally respected and highly valued. Instead of being eager to get instruction from the researcher, the principals wanted to discuss and problematise the prevailing scientific discourse.

In the last stage, 'the establishing stage', a critical approach had developed in the group. No one longer was hoping for a best pedagogical leadership model, and the idea of implementing an evidence-based teaching model that should suit all teachers, seemed a very unwise strategy. On the contrary, the principals' actions had revealed the significance of the context and the situation in complex social practices as a school. In this last stage of the action research process the principals reflected on how the collaboration and the partnership itself had resulted in a scientific and systematic approach.



*Our meetings have given me the opportunity to get a distance to my daily work. To rise a level ... to compare my experience with yours ... and to use theoretical frame works ... this has been important. (Principal 1)*

The principals found that they had become more systematic in planning, acting, analysing and evaluating. Furthermore, they noted that they had established a scientific language and become better at drawing conclusions. They no longer saw research results as the answer to all current dilemmas and problems, instead they saw that a systematic approach was a way to enhance the scientific foundation in their schools as well as in their leadership. Finally, they reflected on how their partnership had contributed to a deeper understanding and sense of confidence in their role as pedagogical leaders.

### **Enabling and Constraining Practice Architectures**

This final level of data analysis involves analysing research questions three and four, focusing on the practice architectures that enabled and constrained the actions concerning the partnership and the principals' leadership actions in their effort to enhance a scientific foundation in their schools. One explanation to what happened during the first six months of the partnership is to be found in the semantic dimension where a technical knowledge interest (Habermas, 1972) initially was dominating the sayings in the group. Among other things, this appeared in the principals describing and exchanging different evidence-based teaching methods that claims to improve students' outcomes and also in the wish that the partnership with a researcher would provide access to a 'scientific pedagogical leadership model'. Technical knowledge interest also includes the perception and tradition that researchers know best. From a social perspective this is a social-political arrangement that affects the relations and interactions in the group, and gives the researcher a

form of higher hierarchical knowledge role. This explains why the researcher was the one doing most of the talking during the establishing stage, and why the principals were taking notes in their effort to catch 'the right answer'. The fact that the meetings took place at the university, as a material-economic arrangement, reinforced the sense of a scientific truth being present and accessible.

As a critical and emancipatory approach is the ideal in action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), this pattern was a problem. Habermas's idea of communicative rationality (1996) was therefore used as a 'tool' to improve the partnership. Unlike instrumental rationality, communicative rationality aims to achieve mutual understanding and it is a rationality that rests on democratic foundations. As a result of the principals' actions to enhance a scientific foundation in their schools, the idea of 'a best pedagogical leadership model' began to appear unreasonable. Such a model would reduce pedagogical leadership to something uncomplicated, which was not at all consistent with the principals' own experiences. Based on the democratic dialogues in the group, it became clear that the knowledge that pedagogical leaders need is the ability to make wise decisions in morally charged situations, which is something completely different from a technical expertise that can be performed by reading and following instructions. However good and well-formulated speeches are not enough, the credibility of a person depends on how consistent the person's actions are. At the meetings, when the principals presented their actions and their consequences, this brought about a great change in all three intersubjective dimensions. For one thing, the meetings now started to evolve into communicative spaces. As the principals began to describe their actions, the interactions in the group were distinctly improved. When a principal presented his or her actions, the others were active in



raising questions, reflecting and analysing. The actions also resulted in concrete improvements in the principals' schools. One example is that the teachers became more included in the schools' pedagogical leadership since the actions revealed that pedagogical leading is strengthened when it becomes a shared responsibility at the local school.

Through the actions, the group's dominant knowledge interest changed, moving from technical to emancipatory. These changes contributed to more energy and commitment, and the responsibility for the partnership became shared. Expectations from politicians were problematised, as were researchers' different point of view. As a consequence, one conclusion drawn was that politicians at the municipal level, can actually limit pedagogical leadership when they impose assessment as a form of 'window dressing' that erects a nice facade towards the rest of society. These kinds of assessments steal time from the school's core activities and are therefore counter-productive in relation to student learning. Similarly, models and methods that promise success regardless of context and situation were analysed and evaluated.

Activities of this nature are seen as emancipating, as they made it possible for the participating principals to free themselves from structures, assignments and other factors that constrain their pedagogical leadership. The principals felt that they became better equipped to meet unreasonably ambitious expectations and demands, as they no longer regarded research and government texts as instructions. The principals developed their ability to problematise and analyse, and they could distinguish factors that both enabled and constrained their pedagogical leadership.

