

## The Impact of the Swedish National Principal Training Programme on Principals' Leadership and the Structuration Process of School Organisations

Anette Forssten Seiser \* 

Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

Åsa Söderström 

Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

### Abstract

*Principals have an important function in schools' ability to create high-quality learning and teaching. As the expectations placed on principals are high, large resources are invested in school leadership training, thus necessitating research on the impact of such initiatives. In this article, we report on a longitudinal research study on the training programme for principals in Sweden. The aim was to examine the programme's impacts on the principals' leadership and school organisations. We did this by interviewing principals, teachers and students at four schools during the principals' participation in the programme. Giddens's theory of structuration was used to analyse the study. The results showed that leadership needs to be foregrounded throughout the training and that awareness of the function of principals in leading schools' structuration processes (i.e., their creation of meaning making) should be clarified.*

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\*Corresponding author

E-mail: [anette.seiser@kau.se](mailto:anette.seiser@kau.se)

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**Introduction**

The expectations placed on school leaders have never been more ambitious than in the first decades of the 2000s (Robinson, 2011). Local schools face increasing responsibility to achieve high-quality learning and teaching, and research on school leadership has focused on how principals and school organisations can promote students' learning and teachers' teaching (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021; Henry & Harbatkin, 2019; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood & Louise, 2012). Moreover, research has shown that low-performing schools often have shortcomings in their organisations and leadership (Blossing, 2011; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

The Swedish National Principal Training Programme provides 30 higher education credits and runs for 3 years. The programme is compulsory for principals and must be completed within 4 years of the principal's first assignment. According to the programme goals (Skolverket, 2015), the main focus is the principal's responsibility for developing an organisation that ensures that all students receive an education that is of equal value and consistent with the prevailing legislation. Three areas constitute the central content: *school legislation and exercising public authority, management by goals and objectives, and school leadership*. In addition to learning this content, the principals are expected to develop critical thinking.



As extensive resources are invested in the Swedish National Principal Training Programme, and expectations of positive effects on student outcomes and school development are high, it is important to study its impact. Early evaluations have shown that the principals' training programme may have an impact on their leadership (Ekholm, 1981; Hultman, 1981; Pettigrew, Schmuck, & Vormeland, 1982), but less is known about its effects on local school organisations. This provided the motivation for this study, where we followed a group of principals during their 3 years of participation in the programme. The aim was to examine the programme's impacts on the principals' leadership and school organisations.

We did this by interviewing principals, teachers and students at four schools during the principals' participation in the programme. Giddens's theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984) was used as a theoretical framework to capture both the principals as individual agents and the school organisations. The latter were understood as structures constituted by both formal and informal rules and routines. The training programme was seen as an agent, with the purpose of affecting principals' leadership and school organisations. In our study, we emphasised the duality of structure and practice that Giddens (1984) refers to as the "duality of structure" (pp. 25–28):

*In my usage, structure is what gives form and shape to social life, but it is not itself that form and shape – nor should "given" be understood in an active sense here, because structure only exists in and through the activities of human agents. (Giddens, 1989, p. 246)*

We focused on common meaning making – the so-called structuration process – in the participating schools. According to Giddens, human actions are based on different forms of consciousness: *Practical*



*consciousness* (Giddens, 1984, pp. 41–45) is expressed in action and is non-reflected silent knowledge, while *discursive consciousness* (Giddens, 1982, pp. 41–45) is expressed verbally. Our research questions were as follows:

1. How did the structuration processes emerge based on the principals', teachers' and students' discursive consciousness regarding the rules and routines that constituted the local schools?
2. Based on the principals', teachers' and students' discursive consciousness, what connections were found between the principals' participation in the programme and how they acted as leaders in the structuration processes in their local schools?

### Research Review

Leadership has received extensive attention as an essential ingredient in efforts to improve schools, with a growing consensus that improving the training of principals is worthwhile (Grissom et al., 2021). Studies on leadership training and its effects have identified a number of general principles that may underpin effective leadership training programmes (Clarke & Dempster, 2020; Darling-Hammond, LaPoint, & Meyerson, 2007; Dempster, Lovette, & Fluckinger, 2011; Hallinger, 2018; Huber, 2013; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1992; Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008), including active participant-centred instruction, integrating theory and practice, work-based experiential learning, peer support, networking, and sensitivity to context. However, McCulla and Degenhardt (2016) stated that a focus on local context risks ignoring shared developments. If the training moves towards a focus on the uniqueness of the context of each principal, there is a risk of obscuring what is general in the principal's profession.



