

School Leader Education as a Driving Force for Personal Development in Terms of Orientation, Reflection, Exploration, and Interplay

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Abstract

Following a professional program to ensure qualification for school leadership is a growing trend. However, school leaders have also come to understand and use content from educational programs in widely different ways. There is therefore a need to study how participating school principals experience learning differently within one and the same program. This empirical study uses qualitative methods to examine fourteen compulsory school principals' experiences of how the mandatory Swedish National Principal Training Program contributes to their professional development. The findings show how program elements can be experienced as contributing to professional development of some principals while being experienced as obstacles for others, depending on becoming active or passive driving forces for participants in terms of orientation, reflection, exploration, and interplay. Applying a theoretical framework made it possible to describe and understand their professional development through program participation in a nuanced way. In terms of analytical generalization such knowledge may form the basis for development of school leader programs.

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Introduction

The interest in preparation and development of school leaders through their participation in certain professional programs has expanded and strengthened the professional development and learning of school leaders, a trend that is growing internationally. Completing school leadership training is also increasingly becoming a requirement for professional practice of school leadership (Bush, 2008, 2018; Mourshed et al., 2010). However, training for school leaders varies as leaders' responsibilities and services vary between countries.

Empirical studies of formalized training programs for school leaders focuses on the content of program models as well as their pedagogical approaches (Aas and Törnsén, 2016; Jensen and Ottesen, 2022, Orr 2009; Orr and Orphanos, 2011). Accordingly, school leaders who have participated in high quality training programs, are argued to become better prepared, more consistent in how they exercise their leadership and get better at leading school development (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). However, school leaders are found to experience, understand, and make use of the program content pertaining to such trainings rather differently in their professional practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Huber, 2013; Jerdborg, 2022a; McCulla and Degenhardt, 2016). This entails exploring the very issues for dissimilar participants as individuals. That said, sparse empirical and theoretical attention has hitherto been paid to the professional development of school leadership across institutions where participants are expected to learn and develop 'across sites', i.e., they are expected to learn at site in university-based programs to develop their practitioner school leadership practice (e.g., Jensen, 2022). Thus, more attention needs to be directed to whether courses for school leaders are designed effectively so that the desired outcomes become possible.



Moreover, studies of school leadership training have been criticized for being atheoretical and for relying too heavily on participants' self-assessment, as participants respond positively in surveys regardless of the features of the program design (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Jensen, 2016, 2022). Therefore, researchers must look for ways to evaluate participant perspectives that do not rely solely on self-assessment. Consequently, studies are needed that focus on the different ways program participants experience learning. To advance education, knowledge of participants' experiences of learning may form the basis for educational development. Furthermore, basing research on a sound theoretical foundation and triangulating research methods seem important (McCulla and Degenhardt, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010).

This study creates knowledge about how school leaders (i.e., principals) experience professional development and learning through participation in a specific principal program. The Swedish National Principal Training Program (SNPTP) is a mandatory three-year program that runs concurrently with participants' work as a principal. This arrangement is in some ways unique and makes Sweden an interesting context for study, especially as there is no self-selection paving the way for voluntary attendance viz. all new principals are required to take the course. The focus is on experiences of principals who attend the third (i.e., last) year of training in the SNPTP. While participating in SNPTP, the participants of this study work as a principal in a Swedish compulsory school. As they are in their last year of the program, they have experienced all the courses and gained a few years of experience as a principal. The focus on the principals' experiences with SNPTP is specifically approached in terms of how training elements, program design and content are experienced in an



intertwined fashion. Two research questions guide this study: 1) What training elements do participants highlight and how do these contribute to their professional development and learning? and 2) How can the participants' professional learning be described and understood? The analysis uses a theoretical framework based on Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning.

Contextualization

The SNPTP is designed to intertwine experiences from practice with learning in the program and to promote social learning for the participating principals using diverse group formations during course work. The current form of the program was established in 2008 and has been mandatory for new principals since 2010. This three-year program comprises 30 higher education credits, partly at an advanced level. The principals begin the training within one year after they have been hired as a principal (Jerdborg, 2022b). The program comprises three courses: School law and the exercise of authority; Governance, organization and quality and School leadership pedagogical leading. The training/studying, conducted while the participants work as a principal, takes about 20% of the participants' working time. This parallel process contributes to professional development by linking the program closely to participants' professional experiences and everyday work (Skolverket, 2020). Through this program, the participating principals develop knowledge and competence, including an understanding of national and local goals, develop the ability to critically examine their practice, and formulate strategies for school development based on their analysis (Skolverket, 2015, 2020). The course meetings are interspersed with literature reading and assignments addressing participants' practice (Forssten Seiser and Söderström, 2021; Norberg 2019; Brauckmann et al., 2020).



Research on school leaders' professional development in education

Previous studies of school leader education show that program content should be closely linked to participants' practice, that program design should be clear and that participants need to be motivated (Orr, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Huber and Hiltmann, 2011; Orr and Barber, 2006). Programs should focus on developing leadership skills, ethical leadership, leading teachers' learning and vision work, managing the school organization's goals and results and developing organizational and change work, while connecting theory and practice using mentorship and assisting in the creation of professional networks (Orr and Orphanos, 2011; Young et al., 2009). Jensen and Ottesen (2022) display how educational practices of school leader education is dependent on social, material, and discursive artifacts and how they relate. Moreover, they argue that research needs to pay attention to educational entities in teaching practices of school leader programs and to their relationships using data from situated practices alongside to the detailed understanding of what it means to participate. Consequently, this study seeks to contribute by exploring how school leaders experience program entities through participation in a certain principal program.

