EDITORIAL

Educational Leadership in Transition

In November 2014, the first conference on the theme Educational Leadership in Transition took place at Uppsala University, Sweden. The aim of the conference was to bring together researchers from various parts of the world to visualise the findings of contemporary research using different perspectives on leadership and learning. By this, we wanted to make collective reflection possible about what we know about and where to head in the future of educational leadership research. This special issue emanates from that conference.

The basis for the conference was a Nordic perspective on educational leadership. A six-year-long research project in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, When National Policies Meet the Local Levels, was to announce its conclusions. Over the years, the project had shown many different actors as part of the governance of schools and had been involved in leadership-related activities by both professionals and politicians. To understand the challenges of leadership in different schools and the societal context, and what leaders at different levels do to enhance learning, are the central fields of interest in the project. The transnational influences on the Nordic countries are obvious, even if they are handled differently. At the same time, the local variations between municipalities are tremendous. Therefore, comparisons between different municipalities within and between countries are as important as comparisons between countries. The project has dealt with questions that in different ways are related to what could be labelled ‘educational leadership’. But what the epithet ‘educational’ in educational leadership really stands for can be both discussed and problematised; for example, to what extent is the school context in which leadership activities are performed considered, or is it something that relates to what leaders do, no matter the context? This was also an important question for the conference.

The first day of the conference was spent sharing experiences from school-related projects. This was complemented by two international keynotes on school leadership by Karen Seashore Lewis and Phillip Hallinger. Through their extensive experience of research on school leadership, it was possible to mirror the Nordic examples in previous international research regarding leadership for learning. The focus of day one on leadership within school context also embraced a pedagogical focus on a leadership for learning as well as discussions regarding the context. The contextual perspective was highlighted through a cross-cultural perspective on school leadership in 22 countries (Årlestig, Johansson, & Day, 2015). The school-related leadership on different system levels and across national contexts laid the foundation for reflections on educational leadership as a phenomenon.

What was evident was that leadership in all school contexts shares the basic structure that leadership activities in some way or the other are related to students’ learning, although one important question was whether leading of others also includes learning on different levels. Multi-level leadership or leadership for learning is not merely a school-related phenomenon. By opening up the concept of educational leadership to areas other than leading schools, day two made it possible to go deeper into the pedagogical aspect of educational leadership. The paper sessions represented a mixture of studied phenomenon, theoretical perspectives and methods. The multiple voices made it possible to elaborate on how educational leadership as a concept can be more carefully used.

The conference ended with an open call for this special issue. We are happy to present a selection from the choir who responded to the call. In the following, we give voice to researchers who in different ways deepen and/or challenge the understanding of educational leadership.

This Special Issue

In the call for this special issue, we stated that educational leadership can have different meanings. In the following sections, we aim to visualise contemporary research relating to the concept of educational leadership in different ways. We return in the end to the question as to whether this variation is a strength or a weakness of the concept. The variations are also present in theoretical as well as methodological approaches, which in the end can be added to the discussion regarding educational leadership as a theoretical concept. Finally, the articles in various ways make it possible to discuss whether, and in what ways, educational leadership is in transition.

The articles are grouped into three categories:

- International reflections on educational leadership
- Educational leadership as system-related activities
- Educational leadership as learning-related activities
**International reflections on educational leadership**

Within this first theme, we have grouped three articles written from an international perspective. Through this introduction section, it is possible to move beyond geographical borders to see whether a common core can be identified. All the articles are dealing with school-related leadership. But the question is whether it is just leading within the same kind of important frames that is the core or whether it is an aspect of the leadership as practice.

Karen Seashore Lewis, the first author, starts her article ‘Linking Leadership to Learning: State, District and Local Effects’ by asking, does educational leadership matter? whose leadership matters, and for what kind of outcomes? From a large research project that examined the effects of leadership at multiple levels on student learning, four interrelated conclusions are discussed. The first conclusion regards the need for integrative leadership and what is meant by the expression: no silos. The focus of integrative leadership is on collaboration, particularly collaboration across boundaries that normally create silos’. Integrative leaders link elements within the school or between the school and community agencies, bridging differences. The core thought is that all actors are to be connected for the same purpose. The second result concerns the fact that teachers tend to work alone, although the magic is rather in the professional community, consisting of such things as shared norms and values, collective focus on students learning in reflective dialogues, and collaboration. A third result points to the importance of shaping productive school cultures, which in practice means that principals engage in everyday work and use staff meetings to talk about equity and instruction. This is again relating to the collective focus interlinked to organisational learning. In this kind of professional communities teachers search for improvement and discuss their work. Finally, as indicated earlier, the school is not isolated from the local context, which in this case includes local education authorities who can play critical integrative leadership roles. Districts could function as sources of both support and pressure, and Seashore argues that ‘pressure without support may have negative effects on principal collective efficacy, and reduce shared and instructional leadership behavior’. All the conclusions point to the importance of coherence.