A number of studies have illustrated the difficulty of combining theoretical and practical knowledge, emphasising the problem of connecting knowledge from educational practice with experience from leadership practice (Clarke & Dempster, 2020; Forssten Seiser & Söderström, 2021; Grootenboer & Hardy, 2015). A study of learning among principals in the Swedish National Principal Training Programme showed processes of continuous learning stretching between the training programme and the workplace (Jerdborg, 2021). The study also showed how interrupted learning constrained or even hindered the link between learning from educational practice and experience from leadership practice, as this is a process that requires greater consciousness of the value of bridging learning between these two practices.

When a national training programme for principals was introduced in Sweden in the 1980s, it was accompanied by a comprehensive evaluation plan. According to the evaluations, the programme had impacts on principals' own leadership, but whether it had any impact on schools' capacity to improve was doubtful (Ekholm, 1981; Hultman, 1981; Pettigrew et al., 1982). In a literature review, Jensen (2016) examined what is known about school leadership training, noting that it is difficult to examine the importance of a principals' training programme. She established that we know a lot about how school leaders (and school leader educators) perceive the training but less about its impact on principals' leadership. This motivated this study of the Swedish programme's impact on principals' leadership and school organisations through exploration of principals', teachers' and students' discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1984).



### Giddens's Theory of Structuration

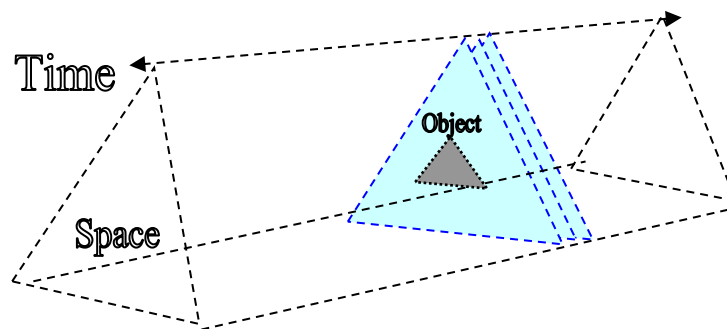
Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration was used for the theoretical framing, enabling the identification and analysis of prominent changes in the schools during the study. The structuration process in relation to a school is the common creation of meaning whereby principals, teachers and students structure the social consciousness through their daily interactions. Giddens (1979, 1984) identified two different forms of consciousness that form the basis for human actions: *Practical consciousness* consists of non-reflected silent knowledge and is expressed in action, while *discursive consciousness* is expressed verbally

Structures are not fixed; rather, they are created and recreated in a process constantly influenced by agents. They are present as patterns that enable and limit agents' actions and create a sense of stability and security in everyday life (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). Structures are manifested in rules and routines that can be understood as invisible, underlying codes that arise in everyday interactions and are expressed in actions. They can be seen as a map by which agents orient themselves to create ontological security in a world that would otherwise seem chaotic. Rules and routines provide information about what can be expected of principals, teachers and students. Many of these rules and routines extend over time and form a school's culture. At the same time, rules and routines are constantly reinterpreted.

When structures are routinised and stretch over time and space, they form social systems (Giddens 1979, 1984; Giddens & Pierson, 1998). Institutions such as schools are social systems that are deeply rooted in time and space, harbouring relatively standardised ways of expression (Giddens, 1979). They involve a duality of structure, as school structures are means of actions, while, at the same time, the actions constitute the structures. For our study, this meant that when

the principals, teachers and students acted, they reproduced the structures that formed the schools, but, at the same time, their actions shaped the structures. In this way, there was constant stabilisation and change in the schools through continuous structuration processes.

Resources are assets that agents mobilise to make things happen. Giddens's (1984) concept of resources is about power and positions of power. Access to and opportunities to use resources are of crucial importance for agents' ability to influence practice. The position of a principal has more power than the positions of teachers and students, and this power brings greater obligations. However, agents in a subordinate position also have the possibility of influencing by exercising resistance. This dialectic of control reveals the reciprocal distribution of power. Thus, even if the formal relationship between principals, teachers and students is clear, this does not mean that the principals' dominance is given. The principals' authority is challenged when teachers and students offer resistance.



**Figure 1.** *Illustration of the study's theoretical starting point*

Our study took place throughout the 3 years during which the principals participated in the principals' training programme. It began

in the smallest, dark grey triangle, with an analysis of the principals', teachers' and students' views of their local school's organisation and the changes they experienced over the 3 years. Extending the analysis outwards to the blue triangles, the principals', teachers' and students' views of their local school and its changes were then analysed in relation to the principals' views of the training programme's form and content.