Internationally, research traditions vary concerning research on school leadership education. However, as few studies use theoretical analysis tools (Jensen, 2016; Møller, 2016), there is a need for qualitative studies that use theoretical analysis. Such studies with a qualitative orientation would help provide an in-depth understanding of learning in the SNPTP context. The education of school leaders tends to develop as a separate field of research rather than relying on post graduate education (HE) research in general (Jensen and Ottesen, 2022). Thus, the situation with school leaders participating in school leader



educational programs is indeed important to address and discuss in the fields of school leadership and professional development of school leaders.

In the Swedish setting, Forssten Seiser and Söderström (2021) found that SNPTP participants develop diverse strategies according to their study group's culture. In some groups, a reflective learning community is formed, while in others effective collective routines are developed before examinations or an individualized culture is formed. Liljenberg and Wrethander (2020) show that participants in the SNPTP find the program's long-term focus on internship-related examining tasks challenging, but they gradually take on and learn from the tasks. Jerdborg (2022a, 2021) found out that participants in the SNPTP adopt one of three separate learning identities in the educational context, each affecting both how they perceive the program and how they approach their practice. Skott and Törnsén (2018) as well as Ärlestig (2012) shared that participants' previous experiences seem to affect their learning in the program. Based on these studies, new questions arise as to how the training elements are experienced by SNPTP participants and how these promote learning and professional development. This study approaches these issues specifically.

A social learning perspective as a theoretical frame

This study uses Wenger's (1998) social learning theory as a theoretical and analytical framework to explore principals' experiences of professional development and learning while participating in a principal program. That means, as this study takes on socio-cultural and practice perspectives, it is based on an ontology that perceives people as acting beings, engaged in the world (Wenger, 1998). From this perspective, learning is based on how people (i.e., the principals) develop learner identities through their active participation in specific



contexts (i.e., their program and work). However, a point important to consider is that learning cannot be designed, it can only be designed for in terms of being facilitated, or frustrated (Wenger, 1998 p. 229).

Consequently, Wenger (1998) argues it is important for educational programs to be designed for learning. For example, programs could link participants' educational engagement with their educational alignment and imagination concerning professional identity. Thus, education, at its best, can become an active force for participants' professional lives. This is an important quality to identify in the study. Further, Wenger (1998) argues for a learning design that creates social infrastructures and involves practices and professional identities. From this perspective, education becomes relevant for participants when they engage in formulating, testing, and reconsidering their professional identity as this allows learning to become a meaningful part of their professional life (Packer and Goicoechea, 2000; Wenger, 1998). Although engagement is critical to learning, it takes imagination to encompass with the broader context. In this study, facilities of imagination are therefore approached in terms of orientation, reflection, and exploration (Wenger, 1998 p. 238). Further, designing for learning is a matter of combining some fundamental dimensions productively. Thence, participation and reification, designed and emergent, identification and negotiability as well as local and global are approached as dualities in the study (e.g., Wenger, 1998 p. 232).

Becoming a member of a new community (e.g., through participating in education) is a typical starting point for learners' identity development. However, participation requires not only new knowledge but also changing one's 'old self', possibly experienced as a tangible loss (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Wenger, 1998).



In this study, learning can be understood based on the understandings of what is socially experienced and how this takes place. Consequently, studying principals' experiences of program participation and materialization are important. As the perspective implies that learning is ongoing in all contexts and transforms identities by including engagement, imagination, and the ability to align with systems (Wenger, 1998), educational contexts, educators' actions and teaching materials become resources for learning in complex ways and thus constitute important qualities to identify in the study. Also, when knowledge is coded into elements (e.g., texts, syllabi, and other learning material), a distance is created between the learner and the practices where the knowledge is included (e.g., school leaders' practices) (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, understanding the teaching material might require extra work constituting a pedagogical cost for the learner. Furthermore, learning can become linked to the material rather than practice, providing only superficial learning with narrow usefulness on the part of the participants. Thus, educators need to constantly balance the use of teaching material. Knowledge also needs to encompass meaning and usability to be utilized more participatively in professional settings.

Wenger's (1998) social learning theory has influenced several research fields that include learning in societal contexts and working life. In education, researchers have formerly used Wenger's framework to study how participants develop closeness or distance to their learning by adopting different learner identities (cf. Oppland-Cordell and Martin, 2015; Biza et al., 2014; Crawford and Cowie, 2012). Wenger's (1998) theoretical contribution, however, has been criticized for not being a "grand theory" and therefore not always perceived as complete. Furthermore, the theory has been criticized for not



sufficiently being empirically grounded (Engeström, 2013; Kaner and Lerman, 2008; Handley et al., 2006). Wenger argues that the ambition is not to be all-encompassing but that the theory constitutes a framework for considering learning, which is to be validated empirically (Farnsworth et al., 2016). This view sheds light to the ways through which the uses of constructs should be understood in this study as applied in the context of the specific program.

Method

The study focuses on the relevant learning experiences of 14 principals in the third (and final) year of the SNPTP in 2018–2019. All the participants were concurrently working as principals in a compulsory school. Their participation was situated within one of three studied course groups, each associated to a specific program provider (i.e., a university). These participating principals correspond to the usual composition for principals in the compulsory school regarding area of responsibility, gender and municipal or independent school organizer. That is, there was an even distribution of responsibilities regarding student grades (1–3, 4–6 and 7–9). About 66% of the principals were women and about 80% were municipal school principals (i.e., 20% were school principals of independent schools).