In Education Accountability and Principal Leadership Effects in Hong Kong Primary Schools, Philip Hallinger and James Ko start by identifying that during the past decades education reforms have spread around the world with ‘increased government investments in quality education’. Parallel to these reforms, they identify efforts to transform the role of school principals ‘from organisational managers into leaders of learning’. Hallinger and Ko are interested in what happens when these parallel phenomena reach Asia, where the principals ‘have been managerial and political in nature’. They are now to become leaders of learning, a transition resulting in a possible identity crisis among principals, according to role transformation. The presented study explores the impact of principal leadership on school capacity and student learning in 32 Hong Kong primary schools. To study this, they use a theoretical model where leadership effects on learning are considered indirect and where leaders ‘direct their efforts towards influencing intermediate targets at both the school /.. / and classroom levels’. They argue that these actions also must be understood in terms of particular contexts, such as the Asian one. The study focuses more narrowly on leadership for learning in a Hong Kong accountability context. Empirically, the study uses a quantitative approach examining seven dimensions of leadership practices. The results indicate that ‘the policies may not be achieving the desired effects of building school capacity for improvement’. Principals appear to be more focused on survival and compliance instead of fulfilling their role as leaders for learning.

According to previous work of Hallinger (2011), the ‘blind spot’ within leadership research has been the context – the question is not only what works but also what works in different settings. Michel Uljens and Rose Ylimaki continue the search for the blind spot within leadership research in Towards a General Theoretical Framework for Curriculum Studies, Didaktik and Discursive Educational Leadership. They argue that ‘leadership studies do not really define education or articulate an underlying educational theory’. They also argue that: ‘Much recent educational leadership research is /.. / trapped in either an empiricist or descriptive approach or in a prescriptive and normative approach’. Parallel to this, they claim that another theoretical approach, curriculum theory/didaktik, provides strong intellectual arguments and analytical tools but that the perspective ‘still offers a normative view, promoting a particular set of values and ideals’ and that ‘leadership has not been an area of focus in this literature’. Altogether, they argue that both perspectives would benefit from a closer dialogue. The article wants to contribute new perspectives regarding the intersection where societal interest transforms into educational content and how professional groups within societal institutions working at different levels cooperate for school development. Writing towards a general theoretical framework, they ask two questions:

- How does an educational leadership theory explain the relation between individuals in terms of pedagogical influence?
- How do we define the relation between education and society?

They identify curriculum work as educational leadership within and between six different levels, from the teachers’ leading of the students in the classroom to a transnational
level. Instead of focusing on one or only a few of these levels, they suggest discursive institutionalism as a complementary and fruitful approach ‘to understanding how educational policies, ideas and values (curriculum) relate to administrative processes on different levels’. They end by suggesting that educational leadership can be conceptualised as ‘a non-affirmative, critical-interpretative and cultural–historical practice carried out on different levels of the educational system’.

When mentioning the three international contributions, it is obvious that the first two ones share an empirical research perspective, including results on what kinds of leadership enhance students’ learning. They have the school leader in focus, although they argue that the school leader must be understood as acting within a larger context. This means in turn that schools as well as school leaders can be seen as global phenomena existing within political and national contexts, which frame their activities more specifically. This contextual aspect is also important for the third text, which uses a more theoretical approach, challenging the empirical tradition of school leadership research. What is interesting, however, is that all of them recognise that leading for learning, in school settings, includes a multilevel leadership. All of them also express a need to focus more on context. Linking school leadership to a larger system of interrelated actions and pointing to coherence, awareness and collective reflection include lifting the perspective from the individual leader to the interlinked actions of many. Here, the two introducing articles point to the importance of putting school leadership into a local district context, while the third article has, in a way, context as a starting point. A key question is how these collective actions and phenomena can be understood. Does this, for example, mean that educational leadership needs to be placed within some kind of larger theoretical approach, like curriculum theory? This means asking questions about what schools, knowledge, learning and teaching are really about and not taking them for granted. It is interesting to note that none of the authors uses educational leadership as a pure theoretical concept; rather, they link it to others such as integrative leadership, instructional/transformational leadership or discursive educational leadership.