The outer elongated transparent prism (the Toblerone figure) is an illustration of the school as a system. Here we find the structure – the more difficult-to-influence rules and routines – that constituted the school as a phenomenon in a social context. In this article, we examined how the four local schools, their principals and the Swedish National Principal Training Programme interacted as aspects of a complex reality that we sought to understand.

### **Method**

This article is based on semi-structured interviews (Yin, 2013) conducted with principals, teachers and students at four Swedish schools. The study began in autumn 2017 and lasted for 3 years. It was conducted in three steps.

1. During the first semester of the principals' training programme: individual interviews with the principals and group interviews with teachers and students in the principals' schools;
2. During the fourth semester of the principals' training programme: follow-up individual interviews with the principals;



3. After completing the principals' training programme: individual interviews with the principals and group interviews with teachers and students in the principals' schools.

**Table 1.** Schools and interviewees

Schools	School Leaders	Teachers		Students	
		2017	2020	2017	2020
Adult Education (Small Town)	1 principal	5	5	3	5
Upper Secondary School (City)	1 principal	6	8	6	3
Primary School: Preschool – Year 6 (Rural)	1 principal	4	6	4	5
Three Primary Schools: Preschool – Year 3 (Small Town and Rural)	1 assistant principal	8	5	18	4
Number	4	47		48	

A total of 47 teachers and 48 students were interviewed in the four schools. Apart from the principals and some of the teachers, the respondents were not the same in 2017 and 2020. Based on our instructions, the principals organised the group interviews. To be able to capture the school culture – in the form of the rules and routines that have developed over time – we asked for a group of teachers who had



worked for a long time at the school. We also asked for a group of newly employed teachers, as newly employed teachers still have the ability to see the culture from an outside perspective.

In the interviews, our intention was to capture the principals', teachers' and students' discursive consciousness regarding their own school's structure (organisation) and changes over the 3 years during which the principals participated in the training programme. They were encouraged to talk about their school, and all interviews were recorded.

Everyone in the interviews participated of their own free will. The principals were instructed to inform the teachers and adult students about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation. Regarding the younger students, their parents were provided written information about the purpose of the study and the ethical guidelines. We began each interview by describing the ethical guidelines and gave the respondents the opportunity to cancel their participation. There was a risk that we would receive an overly positive image of the schools due to the fact that it was the principals who organised the students and teachers. This was mainly a result of the teachers' work situation and the availability of students at the interview times. There were both positive and critical voices represented in the interviews.

### **Principals**

Principals in two training groups were invited to participate, and seven principals registered their interest. In this article, we focused on the four principals who did not change their workplace throughout the training. Three of the participants had assignments as principals and



one as an assistant principal. They represented both urban and rural schools as well as state and private schools. The principals also represented different parts of the school system (preschool, primary school, high school and adult education). Each principal was interviewed three times for approximately 90 minutes. Both researchers participated in the individual interviews with the principals: one conducted the interviews, while the other listened and raised additional questions when something was perceived as unclear.

In the first interviews, the principals were asked to describe their school and their work. The questions were asked openly, so the principals could choose their focus. The questions in the second round of interviews with the principals were based on their first interviews. The focus was on what changes had (or had not) taken place since the first interviews. Questions were once again raised about the form and content of the training programme and how the principals found the connection (or lack of connection) between the programme and their daily life as a school leader. In the third interviews with the principals, we returned to the two previous interviews and the principals' individual descriptions of their school and their identified changes, as well as how they assessed the form and content of the principals' training programme and its potential effects on their school's organisation and their leadership.

### **Teachers and students**

The interviews with teachers and students were conducted as semi-structured interviews (Yin, 2013). There were separate focus groups for a) students, b) newly employed teachers, c) experienced teachers and d) teachers with some form of extended pedagogical leadership. The



interviews lasted for approximately 1 hour and had the same intention as the interviews with the principals: getting teachers and students to share their discursive consciousness of their school's organisation and changes over time. In the second interviews, content and statements from the first interviews were followed up.

### **Analyses**

Each interview was transcribed. Some parts were printed verbatim, and others were summarised. Data from each school were compiled into a comprehensive case description of between 50 and 80 pages. The analysis took its theoretical point of departure from our interpretation of Giddens's (1984) structuration theory and the concepts of rules and routines. To make the coding sharper, the researchers individually coded the data and then compared their coding. The purpose of the analysis process was to capture both the possibilities and boundaries to be found in the structuration processes.