These principals participated in three semi-structured interviews – an individual interview, a group interview conducted at their educational site (i.e., in connection with the course), and an additional individual interview was conducted at their workplace. The two methods of individual and group interviews offer complementary approaches to answer the research questions. Individual interviews served to deepen individual experiences of the program, and as some questions were retrospective, in all, processes of professional development were



concentrated upon. Group interviews stimulated discussion and meta-reflection, helping participants to remember their past experiences in terms of program design and content. Moreover, listening to different views and reflections together brought contrasting experiences of the same entities to the fore. Meeting the principals for a second round of individual interviews, situated at their workplace, gave perspective and the opportunity to return to previous statements for further in-depth exploration. Both the individual interviews, which lasted 60–90 minutes, and the group interviews, which lasted slightly longer, were recorded digitally and transcribed.

Observations were conducted for 7–8 full days in each of the three course groups, and the participating principals were shadowed at their workplace (i.e., school) for one day. Observations functioned as complementary to interviews, helping to understand the related contexts, and highlighting the meaning of oral comments, serving as a form of triangulation. Accordingly, interview transcripts constitute main empirics for the analyses, while the observational notes are not specifically described or analyzed for this manuscript but functioned as described, contextualizing each principal's talk of their practice.

Analyses

In the first round of the analyses work, the transcripts were read for several times. All the educational activities that were talked about in the interviews, including content and design, were highlighted, and recorded in the first column of a matrix. The next column recorded what the participants shared about the gains out of the educational activity in relation to their development and in the third column what the said processes in turn meant for them in the forms of development or constraints. This round of analyses revealed two opposing views, or rather two sorts of opposing experiences. Moreover, it appeared that



several educational activities rendered the same sorts of experiences. To bring these together and find ways to analytically describe their value for participants' professional development, Wenger's (1998) conceptual framework was used. Consequently, this can be termed an abductive analysis.

This meant that the empirical material was sorted based on the principals' experiences of their program participation in terms of training elements and content. Their experiences were attributed to the aspects of orientation, reflection, exploration, or interplay (cf. Wenger, 1998, p. 238) as it takes imagination to encompass crucial engagement in a program with the broader context of a principal's work. In the analysis, orientation refers to experience of locating oneself in one's professional role and understanding one's role in relation to a general principal's role. Reflection refers to the experience of increasing self-awareness through interaction between closeness and distance, making it possible to see oneself and situations with 'new eyes'. Exploration refers to experience of exploring, trying out and recreating opportunities for professional practice. Interplay refers to experiences and training elements where orientation, reflection and exploration interact. Moreover, out of the two contrasting ways to experience the activities, these aspects are related to whether they constitute an active or a passive driving force for the participant (Wenger 1998, p. 273). Active here refers to whether the program becomes an active part of the participant's professional identity, driving and developing understanding and action. With respect to orientation, on the other hand, active refers to expanding the participant's understanding. As for reflection, active refers to gaining a view of oneself and the surrounding world in new ways. When it comes to exploration, active refers to creating a new self-image by trying out actions and providing

new experiences. Passive in relation to orientation refers to fixed ideas which can limit the professional role, whereas regarding reflection it refers to limited perceptions of oneself and situations, becoming a limiting factor. Passive in relation to exploration refers to participants' limited experiences preventing understanding and meaningful 'ownership' of the program content. The participants' experiences were related to their engagement and alignment toward the educational activities and training elements. Engagement refers to how participants approach the program and the content, while alignment points to how they adjust themselves and use what is learned. How the categorization of statements was approached in this phase of analyses are exemplified in Table 1.

Table 1. *Categorization of statements*

Engagement and alignment Passive force Examples of quotes	Aspects of educational imagination	Engagement and alignment Active force Examples of quotes
<p>Passive with respect to orientation refers to fixed ideas, which can limit the professional role.</p> <p><i>"It probably hasn't broadened my view of the assignment that much."</i></p> <p><i>"The education may not have influenced my view of principalship, but I think doing the work of principal is what creates my view."</i></p> <p><i>"There have been different qualities of the lecturers. I'm not a fan of someone coming up and putting up a PowerPoint of 250 pages, and then you know that, damn it, now we're</i></p>	<p>Examples of training elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Literature</i> ○ <i>Lectures</i> ○ <i>Assignments</i> ○ <i>Exams</i> <p>Categorized as:</p> <p>Orientation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Space ○ Time ○ Meaning ○ Power 	<p>Active with respect to orientation refers to expanding the participant's understanding.</p> <p><i>"After all, we should all have read the literature and then I assume that you do. If you have also written a reading log, then you already have a lot of thoughts raised and a lot of things learned. And then you get here, and you sharpen it even more, [...] and through conversations in groups about the theoretical concepts. And if a colleague says, but I interpret it this way. Then you get into a new way of thinking. [...] And an exchange of experience occurs."</i></p>