## Discussion

In the same way that a technical interest can attract attention from elsewhere, there is a risk that an excessively one-sided demand for educational research may limit the creativity and inventiveness of teachers, principals and researchers. Instead of striving to do things in the best way, they should be focusing on doing things the right way. Therefore, I claim that the prevailing scientific discourse needs to be analysed and wisely handled within schools. Two main directions can be distinguished (SOU 2018:19), from an Aristotelian classification described as applied science and practical philosophy (see table 1). The first advocates a more technical, or evidence-based, approach, a line that risks marginalising professionals by reducing school leaders and teachers to uncritical users and executors of research. The second direction distinguishes a scientific approach that is emerging within schools, which acknowledges that principals and teachers are the ones best suited to determine important issues in a complex social practice. This approach is in line with both the empowering aim of critical action research and the assumption that principals' and teachers' participation is necessary for sustainable school improvement efforts. By contrast, politicians tend to prefer technical action research on the grounds that this approach is often perceived as an effective method for improving schools (Levinsson, 2013). However, research based on a technical approach threatens to be 'the new silver bullet of school reform' (Anderson & Herr, 1999, p. 14), that is, a quick and simple solution to schools' often complex and complicated dilemmas.

A reading of Habermas (1996) helps us to theoretically understand the development of national school system reforms whereby efficiency and high outcomes have been placed in the



foreground. Habermas's analytical model divides our day-to-day lives into two spheres: lifeworld and systemworld. The lifeworld is where we have our social relations and interactions with family and society at large. It is based on a tactile fund of shared meanings and understandings that enable us to perform actions that we know others will comprehend. Thus, the day-to-day actions that we perform in the lifeworld are generally communicative in nature. By contrast, the systemworld consists of strategic actions and anonymous relations, essentially driven by money and power. According to Habermas, the systemworld, which is based on and has emerged from the lifeworld, is now threatening to colonise the lifeworld, as the lifeworld is increasingly permeated by instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality is rationality that aims to find the most effective means to achieve predetermined goals. School improvement and school leadership are complex and elusive phenomena, but contradictory the dominant part of the current research in these fields has a clear technical interest (Gunter & Ribbins, 2003). This technical interest can to some extent be explained by politicians' great commitment to this type of research. But just as with most models and theories, difficulties arise when they are implemented at the local school level. Perhaps the explanation for this is that a technical knowledge interest is not enough to understand complex social phenomena such as pedagogical leadership and how to enhance a scientific foundation in schools. Another problem with this kind of development is that it often lacks consideration of basic components such as participation, engagement, shared responsibilities, non-hierarchical relations and the emancipatory aim of empowering individuals.

The participating principals were concerned about the way schools are changing in Sweden. Politicians give instructions stating

that teachers should apply teaching methods that promise better student outcomes, but the requirement for high outcomes rests heavily on the school principal. Often, the methods advocated are trendy and popular. Such directives rarely emanate from the needs of the local school but are based on a tradition that there are optimal teaching methods and models that benefit everyone. This is problematic, as the ideas of universal validity and transferability have proven to have poor success within schools (Flygare et al., 2011; Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015; Forssten Seiser, 2017; 2019). Moreover, there is a realisation that teaching and learning should not be driven by measures of economic efficiency. Such approaches, which are designed to 'make things happen' rather than 'let things happen' (Mahon et al., 2017), can have significant consequences in terms of what enables and constrains school improvement.

Principals and teachers have to act in response to political assignments, and there are certainly problems in school arrangements that can be traced back to such demands. But some of the problems also come from the professionals themselves. If principals and teachers do not see any possibility to influence the developments that worry them, there is a risk that they may implicitly hand over responsibility for the school's development to the decisions of others. Alternatively, teachers and principals may get stuck between political demands for more efficiency and the idea of a school based on democratic values.

The picture that is visualised in this text is that different actors understand the demand for research and proven experience in schools in various ways. It is a development that provokes teachers, principals and researchers to reflect on and raise critical questions collectively and continuously. Teachers and principals are those



engaging in students' day-to-day life in schools, so their participation in building knowledge about life in schools is necessary. Teachers and principals have a great responsibility to ensure that work in schools is based not only on research but also on ethical and moral perspectives, or in other words to take actions for 'praxis' (see Table 1). Emancipatory knowledge emphasises independence and the ability to stand up for opinions that are well thought-out. Where technical interest fails, a critical and emancipatory perspective can be empowering, contributing to the avoidance of an uncritical adoption of methods that promise high outcomes. Perhaps the best response to the demand of research is to be found in the variety and complexity of the school, as principals and teachers strive to conquer inequalities and work with solutions suited to the context and situation.

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