- In the first interviews, the following questions guided the analysis process: Which rules and routines, formal and informal, were referred to in the interviews as affecting the structures of the local schools? What changes could be seen during the 3 years?
- In the second and third interviews, the following questions guided the analysis process: What reproductions and changes in the local schools' structuration processes were referred to in the interviews? Were any of these mentioned in connection to the content of the principals' training program?

In the final step of the analysis process, thick descriptions (Yin, 2013) were constructed in the form of four cases.



## Findings

### **The schools' structuration processes**

The aim of this study was to examine the training programme's impact on the principals' leadership and their schools' organisations. The first step in this exploration was to analyse how the schools' structuration processes and the principals' leadership emerged regarding the rules and routines that constituted the local school organisations.

In the following narratives, we report on structures that created a sense of stability and security in the participating schools. These structures were often in the form of underlying codes or formal rules through which school leaders, teachers and students oriented themselves in their schools' daily life. Many of these had developed over time and constituted the foundation of the current school organisations, but, at the same time, they were constantly challenged and reinterpreted in the organisations (see Figure 1). Quotations from the interviews have been added to strengthen the validity of the narratives. Each quotation is followed by a parenthesis that notes the respondent and the interview round.

#### *North School: A stable structuration process that is being challenged*

North School is a small, private rural school that emerged as the heart of the village where it is located. Traditional rules and routines constituted an extensive school culture that affected life both in the school and in the community. The social patterns that appeared in the respondents' descriptions of the community reappeared in their descriptions of the school: "The school is run as a family business. Everyone helps everyone" (Experienced Teacher, 3). In both the community and the school, there were expectations that everyone



should contribute to the system regardless of their position. There was an informal but well-known rule to voluntarily offer help if someone was absent from school. This had led to the principal cooking school lunch and the assistant principal driving “the bus if needed. I teach classes, and I teach special education... it’s easier to describe what I don’t do” (Assistant Principal, 3). The rule to step in when a colleague was absent was stressful, according to some of the newly employed teachers.

As the school principal, Susanne was an agent with greater power than others. Through her actions, she reinforced different norms. Susanne was a team player who advocated distributed power and leadership. Along with a straightforward communication system, this had contributed to a pleasant climate and relational trust among her colleagues. But there was a tension between the democratic leadership and the teachers’ workload. The expectation to be involved in all decisions was perceived by some as exhausting: “We are supposed to think about everything: sometimes to exaggeration!” (Experienced Teacher, 3). In contrast to the teachers, the students were not engaged in the same way. School rules were familiar, but the students did not know who decided them or why they were formulated as they were. One student, who was describing how she used to be teased and bullied, was interrupted by an older student who appeared eager to provide a positive image of the school:

*We are few students, which makes it easy to know everyone, and there are rules that everyone knows and make us feel safe. I have never been bullied – do not think it ever existed, at least not for several years. (Student Year 6, 3)*



The prominent pattern in this structuration process was that this was a school that had been formed over time by teachers, parents and others in the community. This had resulted in strong rules and routines, forming a friendly and informal school culture. Newly employed non-resident teachers were in some parts challenging this. Susanne's way of acting as a principal contributed to stabilisation and reproduction, but she was also challenging the structuration process by trying to formalise certain informal rules and routines.

*South School: A structuration process characterised by progression*

South School is a fairly young and relatively small private vocational upper secondary school located in a large city. Earlier, the school had staff turnover problems, but this had changed, and the explanation seemed to be Tim, the new principal. According to staff and students, a stimulating community and a friendly school culture had developed under his leadership. They claimed that the school no longer had a bad reputation.

The overall aim at South School was to make students employable. A majority of the students chose this school due to the fact that half of the education was executed in the workplace: "You go to this school because you want to work with your hands, not to study" (Experienced Teacher, 3). Our first interviews showed that the introductory programme was the school's largest programme. This programme was for students who had not yet achieved minimum pass grades. The students were described as resource-intensive and with low motivation, and in the teacher interviews, it became clear that some "want more high-performing students" (Experienced Teacher, 1). During the study, more study-motivated students applied to the school, and by the second round of interviews, the introductory



programme was no longer the largest. However, the principal was uncertain whether this was a positive change:

*We wish for study-motivated students because it is difficult to work with students who do not know what they want. But the question is whether this is good, as I am not so sure that we are as skilled at teaching these students as we are with the ones with low motivation. (Tim, 2)*

A pattern in the school's structuration process was a change towards order and control. Introductory "having-fun-together days" were replaced by introductory days with a focus on preparing students for their upcoming education. Moreover, cameras were installed to reduce conflicts during breaks, and home classrooms were organised to increase teachers' control. A rule that mentors should check on all absent students as early as the first day was implemented, which was appreciated by the students: "If we are ill, they call and ask how we are, or if we have not reported absence, they call and check what happened. They provide a safe space, and you can go to the mentor if something happens" (Student, 3).