<p>going to sit here until twelve o'clock and look at 250 PowerPoint slides, and where there's only two words that stand. And then you know that here is someone who likes to listen to himself."</p>		
<p>Passive with respect to reflection refers to limited perceptions of oneself and situations, becoming a limiting factor.</p> <p><i>"If you could sit down for a while or sit down with other people and if you could be systematic and if you could let go of all these practical things. [...] That is, you train a little and you prepare, but you really run a lot on instinct because you lack experience and fingertip sense."</i></p>	<p>Examples of training elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Planned reflection in assignments</i> ○ <i>Spontaneous reflection on content</i> <p>Categorized as: Reflection</p>	<p>Active with respect to reflection refers to gaining a new view of oneself and the surrounding world.</p> <p><i>"The education has given time for reflection. [...] on what we do here, and what it means in my everyday life, which in turn has in any case given me more knowledge about both myself but also about the school as an organization."</i></p> <p><i>"I probably thought it [SNPTP] would be more fact-based, not that it was so much self-reflection making me grow more in three years as a person than in the other 46."</i></p>
<p>Passive with respect to exploration refers to limited experiences preventing understanding and meaningful 'ownership' of educational content.</p> <p><i>"It's my worst branch! (Note. To role-play). Shall we change the subject?"</i></p> <p><i>"Concretely, my staff doesn't see anything from the course I'm taking. I don't believe you should say that "I have an assignment from the course to carry out", then it becomes experimental, and I find it difficult to believe in such a task."</i></p>	<p>Examples of training elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Role play</i> ○ <i>Experiencing visual tools (pictures, maps, models, concepts)</i> ○ <i>Working with cases</i> ○ <i>Trying out tasks in professional practice</i> ○ <i>Testing and reconsidering actions</i> 	<p>Active with respect to exploration refers to creating a new self-image by trying out actions and providing new experiences.</p> <p><i>"In the role play, a union representative, was going to meet the manager. The union representative would make demands and the manager would respond. In my group, it went crazy, because the manager answered completely! And I just realized that, ah! If I'm just in the slightest bad mood, that's how I'll answer! And you can't do that!"</i></p>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Visiting or receiving visits to school</i> ○ <i>Long term development plans</i> <p>Categorized as: Exploration</p>	<p><i>“You must always start from where you are. You can start from your own school and the reality where you are and apply what you learn in your practice. And put it, as well as the knowledge you get, into action.”</i></p>
<p>Passive with respect to interplay refers to training elements where orientation, reflection and exploration should interact but disconnect.</p> <p><i>“The educational design is good, but also intensive. I’m the kind of person who, well, jeez, at least I can decide for myself where to sit! [...] If you are a person who needs to just, (breathing), then it is too intense.”</i></p> <p><i>“There are always some in the group who would like to be seen and heard. And in those situations, I find it a bit difficult. Because I kind of can’t bear to be pushed with someone else to take a seat.”</i></p>	<p>Examples of training elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Working in study groups and exchange of experiences</i> <p>Categorized as: Interplay</p>	<p>Active with respect to interplay refers to training elements where orientation, reflection and exploration interact.</p> <p><i>“Because you have collaborated with different groups, you have received many examples of what it looks like at other schools and gained an insight into both that you have had to reflect on the chain of steering in the own municipality versus what is found in others. In other workplaces, and municipalities, and independent schools versus municipal schools and so on. You’ve gained a widened view of the assignment.”</i></p>

In the next round of analyses the different aspects of educational imagination, engagement and alignment were further explored in detail. Analytical concepts in terms of four dualities as fundamental dimensions (Wenger, 1998, p. 232) were used in terms of local/global, participation/reification, designed/emergent and identification/negotiability. The local/global dimension in this study considers the relationship between the program content (global) and the participant (local). The participation/reification dimension relates to degree of participation concerning training elements and how program content



and form (reification) are used. The designed/emergent dimension considers the relationship between training elements (designed) and emergent understanding (emergent). The identification/negotiability dimension examines the interaction between the participant's identification with the professional role (identification) and openness to negotiate new elements of identification (negotiability). A visualization of these dimensions in the form of an analytical frame is presented in Table 2. In the last round of analyses an analytical generalization was conceptualized out of the findings and illustrated with a figure.

Table 2. *Visualization of dimensions used as analytical frame*

Dimensions of educational (program) design		
Participant participation	Local --- Global	Program content
Degree of participation	Participation --- Reification	Program content and design
Training elements	Designed --- Emergent	Emergent understanding
Identification with professional role	Identification --- Negotiability	Openness to new elements of identification

Findings

This section presents results in three steps in line with the description of the analyses process. The first step concerns the first research question: What kind of experiences of program participation do participants highlight concerning learning and professional development and how do these contribute to their professional development? In this direction, descriptive categories from empirics are presented, however, these patterns discovered through inductive analyses, which are analytically interpreted creating links to the



theoretical constructs of the elements described in the analyses section and to their function for the participants are further made explicit. In the second step these experiences are further described and explored in terms of contribution to their professional development. Moreover, an analytical generalization is made, with the help of the second research question: How can participants' professional learning be described and understood? In the third step, the empirical results are conceptualized theoretically and illustrated through a figure.

Experiences and their connection to professional development

First, participants highlight experiences of traditional educational design in terms of lectures and literature reading together with writing assignments and exams. In the analysis, traditional elements are attributed to the elements of orientation as they contribute with information and perspectives, creating structure and direction, most often supporting the process of locating oneself professionally in time, space, meaning and power. Second, educational design promoting professional reflection is highlighted by the participants, both in terms of reflection as a specific assignment and in terms of spontaneous reflection linked to the program content and practice. In the analysis, these are both attributed to the elements of reflection. Third, the principals highlighted educational design in the form of role play, visual tools (pictures, models, maps, and concepts), contrast, work with cases, educational tasks in one's own professional practice, testing and reconsideration of acting, visiting and receiving visits to one's school and taking on long-term development work in practice linked to report writing. In the analysis, these are attributed to the opportunities for exploration. Fourth, participants highlighted working in study groups. In the analysis, working in study groups are attributed to the elements of interplay, as study group work required



an interplay between the elements of orientation, reflection, and exploration.

In the following, principals' experiences of participating in the program are presented under four headings, each corresponding to the element of orientation, reflection, exploration, or interplay. For each element, an introduction is given, followed by a presentation of experiences based on how they constituted an active or a passive driving force for the principals, mainly focusing education as an active force. Illustrative quotes are presented.

Experiencing elements of orientation

The principals describe how traditional educational designs in the form of lectures and literature bring information and perspectives. The structure given for the studies with reading literature and other preparations before each course meeting as well as tasks and assignments between course meetings are experienced as supportive. Thus, the design and structure for participation in the program (i.e., reifications) appear to be supportive and balanced.