This also means that educational leadership is supposed to lead to something that is necessary for the core of schools’ activities: the students’ learning. But is students’ learning the important aspect or is it the learning of others to make this happen? Is the core the education of coming generations? Or can educational leadership be leading towards learning in general? To this can be added what knowledge or competence that the learning should develop – the knowledge of a whole school practice or the knowledge of a student? In somewhat different ways, they all see that the educational leadership connects various related leading activities to each other. School leaders lead for one thing: enhanced student learning through others (learning). This finally raises questions about the knowledge relating to learning. Can educational leadership include not only learning processes but also knowledge processes as well? If so, educational leadership is indeed a pedagogical activity. The last section examines this further. We continue, however, by focusing on educational leadership as system-related activities.

**Educational leadership as system-related activities**

When context is activated as a variable, there is necessarily a shift from a focus on individuals in given settings to questions about the system in which the individual exists and acts. Within this section, the two articles deal with how local school leadership is affected by, and relates to, larger system actions, such as national school inspections and government bills creating new leadership positions. These system changes are externally initiated activities and regulations, not decided upon by leaders in schools, affecting and challenging school leaders’ work.

In the first article, ‘Learning from, Coping with, Adjusting to: Making School Inspection Work in Swedish Schools,’ Joakim Lindgren examines national inspections from a leadership perspective. Instead of analysing inspection as a repeated phenomenon in an era of accountability, the aim of the paper is to ‘explore the inspection work carried out by inspectees before, during and after inspections’. This means that the focus is not on control over education as such, but on how this ‘might produce or reconfigure education’. Inspection work is defined not merely as the activities performed by others coming to the school to scrutinise it. Inspections are seen as part of a local ‘doing’ relating to governing. This includes activities before, during and after the visits, where the local school leader has a choice of how to use the time the school, or the local context, spends on being inspected. In this way, traditionally labelled implementation processes are understood as translation processes, where ‘meanings are subject to inflection and interpretation by active agents in specific locations’. Using Jacobsson’s conceptions of different governing activities (regulative, inquisitive and meditative), Lindgren shows that each step of the process includes situations where leaders can be active using the inspection for local learning purposes. It highlights that inspection work is not only an external activity interrupting local work but also includes activities where the leader must be able ‘to narrate and provide in-depth descriptions about the inner work of a school’. The leaders need to learn how to perform inspections individually as well as collectively. This also includes how to lead municipalities or schools to transform what can be identified as systematic deficiencies. Summative models of supervisions can in this way be transformed to productive formative processes.
The second article, ‘Towards New Forms of Educational Leadership – The Local Implementation of Förstelärare in Swedish Schools’, also takes an external reform (regarding career paths for teachers) in Sweden as its point of departure. Daniel Alvunger understands the reform as part of a larger effort to enhance the teaching, introducing new categories of teachers called förstelärare (the first of teachers) and lecturers (with PhDs or Licentiates). In the article, he studies how förstelärare describe and understand their role and in what way their introduction ‘impact the educational leadership of the principals’. Using a curriculum theory base and adding to this Resnick’s concept of ‘nested learning systems’, Alvunger identifies three levels of action, including leadership at the teaching level, the school level and the district (or municipality) level, where ‘the sub systems are shaped by specific conditions and constituted by their own internal logic’. They all use different strategies to make meaning out of national policy reforms. The question is what happens when these new positions are to be understood and lived within existing systems of leadership? To begin with, some municipalities build differentiated organisations where these new leaders work on different levels. Others install them in a decentralised way in schools. In all cases, these new positions, according to the author, make it relevant to work with an added theoretical concept – distributed leadership. The new leaders exist parallel to principals and ‘share a deep interest in the improvement of teaching and/or supervising colleagues’. They also see themselves as important to collegial learning and fostering professional development. As is clear, this can challenge existing structures and some of them also express that they have ‘difficulties in finding their position and role within the organisational structure’. From a principal’s perspective, they can catalyse as well as challenge the traditional understanding of how educational leadership is to be performed. Alvunger notes that ‘maybe the reform itself forces the principals to distribute leadership to a greater extent than before’. This in turn challenges the existing understanding of if and how educational leadership in schools can be shared.