Tim appeared as an organiser and a strategist. Everyone spoke well of him, and he was a much-appreciated leader. "Tim has a black belt in leading school activities" (Experienced Teacher, 3). "This is my sixth or seventh principal, and there is no better in the school world" (Experienced Teacher, 3). Even if Tim emerged as a solitary leader, his leadership was based on the democratic idea of including everyone in the school's decision-making system. Co-influence and short decision-making processes were stressed by both students and staff.

The prominent pattern in this structuration process was that many improvements had taken place in a short amount of time, and the





principal's leadership emerged as the most salient explanation. As a solitary principal, Tim had managed to change a school that was characterised by high staff turnover and a bad reputation into a school that was appreciated by both teachers and students.

*West School: A structuration process characterised by a struggle for cohesion*

When Jane started as principal of Municipal Adult Education at West School, the school had just undergone a reorganisation. Three formal separate units that constituted the municipality's education for adults were united into one common unit. Historically, the units had their own rules and routines and different assignments. In addition, they were locally spread across the municipality.

Our first interviews showed that communication and decision-making within the organisation often took place in informal channels, creating a lack of trust between the principal and the teachers. The teachers in one of the units traditionally had the power to decide themselves how to conduct their work. These teachers described Jane as an absent principal, which could be explained by the fact that her office was located in one of the other units. There was an ongoing conflict between Jane and the teachers concerning the right to discharge students who did not fulfil the requirements. Teachers saw this conflict as a matter of trust, while Jane saw it as a matter of students' legal rights. "But the principal is new and wants to make decisions to ensure that she does not break any formal rules" (Experienced Teacher, 1). By the second interviews, these dilemmas seemed to have diminished, as Jane now had an office at this unit and worked there 2 days a week.

In the third interview, the teachers appeared to be more positive towards the new organisation and the principal. One explanation was that Jane had used her power to dismiss some of the teachers: "In the



past, there were people who hung on the emergency brake all the time. They are no longer here now; it is progressing steadily instead" (Jane, 2).

By the second interviews, Jane had organised all the teachers into *learning groups* with the aim of developing the teachers' teaching. She explained that the work in the learning groups should be based on a student survey, and she described how the teachers were free to choose which themes from the survey they wanted to discuss. Some teachers found the work in the groups "a bit unclear . . . we have different understandings . . . and cannot see the connection between developing our work and sitting in learning groups, listening to each other's experiences" (Experienced Teacher, 3). There was also resistance to the learning groups, and according to Jane, there had been a need for change: "It was difficult to see any results and what they learned" (Jane, 3). Here, Jane was referring to two of the groups, seeing this as an argument for limiting the freedom of the learning groups. As a result, Jane decided that all the groups should instead focus on student assessment and produce matrices related to this theme. Some of the teachers expressed dissatisfaction with this approach: "We are not talking about teaching; we are talking about assessment" (New Teacher, 3).

The prominent pattern in this structuration process was a struggle for cohesion in response to the creation of new rules and routines for collaboration and communication within Municipal Adult Education. Three units had become one but not without conflicts. The principal's role was to lead this process, and the main resource that Jane had at her disposal was the position of power entailed by being a principal.

*East School District: Leading a structuration process without formal power*



Paul worked as an assistant principal at East School District, an elementary school district in a medium-sized Swedish municipality. East School District had a new organisation, and Paul was responsible for the primary grades (1–3) in three schools: Central School, Village School and Suburban School.

Paul started as an assistant principal right after a reorganisation that primarily affected Central School, as the previous teacher teams, which had worked together for a long time and had strong structural working patterns, were split up. “Each old team had its own way of looking at things... everyone wants to change, but not everyone is prepared” (Experienced Teacher, Central School, 1). The reorganisation led to a great deal of insecurity among teachers, students and parents. Old conflicts between the teacher teams in the former organisation became a dilemma: “There were anxieties when the new teams were formed; at the old school, we worked very differently in the two teams” (Experienced Teacher, 1).

The fact that Paul’s office was located at Central School was problematic for the teachers at both Village School and Suburban School: “Now it feels like they [the school leaders] are over there, and we are here, taking care of ourselves because we have to” (Experienced Teacher, Village School, 1). In particular, it was bad because “it takes longer to be notified” (New Teacher, Suburban School, 1). The individual meetings each semester appeared to be important, “as there seems to be a great need for individual meetings that otherwise rarely occur” (Paul, 2); however, with about 60 teachers, these meetings were very time-consuming.