Experiencing elements of orientation as an active driving force

Principals describe how lectures clarified content and perspectives from course literature, deepened and expanded the content and provided access to different ways of reasoning. Lectures also helped the principals adopt critical approaches. When the principals did not read from the literature before the class, they found that their learning was negatively affected, which emerged as an experience that motivated them to read assignments for future classes. The principals described the lecturers as knowledgeable and skilled. Some principals experienced the lectures as the best part of the program and described them as opportunities to listen, reflect and learn new things.



Principal 2: I perhaps sound a bit boring when I say that what has given me the most is actually the lectures. Because there you can relax listening to someone knowledgeable lecturing.

The relationship between these traditional educational designs of the program (designed) and the participants' emerging understanding (emergent) was deemed supportive overall.

The pre-class reading from the literature was accompanied by supportive structures and tools. Literature logs helped the principals structure their reading and identify the author's main messages and arguments; gain the knowledge they could then use in in-class discussions. The principals described how they gained new ways of thinking through their reading. The course literature was also perceived as a form of support for staying up to date professionally and served as a reflective mirror for their own practice. The literature was also described as a dialogue partner who 'wrestles' with participants' ideas. The thoughts raised during the reading affected how the principals viewed their leadership practice and motivated them to act. The literature helped confirm their experiential knowledge. By gaining such professional language, the principals could justify their positions. That is, the literature contributed to their sense of professionalism – i.e., their professional identity.

Principal 7: The literature is very interesting, and I feel at home there somehow. You reflect in a different way. It is not so much that pocks one's attention, I rather get to think the thought clearly, and in consultation with others when we discuss in literature dialogues [...]. You constantly have your school practice in the back of your mind and think about things that I don't have time to think about otherwise. So, this also contributes to my development.



Writing assignments and exams created systematics, reflections, and direction. The principals learned to perform tasks thoroughly, substantiate positions and understand the importance of working qualitatively with a long-term perspective. They found that they had learned to deliberate on possible actions and their effects. Although several participants found writing assignments difficult, they highlighted writing assignments as beneficial for their professional development. They found that responses to their assignments were supportive, promoting their ability to explicitly formulate the essential ideas rather than relying on assumptions.

Principal 3: The report we were tasked with has supported me, it has been a support as a leader, as a principal, because then I have taken actions that I have seen that need to be done. And I'm not so sure that I would have done it so structured otherwise.

That is, engaging active forms of participation (participation) combined with the program content and its concretized forms (reifications) appears to have been important for learning development.

Engaging different perspectives on practice was central to the course literature, lectures and writing assignments. The principals described these perspectives as a central part of their newfound professional understanding. As these perspectives supported their everyday working actions, they became an integral part of their professional identity.

To sum up, the learning development analytically is understood as being dependent on the interaction between what is identified with professionally (identification) and openness to actively engage in



negotiating new perspectives into the professional identity (negotiability).

Experiencing elements of orientation as a passive driving force

Some principals described that the basic understanding of the course content in relation to their professional role was difficult to establish as they found the educational design and content of the program too abstract and theoretical to grasp. Although these participants believed that the perspectives treated in coursework seemed important, they did not understand how the perspectives should be used. Lacking experience with school leadership proved to make program content difficult to understand. Lack of such leadership experience limits the opportunities to link content to practice, but the principals expressed a hope to make such links retrospectively.

Principal 12: The whole second course year felt like a year where I would have to go back and read the literature again and think more about how I can use it. It felt abstract and theoretical, and I got the feeling that there was a lot more there, which I could have benefited from in my leadership. I think that as you get into different situations, you will become more receptive to different parts, and feel that a-ha, that's what they were after in the principal program.

How lectures are conducted is an important aspect. Lectures were described as long and boring, compressing content to such an extent that it became difficult to understand. That is, the lectures were not adapted to the participants' needs. The principals accentuated that lectures 'only describe what successful school leaders do' without linking these to the participants' professional role. The writing assignments, on the other hand, were mentioned as difficult to



understand. This can be interpreted as limiting the possibility to participate and interact meaningfully with the course content, which limits the interaction between participation and reification.

To sum up, this disruption of learning development is understood analytically as an outcome of the lack of interaction between professional identification (identification) and engagement in negotiation of new perspectives into the professional identity (negotiability). These participants rather tried to adapt perspectives and other content to their existing professional identification.

Experiencing elements of reflection

The principals generally described educational design aimed to promote professional reflection as an important part of the program. In this sense, reflection refers to the interaction between proximity and distance, making it possible to 'see oneself with new eyes'. Such reflection can be designed and constitute a separate planned element within the program or might arise as an effect of other design elements or content.

Experiencing reflective elements as an active driving force

Reflecting on and examining one's understanding was experienced by many principals as ways to change their views and actions regarding practice. Reflection made the principals understand the program content and elements and how these relate to their experience, which also helped them understand their practice in new ways.

Principal 9: It has given me time for reflection, which in turn has in any case given me more knowledge about both myself but also about the school as an organisation.



Participating principals described their novel awareness of the importance of reflection as a tool for understanding and analyzing situations. Some participants stated that they now understood the importance of introducing reflection as a tool for their employees to promote school development. Reflection seemed to help the principals revise their professional identity, from being teacher to being a principal. In addition, reflection was experienced as reducing the perceived (i.e., abstract) professional stress. The principals described reflecting on their professional situation in relation to external knowledge gained in the program as a key gain. Sometimes such reflection supported principals' acting to change their situation by, for example, changing their workplace.

To sum up, analytically, reflection is understood as a powerful active driving force when it produces interaction between an element (designed) and a participant's emerging/new understanding of practice (emergent).