Before leaving this section, we can conclude that these two articles in various ways illuminate challenges related to local school leadership. Since schools exist within larger governing systems, such changes are regularly initiated on levels other than those where they are to be realised. That is, the reforms are to be understood and transformed into lived activities by leaders acting in different local subsystems. Over time, the relations between these different levels change, including that although the responsibility for the daily work is local, one of the main functions of the national level is to make the lower ones perform equally. This demands some kind of control from the top. At times, this control is more firmly performed and more strictly focused on results, while at other times the grip is loosened and differences in local processes are accepted and encouraged. To have the competence to understand the present and adjust the organisation to the changes are general challenges for all local school leaders. This means that school leadership relates not only to subject knowledge but also to system knowledge as well.

Added to this, there are at least two challenges: the school leaders are, to begin with, not single independent islands in an archipelago. Instead, they are in different ways dependent on the leadership chains within the system where they operate – a multilevel leadership. At the same time, as the leader is acting a specific role in a system, such as being a superintendent or a school leader, the system at various times defines and places regulative responsibilities on the position. This also means that positions can disappear from regulation and others may be added, creating challenges to the local actors enacting them. The two articles and their different approaches make it possible to highlight how leadership in different local contexts is enacted as visible through two separate reforms although the present national frames are the same. In practice, local leaders handle these aspects of governing simultaneously in their daily work of leading others. This is an important aspect of educational leadership within school contexts.

In the final section, we leave this context to examine whether and how educational leadership can include the creation of learning possibilities for others.

Educational leadership as learning-related activities

In this section, the focus is more narrowly on what leaders do that makes it relevant to categorise their leadership as an educational leadership. One of the articles has its empirical base in a preschool context. However, we place it under this heading to highlight that the article deals with leadership practices and how leaders engage in learning-focused, meaning-making activities. This is complemented by a study on learning-oriented leadership in a large software company and a study of how coaching is realised in terms of learning within health care.

In the first article, Karin Rönnerman, Christine Edwards-Groves and Peter Grottenboer study leadership within a Swedish preschool district where preschool teachers are working to implement a new revised curriculum for early childhood education. The title is: ‘Opening up Communicative Spaces about Quality Practices in Early Childhood Education through Middle Leadership’. In a way, this article is about a reform-based work, in line with the ones illustrated above, but here the starting point is that this work is seen as taking place within professional learning communities (PLC). The focus is on ‘leadership practices and the nature of the communicative spaces for learning as part of a PLC’. They are interested in middle leading, meaning ‘teachers who navigate between the sites of professional learning, teaching and leading’. It is their construction of communicative spaces that is in focus. How are such communicative spaces constituted? To start
communicate. In ‘Categories of Learning-Oriented Leadership: A Potential Contribution to the School Context?’, Marianne Doös & Lena Wilhelmsson change the context for educational leadership from schools to a large software company. By doing this, they explicitly want to contribute to an analytical separation of the pedagogical leadership task from the pedagogical core tasks existing in schools. In this way, they mean that the core of learning-oriented leadership can be identified and later adapted to leadership in a school context. In the article, they use a learning-theoretical perspective to analyse ‘managerial acts of influence as learning-oriented leadership’ identified in managers’ talk about how they worked during a period of organisational change. Various forms of learning-oriented leadership are presented. Starting with learning as something that occurs ‘as a process of interaction between people and situations’, they identify direct and indirect pedagogic interventions. While the first category includes convincing communication as well as inviting communication, the latter involves different kinds of changes in the organisational context. They identify ‘attempts both to align and free structures’ that consist of both organisational and social structures (meaning, for example, norms). They argue that each manager ‘had a repertoire of influencing acts at his/her disposal and moved between the different categories of acts of influence’. When comparing the school context with the large company struggling for its survival, they argue that leadership complexity must be understood from ‘variations in what characterises complexity and difficulty in the two contexts’. All managers, including principals, have different options ‘to intervene into their employees’ learning and competence, both individually and collectively’.