The reorganisation also entailed changes in the school leader team. The principal with the formal power at East School District had chosen to take pedagogical responsibility. This made the assistant principals

more of administrators with limited power. The latter was not clear to everyone, as the assistant principals were the ones primarily in contact with teachers, students and parents. Regardless of some frustrations, Paul appreciated working under the guidance of an experienced principal.

As a consequence of the physical distance from the school leaders, the *teacher team leaders* had been given more responsibility and served as a link between the school leaders and the teachers. “So questions that you previously went to the principal with... they bring to me now” (Team Leader, Central School, 1). Paul met *his* team leaders once a month in what he described as information meetings. The principal also met all the team leaders regularly, which they described as information meetings.

The prominent pattern in this structuration process involved ambiguity and uncertainty due to the extensive reorganisation and the struggle to create new rules and routines for promoting collaboration throughout the new organisation and within the new team of school leaders. Paul emerged as an important agent, but he had a high workload and was uncertain about what power he had as an assistant principal.

### **Connection between the training programme, the principals’ leadership and their school organisations**

In the previous section, the participating schools’ organisations were identified based on their structuration processes, stretching over time and space (Figure 1). In the second step, we examined the training programme’s impact on the principals’ leadership and school organisations to address the second research question: Based on the principals’, teachers’ and students’ discursive consciousness, what



connections were found between the principals' participation in the programme and how they acted as leaders in the structuration processes in their local schools? In the cases above, the structuration processes in the participating schools emerged as clearly dissimilar. This showed that the training programme's impact on the principals' leadership and local school organisations varied. In this section, these variations are reported along with the identified similarities.

The results showed that the programme had the most impact on North School, both on the principal's (Susanne's) leadership and on the school's daily life. One explanation could be that this was a very small organisation where changes were easily noticeable. Initially, Susanne emphasised school legislation and exercising public authority. This programme area had provided her with information about what was legally regulated and clarified her responsibility as a principal. It made her realise that much needed to be done to meet the formal demands. This area was the focus of the first year of the programme. In the second year, the focus changed to management by goals and objectives. During the following two years in which we followed Susanne, this emerged as the area with most effect. Entering the second year of the programme, she discovered that this area was non-existent in her school. The teachers confirmed that this was the area that underwent most changes during Susanne's time in the programme. They described how Susanne created rules and routines for communication and decision-making, challenging the school's informal organisation. Clarifying teachers' obligations was necessary to retain new teachers, as the frustrations that were brought forth were primarily based on uncertainty regarding what was included in teachers' responsibilities: "There is no clarity here; everyone does everything. Before, in my previous school, I had one extra assignment,



but now I do everything” (New Teacher, 1). The dissatisfaction was sometimes so great that some of the new teachers chose to leave the school. At the same time, students from the village and teachers who been at the school for a long time appeared keen to maintain the school’s good reputation. Susanne emerged as an important part of the structuration process, using the training programme as an argument for challenging rules and routines in an informal school culture. According to Susanne herself, the programme had contributed to a better awareness of her formal role as a principal, including her regulated responsibilities, and she had received support in developing management by goals and objectives.

The training programme seemed to have had little impact on the principal’s (Tim’s) leadership in South School, even though this was also a small school. Unlike North School, South School was a young organisation with a bad reputation. Tim appeared as a strong and charismatic leader with a strong conviction of how a school should function and be led. Despite our difficulties in identifying any traces of the programme’s impact, Tim found that the programme had contributed to him becoming more analytical, resulting in him “systematically following up different actions and trusting the process” (Tim, 3). He also expressed how the programme had confirmed that his way of understanding and conducting school leadership was consistent with research. The programme solidified his way of leading rather than changing it. One possible connection between Tim’s leading actions and the programme was his introduction of a specific conversation model addressing specific teaching dilemmas. This was the same conversation model that was used in the programme for addressing specific leading dilemmas;



therefore, it was reasonable to believe that Tim had taken inspiration from the programme.