Experiencing reflective elements as a passive driving force

Principals who did not understand the program content described that their reflection mainly consisted of frustration of not understanding. For them, this difficulty of reflecting added to their existing stress. A lack of professional experience as a school leader seemed to make reflective elements difficult since situations that arise in professional practice must be analyzed on the basis of a narrower framework of experience (adaptation). That is, reflection did not become a tool for deepening the understanding of practice but contributed to experiencing the program as an abstraction.

Principal 12: Sometimes it would be a good help if someone 'translated' a bit so that you don't have to reflect without getting



help. That you get a construction to hang the literature to become more comprehensible, not having to put enormous energy into figuring out what they really meant. You need a shortcut.

To sum up, analytically, reflection is understood as a significant passive driving force when educational elements (designed) do not improve emerging understanding (emergent) as other elements cannot be processed due to a lack of contextual knowledge and experience.

Experiencing elements of exploration

Participating principals described how their process of exploring, trying, creating, and recreating opportunities for one's own professional practice takes place in diverse ways as part of participation in the program.

Experiencing elements of exploration as an active driving force

Carrying out tasks and assignments in one's own professional practice has a central place in SNPTP. This kind of program design provides the opportunity to connect experiences to the course for further processing. However, such a structure is also cogent, which is described in general as supportive for systematic work generating new experiences. Such tasks urge principals to prioritize specific steps and perform them qualitatively and therefore take greater responsibility as leaders. Educational program elements that focus on examining and reconsidering writings and documents were described as contributing to the problematization of these same writings and documents. Participation that was combined with program content, with its concretized forms (reifications) appears to have been significant for learning and professional development.



Visiting other participants' schools was described as both exploratory and experiential. Experiencing the way other schools operate might reveal new aspects of their own practice and put it into a new perspective. Receiving visits was described in a similar way – i.e., the visitors helped them see their own practice with 'new eyes'. In course work, where the reviews of their own leadership are included, the principals described having opened their eyes to the aspects of their own leadership that they previously were unable to see.

Another exploratory element that is mentioned is role play. Through role play, the participants gained a new perspective of themselves and of their actions in their own practice, which lead to self-examination and insight into the need to adjust their leadership. In addition, several visual tools were used in the program to explore new ideas, including figures of theoretical models and sketches in the form of organizational maps and hierarchies. These kinds of visualizations, shown by lecturers or participants, were described as immediately striking, resulting in new revelatory experiences and insights.

Principal 2: I was bouncing around in this 'what's wrong and what am I doing wrong'. In the training, we had a lecturer who drew the flat organization with the principal. And then she drew the hierarchical one next to it. And I just looked at this number line and realized that for me it goes on forever. There are 44 lines on this number line, and then I realized that [...] I must make changes!

Even when the educators of the program contrasted concepts, this has served as a visual model. The principals described how concepts turned their understanding upside down and made them think anew. Similarly, working with cases, which formed the basis for reasoning and discussions, influenced the principal's practice.

To sum up, analytically, the visits and reviews of the existing leadership perceptions and practicum are seen as supportive towards the participants' reflections, commitment, and adjustment of their own (local) leadership practice to a general (global) leadership. However, this is understood as being dependent on an active interaction between the professional identification (identification) and an openness to renegotiate professional identification (negotiability). The relationship between educational elements of exploration (designed) and new emerging understandings (emergent) appears to have been powerful.

Experiencing elements of exploration as a passive driving force

Some participating principals found that the theoretical models and visualizations were difficult to understand. As a result, these principals chose to go directly to solving practice situations. This incongruity can be understood as a pedagogical cost as these principals perceived understanding the program material as too difficult (i.e., not worth spending their time and effort on).

Principal 6: I thought the course was so big and hard to grasp. What was the purpose, where am I going with all this? [...] I just thought the cross model was so difficult, what do they want with that cross model and what should I do, and how does this help me in my practice and how can I implement it?

Some principals described some of the educational tasks to be carried out in their own practice as lengthy and difficult to understand, making the efforts not as useful as originally intended. It also appears that some principals did not want to prove themselves as a 'school leader student' in their professional practice and therefore did not integrate the assignments openly in their practice. Consequently, visits from the program were described as a type of disclosure. During these



visits, they described their fears of receiving criticism in front of their peers.

To sum up, these visits were understood as inhibiting their professional identification, resulting in an unwillingness or inability to renegotiate professional identity.

Experiencing elements of orientation, reflection, and exploration in interplay

The principals described working in a diversity of study groups as a central part in their training, mainly experienced as supportive. When working in a group, the interplay between the elements of orientation, exploration and reflection appeared to be vital.

Experiencing interplay as an active driving force

The work in study groups most often was described as contributing to development and learning. The exchange of experiences provided good insights into different leadership practices and the conditions that surround them. Therefore, meeting colleagues gave access to more perspectives than the ones owned, and new network contacts were made possible. Moreover, in general it seems to have contributed to a more open attitude to the profession.

Principal 8: It was great support with the base group. During all the years, precisely that you change the base group. Very good. I have learned an awful lot. You discuss all the time and openly in a different way because, it's not my municipality and we know that you don't talk about it. So, I think it has been fantastically good and still is.

These conversations with peers provided opportunities to reconcile complex issues in the professional practice, which further promoted



professional identification. Having to account for one's own professional practice and describe it to others seemed to support understanding.

Principals stated that listening to the other principals' dilemmas and how they managed situations contributed to expanded thinking and to figuring out new solutions. Such professional guidance was experienced as instrumental for resolving difficult conversations, which helped them reconsider their actions. The principals described a feeling of 'being on the move to take action and direction' in difficult matters. The dilemmas they dealt with throughout their program participation were seen as vicarious experience for their professional practice. Professional guidance was often carried out in strict conversation models, which was experienced positively.