Finally, the last article, ‘Pedagogical Approaches in Quality Improvement Coaching in Healthcare’, written by Ann-Charlotte Norman, Lena Fritzén and Boel Andersson Gäre, examines a specific leadership activity: coaching. The study ‘investigates how coaching is realised in terms of learning’. The context for the study is healthcare, a system close to the public school system, built on similar ideas regarding quality assurance. In the article, this is dealt with as quality improvement (QI). Regarding coaching they build on Bond and Seneque’s description of coaching, contrasted to managing, consulting, mentoring and facilitating. They investigate an approach, including underlying coaching values and beliefs, the motives for coaching and how a coaching program can be brought about. It is not, however, any approach they investigate but a specific pedagogical approach used by coaches. This means that they see coaches as involved in improvement work, which they regard as a pedagogical practice, including learning. To study the coaches’ pedagogical approaches, a group of coaches were gathered to reflect on their work. To analyse the material, the researchers use critical discourse analysis according to Fairclough. In the coaches’ discussions, they find three pedagogical approaches regarding roles and strategies. These are, in figurative terms, the chameleon, the skipper and the lawyer approach, which are different ways of relating to the groups, such as to win their trust or challenge them. Related to these approaches, the authors identify three different discursive patterns: the pointing discourse, the bypassing (or concealing) discourse and the guiding discourse. Since none of them is more persistent, this ‘suggests that there is an ever-present tension between a pointing and a guiding pedagogy in the coaching activities’. It also indicates that coaching in healthcare is a complex phenomenon.

When considering these articles, it is obvious that none of them explicitly uses the concept of educational leadership, but they focus on pedagogical aspects of leadership that can be conducted in any context. All studied leadership activities are also related to adults’ learning. It is evident that these authors are interested in what it is that leaders really do to make learning happen. Compared with what was identified earlier as leadership for learning, this leadership is not linked to students’ learning and measured in outcomes. Does this mean that an educational leadership can be a leadership for enabling, not necessarily leading to learning? Again, the keywords are leadership and learning, but this section shows that there’s more to it than two interlinked words.

Concluding remarks

In the introduction, we pointed to the fact that educational leadership can be seen as leadership within school-related contexts or as an aspect of leadership, no matter the context. The two perspectives are richly illustrated by the articles. In a way, it is like using a microscope where we move between different scales of focus, sometimes zooming in and sometimes zooming out. But this metaphor does not help us understand whether the different aspects of educational leadership are aspects of the same
core concept or simply different aspects of leadership in general. And as some texts have shown, educational leadership in school contexts might include not only one aspect but several, meaning both system-related leadership and a more narrow pedagogic leadership. This means that educational leadership is not a concept with a given content and meaning—it can either hinder the communication related to the concept, or strengthen it.

Instead of being used as a concept for analytical purposes, it seems to be a concept that forces other concepts to be used around a common phenomenon: that of leading related to knowledge and learning. The strength is that educational leadership must be defined each time it is used, and hence the ‘right version’ of the concept does not exist. The weakness is that it therefore might not be a concept at all. Different theoretical concepts are used in the articles depending on what they want to highlight. This could be a sign of educational leadership being just a phenomenon, not a concept. And maybe then, this is its strongest contribution to the field: that it enhances a theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon to be developed specifically in accordance with what questions are to be answered. Here, the different articles show how this can be done, contributing with more knowledge regarding the phenomenon.

This finally leads to the question of educational leadership in transition. What the articles highlight is that the phenomenon includes a position, the role of a leader, that can in itself be in transition. Instead of being considered as the single leader, we see a transition regarding research on school leaders, towards interrelated leading roles handling local school machineries. This is paralleled by a transition from leading individual teachers towards a collective of professionals. Parallel to this, there seem to be constant transitions on another level, regarding the system in which school leaders lead. Altogether, these transitions make it possible to understand some of the aspects of educational leadership as a phenomenon in school-related contexts. It can be seen as a multilevel activity, including governance, and where a central aspect is that governance includes textual activities where thoughts are to become texts and texts are to be lived, not only read. At the same time, the contributions in this special issue point to the fact that educational leadership as a science discourse might itself be in transition from school-based activities towards the understanding of a phenomenon.

As we started with a wish to make possible collective reflection about what we know and where to head in the future of educational leadership research, we end with the following conclusions:

We mean that the richness in the articles speaks for itself. To study leadership from a multitude of perspectives—not only of a person, a position or a given context—not only enriches our general knowledge but also contributes to deepening the knowledge about the phenomenon. It points also to the importance of moving beyond the traditional concepts of leadership and searching for new aspects of educational leadership. This means opening up to the unexpected but also considering the obvious in more detail, such as different aspects of knowledge and learning related to leading activities.

We hope that this issue can contribute to more voices gathering in the choir of educational leadership.

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