The structuration process in West School was dominated by a struggle for cohesion between the units within the Municipal Adult Education organisation. This struggle created collaboration problems and a lack of trust between the principal (Jane) and the teachers. In the first round of interviews, there were ongoing conflicts between some of the teachers and Jane. By the end of this process, this had changed, mostly because Jane had used her power to dismiss teachers who did not follow the new rules implemented. In the second round of interviews, Jane described how she had organised all the teachers into *learning groups*, with the aim of improving teaching by enhancing communication between the school's different units. As the principals' training programme was organised in learning groups, Jane had experienced working in such a group. According to Jane, this experience had contributed to an awareness that principals need to have knowledge of group processes: "And I may not have thought of that before – the group processes" (Jane, 3). She claimed that the programme had made her more aware of how a group bonds – and how a common enemy can strengthen a group's cohesion: "And that's probably what happened with my teachers" (Jane, 3). However, an important distinction was that in the training programme, learning groups were given a great deal of freedom. Therefore, by imposing restrictions on this freedom, Jane chose a different way of leading, appointing group leaders to ensure that the *right* content (i.e., content that Jane had chosen) was addressed. According to Jane, the training programme had provided her with confirmation, so "I feel more secure in what I say and do" (Jane, 3), indicating that she had been influenced by parts of the programme.



The principals' training programme primarily focuses on the functions of principals and seldom meets the conditions faced by assistant principals. Despite this, Paul, as one of three assistant principals at East School District, found that the programme had enriched him by providing him with new insights. The programme had given him security and a feeling of not being "alone in the ocean; the world is shrinking. This is how it is to be a school leader in Sweden today" (Paul, 3). Perhaps the sense of belonging to a professional community made it easier for him to handle his high workload. Paul appreciated the assignment in the training programme where they visited a colleague for a day of peer shadowing and supervision. He used a modified version of this in his organisation, calling upon the teachers to visit and supervise one another. According to the teachers, these visits seldom lived up to their intention of improving teaching through supervision, and Paul did not appear to have used his own positive experiences from the programme to improve this assignment at East School District.

In summary, we note that there were essentially two areas of the programme that had direct impacts on how the principals conducted their school leadership: *school legislation and exercising public authority* and *management by goals and objectives*. The first area offers a schematic picture of what a principal can, may and must do. This area provided a resource for handling conflicts, as at West School, where Jane referred to educational law when she was arguing why it was not up to teachers to decide which students should be discharged from education. However, a principal's assignment cannot be fully captured by legislation. Indeed, the second area, management by goals and objectives, often had a stronger impact on how the principals acted in their schools, as in Susanne's structuration process at North School.





The position of school leader emerged as important in this study. For example, at both East School and West School, extensive reorganisations had shaken previously stable, but not always conflict-free, organisations. These had resulted in the initiation of new improvement processes. The fact that Jane was a principal and Paul an assistant principal played an important role in their ability to establish new rules and routines. Paul's position limited his room for manoeuvre and created a lack of clarity in decision-making, as he was the one who worked closest to the teachers, yet he was more of an administrator than a school leader.

### **Discussion**

At first glance, while differences appeared when the four cases were compared in line with Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, the results also showed similarities based on how the principals' leadership very often involved creating sustainable rules and routines in school organisations. It was interesting that none of the participating principals stated that these processes required a lot of time and effort. In fact, there was no indication that the principals even were aware of these ongoing structuration processes, nor did they seem aware of their function of leading them. It can be assumed that this is a pattern that is distinctive for inexperienced principals. We think that an awareness of these processes could enhance leadership and improvements in local schools; therefore, we promote the structuration process as an overarching concept for use in a principals' training programme, referring to principals leading the process of meaning making, including everyone in their daily interactions at the local school. This could for example be in the shape of involving students in creating and recreating rules, facilitating collaboration between



teachers, encouraging shared responsibility or, in other words, practicing a democratic leadership.

The third year in the Swedish training programme focuses on *school leadership*. It emerged that this area was mostly perceived in terms of confirming the principals' existing beliefs. This finding was unexpected and to some extent problematic, as throughout the training programme, the principals are supposed to "develop the ability to critically review their own practice and formulate strategies for development and change based on this analysis" (Skolverket, 2015, p. 2). In this study, we identified some minor actions that could be traced to the school leadership area of the programme. However, it is important to note that when the principals were forced to deal with problems that occurred, they did not use their experiences from the training programme. One such example is how Jane described how she appreciated the trust that she and her colleagues felt while attending the training program, being indorsed to make choices concerning content and/or assignment based on what was essential for their learning group (for more information about the principal experiences and the program's design see Forssten Seiser & Söderström, 2021). Jane emphasised that this was a way of organising collegial learning in a way that strengthens both individual and collective understanding as it supports participants to be engaged in themes that are important to them in their professional practice. This was not the approach she used as a principal. Instead she ended up limiting the teacher's freedom by deciding that every learning group should be focusing on student assessment and produce matrices. This highlighted how difficult it is to transfer experiences from a training programme to principals' leadership in local schools (Jerdborg, 2021), underlining that the training programme needs to consciously facilitate this kind of transfer



in a structured way to achieve impact on principals' leadership and schools' structuration processes. We also note that it is a challenge to design a principal training program that fulfil the government's ambitions such as realizing the goal that all students have access to schools of equal quality regardless of context and situations.