To sum up, working in different study groups brings the opportunity for the interplay between elements. The relationship between one's own practice (local) and the outside world (global) becomes central for the participants when working in peer groups. When the principals needed to account for their professional practice, their degree of participation increased as they needed to clarify (reification). That is, design through study groups contributed to an emergent understanding of both one's own and others' views and actions, which helped clarify their professional identity. Thus, the openness to renegotiate professional identification might be at stake.

Experiencing interplay as a passive driving force

Some of the participating principals expressed skepticism about working in study groups. Prestige and negative group processes were said to counteract learning and professional development. In groups, hierarchies become visible and shape boundaries.



Principal 6: We're all leaders sitting here, and sometimes things don't go well at all. It's a bit dodgy, it's not appealing. There are hierarchies already in the groups if you put it that way. I find that difficult.

The quality of group work varied and depended on expectations, members and role taking. Several participants experienced managing many new relationships during coursework as overwhelming. Professional guidance was a training element specifically mentioned as problematic if the conversational leaders did not take care of negative group processes. The principals stated that they adapted themselves to such situations by developing flat and bland dilemmas to protect their self-image.

To sum up, experiencing the interplay as a passive driving force meant that the interplay between different dimensions do not take place. To work in study groups appears to be challenging for the participants for whom the education is a passive driving force. If there is no openness to renegotiate professional identity, the training element is adapted to make it a technically feasible activity for the participant.

Conceptualizing School Leader Education as an active or a passive driving force

The participants highlighted several training elements as contributing to their professional development and learning. In the analyses, these were categorized and attributed to such elements of orientation, reflection, exploration, and interplay. These elements influenced the principals' learning and professional development. The elements of orientation clarified the course content and perspectives, deepened, and expanded the course content and provided access to several different ways of reasoning, aspects that helped the principals adopt



critical approaches. The elements of orientation contributed with information and perspectives and created structure and direction thus helping the principals locate themselves professionally in time, space, meaning and power. The elements of reflection were described as creating an interaction between proximity and distance. This interaction made it possible for the principals to ‘see themselves with new eyes’, to change their views, to act in practice and to promote a new understanding of the program content and how these relate to their experienced practice. The elements of exploration were experienced as immediately striking in a way that provided “aha” experiences and new insights, urging the principals to prioritize specific qualitatively steps of specific sort and take over a greater responsibility as leaders. These experiences appear to be important for learning and professional development. Last, the interplay between elements of orientation, exploration and reflection appeared to be vital when working in study groups, promoting exchange of experiences, providing insights into different leadership practices, and into surrounding conditions, giving access to more perspectives, new network contacts and in general promoting an open attitude about the profession.

However, some participants described how these same training elements hindered their learning relative to their own professional role and therefore blocking their understanding of their professional practice. The content of the courses was difficult to understand so they did not achieve a basic understanding of their professional role. The educational design and the program content were experienced as abstract, and their reflections mainly consisted of frustration resulting from not understanding well. The pedagogical cost of the understanding of the educational material was perceived as high and



managing many new relationships during coursework was experienced as overwhelming.

These results can cast light on a theoretical generalization. Learning in terms of professional development in this study is understood as depending on whether the program mainly becomes an active or a passive driving force (cf. Wenger, 1998, p. 273). Concluding and conceptualizing these results as regards a theoretical understanding, it would be fair to state that as an active driving force, education contributes to and expands the participants' professional identity via driving and developing understandings and actions accordingly. When the participants perceive education as a passive force, it rather becomes adapted to their existing ideas, which limits the development of professional identity.

The conclusion is that the principals who were actively engaged in the program were forced to reflect on their educational and practical experiences, which supported the renegotiation of their professional identities. However, the participants who passively experienced the program were unable to engage in the content or renegotiate their professional identities. Instead of engaging in reflection, they tried to adapt the education to their (narrower) experiences and identification. This is conceptualized theoretically in Figure 1.

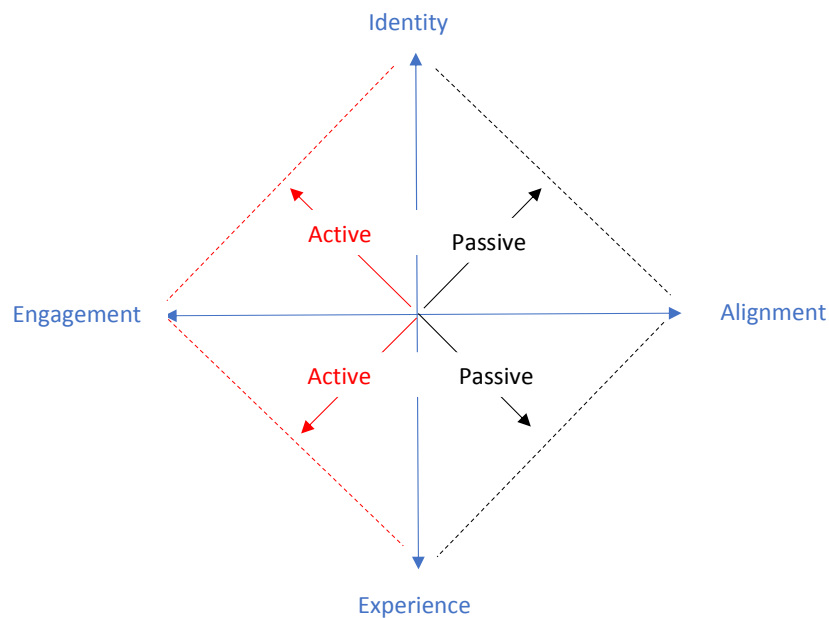


Figure 1. *Conceptualizing school leader education as an active or a passive driving force*

Concluding Discussion

This study creates knowledge about how principals experience professional development and learning through participation in a specific principal program. The first research question addressed what sorts of training elements the participants highlight and how these elements may contribute to professional development and learning. The results show that the training elements that contribute to professional development do so by functioning as aspects of educational imagination in terms of orientation in space, time, meaning and power, reflection, and exploration (cf. Wenger, 1998). This categorization of empirics to broader analytical categories is an authentic form of contribution, nuancing the way specific elements



support and intertwine the participants' learning. Moreover, another category was added, namely the interplay, as results made clear that while working in the study groups, orientation, reflection, and exploration needed to play out in concert. This also showed to be challenging for the participants who experienced education as a passive force, which connects to the second research question.

The second research question of the study addressed how the participants' professional learning can be described and understood. The results show that when education becomes an active driving force, it connects to the participants' identity, engagement, and experience. The training elements, design and content are engaged with the participant's identity and experience, which are actively influenced, becoming renegotiated and therefore generating learning. When education becomes a passive force, the participant's identity is linked to adaptation and experience. That is, when training elements, design and content are adapted to prevailing identity and experience, they are passively impinged and preserved. These results imply that experience is an important asset and that openness to negotiate new elements into the professional identity is crucial to benefit from such a program fully.

As a general lack of experience with school leadership proved to make educational content difficult to understand, it is urgent to review career paths of principals in Sweden (cf. Jerdborg, 2022b) and to address lacunas from policy perspectives. Moreover, to explore and develop a professional identity through participating in professional programs needs to mean focusing on multiple identities as a school professional rather than breaking with the former identifications such as being a teacher. This means, the program should begin by addressing experiences of teaching and middle leading before entering specific principalship issues. Instead of the in-service design, the



program could be approached full time intertwined with long term service in school in between. However, this implies that one needs to abandon the idea of the superiority of the principal arising from the first day of service and accepting experience, professional identity, and professional development as keys to leading and improving schools. This would also dismantle the fear of receiving criticism in how one is approaching practice as a novice principal because a novice can never approach practice in the same manner as anyone experienced and 'expert' in a professional role.

This implies the journey to principalship might not be that of a sprint but rather one pertaining to a slow progression from that of a teacher, into the role of a middle leader before entering the principalship. That is, at least some experiences of leading schools should be gained before entering this type of professional program should there be a difference to be assured. In Sweden professional learning and development of a principal is approached after gaining position as a principal, yet novice principals lack the experience needed to approach any educational content. As former experiences of school leadership work seem to be an asset for the program participants, I question whether the SNPTP can help principals reshape their professional identity into school leaders or whether the program rather promotes further development of already experienced school leaders.

The results of the study show how work experiences affect an individual's opportunities to utilize education as an active driving force for professional learning and professional identity development. It would also be relevant to study the work of educators and how they facilitate engagement of participants' identities and address eventual identity crises arising in the transition from teacher to principal. Pedagogical considerations to be made include whether education



takes sufficient account of pedagogical costs, (i.e., the degree of extra work required to understand educational material). This is not to say that such material should be avoided. Educational material not only constitutes obstacles but also proves to be powerful support for learning. The results of this study also imply that planned teaching and emerging learning of the participants need to interact. That is, educators need to discover attendees' understandings at play to support learning and not expect these individuals to reflect professionally without being given any explicit support. Consequently, program providers can develop their educational design to better meet the needs of those experiencing education as a passive force. Packer and Goicoechea (2000) state that learning not only requires new knowledge but also requires the release of one's old self. This study approves this, arguing the importance of approaching professional selves in principal programs.

The results of this study expand previous studies of school leadership education by nuancing how the participating principals experience content and design. The results also show that educational programs can become active forces for participants which is of great importance (cf. Orr, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Huber and Hiltmann, 2011; Orr and Barber, 2006). However, this study clearly shows how some participating principals instead experience the education as a passive force even though the focus of the program is on the development of leadership skills while connecting theory and practice as well as assisting in creation of professional networks (cf. Orr and Orphanos, 2011; Young et al., 2009; Ärlestig, 2012; Liljenberg and Wrethander, 2020). This is of importance for principals, educators, and policy makers, engaged with principal programs.



Conclusion

This qualitative study focused on the participants' experiences of the SNPTP in three different educational contexts. This approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of their experiences as participants. The balancing act of not relying only on the participants' self-assessment while exploring educational experiences from a participant perspective was approached using qualitative observations and interviews and utilizing a consistent theoretical approach. However, this type of study still has limitations. The limited data set is not sufficient for separating and comparing the educational providers to obtain reliable results for each educational provider separately. To design and conduct such a study could, however, possibly provide important insights into how pedagogical approaches might contribute to the program becoming more of an active driving force or more of a passive driving force.

This study used Wenger's (1998) theoretical and analytical framework to create the knowledge of how principals experience professional development and learning through their participation in a specific principal program. This framework made it possible to approach those principals' experiences of learning in terms of the elements of orientation, reflection, exploration, and interplay to describe and understand their professional development through program participation in a nuanced way. Trying to speak about the principals learning in school leader education in terms of becoming an active or a passive force for the participant made it possible to describe and understand how and why the participants' experiences out of the same professional learning opportunity can be totally different. This way of approaching professional development expands research on principals in education and should be viewed as a theoretical

contribution. This study proposes further use of Wenger's (1998) constructs to explore professional learning and development in diverse contexts as such theoretically based studies could add to our existing knowledge about professional development in education.

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