Another aspect that we wish to emphasise is that none of the participating principals expressed what kind of power and responsibility system they wanted to develop, by which we mean how the power to make decisions as well as the responsibility to execute them is distributed at the local school. It was only the principal of South School who was consciously striving for a more democratic system. This indicated that the programme may be missing something significant when it comes to reflection, awareness and responsibility regarding the development of democratic systems. Therefore, we emphasise that the training programme needs to focus more on the development of critical thinking for formulating strategies for development and change. Consequently, we promote principal training programs, regardless of national context, that foregrounds specific content and assessments that enhance democratic leadership with a focus on principals' responsibility for developing an organisation that ensures an equal education consistent with the prevailing legislation. In other words, a school leadership training programme needs to educate and train principals to lead structuration processes that create a stimulating and secure learning environment for all students.

The training programme is for the most part designed to suit everyone, regardless of the local school context. This can be seen as a problem that causes a lack of relevance which for example emerged in the interviews with Jane, who wished for content more relevant to adult



education, and in the interviews with Susanne who expressed that it felt a bit strange, running a small private school where the general content was difficult to apply every now and then. From another angle, it can be seen as a necessary prerequisite in a school system where mobility among principals is very high (Thelin, 2020). Overall, we agree with McCulla and Degenhardt (2016) that a large focus on a school's uniqueness jeopardises the general aspects of a principal's assignment.

### Concluding Remarks

The question of how principals should be educated has become a central concern globally (Jerdborg, 2022), and that education should reflect the social and cultural contexts. This study has, in the light of Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, contributed through its discussion of the Swedish National Principal Training Programme's impact on the participating principals' leadership and school organisations. The findings provided a deeper understanding of the width and depth of the structuration processes in the schools and how the local schools' diversity shaped the assignment of leading this process. The study revealed how the principals in their daily work were facing different significant challenges as a consequence of their dissimilar contexts.

The Swedish National Principal Training Programme is perceived as essential for inexperienced school leaders, but the fact that the programme is divided into three main areas of content risks giving the impression that leadership is *one* part of a principal's assignment rather than constituting the *entire* assignment. Questions arise regarding what should constitute the foreground and background of a training programme and how the general versus unique aspects of principals'



assignments should be highlighted. School leadership training needs to involve both vital content and the development of certain skills. It is not a question of one or the other but rather of both.

There is a need for further research on the relationship between school leadership education and principals' leading, as well as on local school structuration processes. The researchers advocate studies involving students and focusing on students' learning connected to the resources invested in school leadership and school leadership training. A limitation of this study is that no observations were conducted, with the empirical data solely consisting of the principals', teachers' and students' statements. To more fully comprehend the impact of the principals' training programme on the participating principals' leadership and schools, observations could have been included in the empirical data. Thus, the researchers advocate further research involving observations. A further limitation of the study is that the full potential of Giddens's structuration theory was not utilized, as the results were not placed in a larger social and cultural context. Such a contribution would deserve a full study of its own.

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#### **About the authors:**

Anette Forssten Seiser is a lecturer in educational work. Her research is within the school leadership and school development fields. She conducts research both on local schools and on governments projects, often studying the role and function of school leaders in different didactic research initiatives.

**E-mail:** [anette.seiser@kau.se](mailto:anette.seiser@kau.se)

**Authorship credit details:** Conceptualization; ideas, formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims. Funding acquisition; Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication. Investigation; Conducting a research and investigation process, specially performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection. Methodology; development or design of methodology, creation of models. Visualization; Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/data presentation. Writing – original draft; Preparation, creation and/or



presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation).

**Åsa Söderström** is a lecturer in education. Her research topics are school improvement, school leadership and organization development. She has also been engaged in exploring an ethical perspective in school leading.

**E-mail:** [asa.soderstrom@kau.se](mailto:asa.soderstrom@kau.se)

**Authorship credit details:** Conceptualization; ideas, formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims. Investigation; Conducting a research and investigation process, specially performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection. Methodology; development or design of methodology, creation of models. Visualization; Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/data presentation. Writing – original draft; Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation).