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# Principal's Leadership through Perspectives on Person, Profession and Position

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*In this article I present the findings of research into the leadership and management of full time principals in Finnish comprehensive schools. The intention for this study is to investigate principals' leadership through the perspectives of person, profession and position in order to analyze the consequences of a lack of detailed national regulations about school principals. The overall aim is to investigate principals' awareness of leadership opportunities according to the mandates for school leadership. Data is collected through interviews transferred to narratives and analyzed as life stories. The results show that implications concerning principals' awareness about significant issues in their leadership have been established. Self-knowledge as a personal trait is recognized and grounded in the leadership role. The lack of detailed regulations opens for principals' educational professionalism and autonomy in leadership as a profession. Conditions for the leadership position are related to time and experience, and signs of quality outcomes are evidence of applying leadership practice wisely.*

*Key words: Principal, Leadership, Self-Knowledge, Profession, Position*

## Introduction

The origin of this article is the formal assignment of school leadership in Finland and its influence on leadership in practice. The national legislation acts mandate that “the principal is responsible for school operations” (Act 628/1998). The brief formulation of the mandate indicates that on the national level Finland has relinquished overall national steering of school

leadership. This fact and its effects, challenges and opportunities for principals are in focus in this article. The lack of detailed general instructions communicates opportunities for developing leadership according to contextual needs. The open instruction leaves open a number of possibilities in practicing and developing the leadership role. It creates the potential to develop personal skills and leadership strategies, as well as insights into how to develop qualities in the leadership profession and position.

This article is guided by three motives. The first is to recognize the principals' self-knowledge (i.e. good understanding of own thoughts, feelings and abilities) according to personal traits as components in leadership, the second is to analyze principals' perception of leadership as a profession and professional development, and the third is to view principals experiences about leadership as a position and analyze if principals are able to identify development and transition in the leadership role according to time and experience.

The motives are conducted by the fact that lack of general instructions according to the mandate of principalship opens up broad views of challenges and opportunities in educational leadership practice. According to experiences from several years of being in charge of conducting leadership studies for aspiring principals, the motives are also partly based on a personal interest.

The qualification of the principal is defined by the special Decree on Qualifications for Personnel in the Provision of Education. The qualifications include the Master's Degree, a teacher's qualification for the corresponding school level, sufficient work experience as a teacher and the education administration certificate given by The National Board of Education, or at least 25 ECTS of university studies in educational administration, or a sufficient knowledge in educational administration acquired in some other way (Act 986/1998).

According to the mandate, the principal has a legal position in terms of leadership. Educational tasks conducted through the curricula and decentralization in school management has expanded the principal's responsibilities and the demands of the profession (Risku & Kanervio, 2011). Principals in Finland are required by law to have been teachers themselves and they must continue to be engaged in classroom teaching. The school leadership role is either a fulltime profession in leadership or a part time job with full time teaching and part time principalship. In the first case a person applies for a fulltime leadership position, and in the second case a person who has applied for a teacher's job accepts being a principal as part time job. In both cases principals have to be engaged in classroom teaching; as a

full time principal at least 4-5 hours, and as a part time principal up to 20 hours of lessons per week.

The lack of general legislation about school leadership in Finland opens up challenges of freedom for the principal as a person, for the leadership profession and the principal's position in creating successful educational leadership and supporting quality learning outcomes. To be aware of oneself as a person, to be able to recognize leadership as a profession and to have insights into the consistency of the leadership position are incontrovertible realities in principalship. These perspectives on principals are in focus in this article, and related to the motives, the aim of this article is to analyze principals' awareness of leadership opportunities according to the mandates for principalship.

## Previous research

This section consists of a brief overview of research on school leadership related to the perspectives of person, profession and position. The purpose of the theoretical orientation is to facilitate understanding of the content of school leadership according to findings presented later in this article, and its impact on the open regulations concerning operating the school.

### *Research on principals related to perspectives about the person*

According to the aim of this article, research findings about principals and personality related attributes are limited. Research on the general level related to the person in terms of self, personality, identity, self-confidence and self-awareness (Sandvik, 2009; Uljens, 1998) uses the expressions "me" and "personality" when relating to a person's awareness about him or herself. Giddens (1991) uses the term "self-identity" to express "When something has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual." According to Branson (2010), a person's behavior is influenced by various components of the self. Increasing self-knowledge starts with self-concept, and developing processes include awareness about self-esteem, motives, values, beliefs, emotions, and appearances finally in a person's behavior, "the most obvious and undeniable component of self".

Research related to the understanding of human beings as individuals and in interaction with one another, conducted by Seagal and Horne (1997/2004) addresses the findings as follows.

All people have mental, emotional and physical capacities; these are basic threads in the human system, so fundamental and universal that we have termed them principles [...] Each of these three principles and their attributes are active in all people but to varying degrees and in varying combinations. (Ibid. p. 26-27)

Mental principle	Emotional principle	Physical principle
Thinking	Feeling	Making
Objectivity	Subjectivity	Doing
Vision	Relationship	Actualizing
Overview	Communication	Sensory Experience
Structure	Organization	Practicality
Values	Creative imagination	Systemic Experience

*Table1. The three universal principles and their attributes. (Seagal & Horne, 1997/2004).*

When aware of how the attributes are active, self-knowledge will come into sight and a developing process start.

The research field regarding a person as an individual consists of aspects concerning identity, personality, universal principles and components of the self, among many other elements. In this article the purpose is not to dig deeply into the psychological area of a human being. The intention is to obtain a view of principals' self-awareness according to personality related behavior in the leadership role.

### ***Research on the profession of principal***

Research findings on the basic elements in the profession of principal are limited according to both national and international studies. The terms profession, professional and professionalism can be found among researchers from different academic fields. In this article focus is given to aspects on profession and professionalism in relation to principal's educational leadership.

Brante (2009), states that "a profession has to include activities based on scientific research". He also points out that members of a profession share a feeling of identity, common values and have a common language. Leo (2010) discusses whether the profession of principal is professional or semi-professional, and ends up defining it as semi-professionalism, because principalship is still developing towards a classical profession according to national qualifications for the job (e.g. Sweden).

Principals motivation in the profession (Sandén, 2007) brings in educational leadership views on the profession, and research about principal as leader of the knowledge management function for the teachers in basic education (Raasumaa, 2010) points out a new perspective on leadership: being a professional educator for colleagues. Ahonen's (2008) research on leaders' identity as narrated by principals is also related to the profession.

Significant elements in the profession are the abilities to handle relationships and to use communication as a leadership tool. According to Svedberg (2000) "leadership doesn't occur in a social vacuum [...] leadership emerges as a set of social relationships." Nordzell (2007) stresses that principals leadership is to be developed by a new perspective on leadership through communication as a structured occasion.

According to Hargreaves, Halász and Pont (2007), school leadership in Finland is a paradox: principals are highly qualified in education and expected to have high status at the same time as they are practicing classroom teaching. The term paradox is a core factor when trying to understand complexity. In schools the paradox is that control and un-control exist at the same time. "Generally everyone have expectations that the principal and teachers have control over all upcoming situations in the school.[...] In reality uncontrolled situations occur all the time" (Augustinsson & Brynolf, 2009, p.47). This influences the leadership profession, and confirms that one element in the definition of the leadership profession is the ability to handle complex situations (Lind Nilsson & Gustafsson, 2006).

Ekholm (2004) states that one approach for analyzing the grade of professionalism in a profession could be to look at the phenomenon through sociological lenses. Ekholm points out five factors relevant for identifying professionalism: basic knowledge of the profession, responsibility for developing the profession, agreements on professional ethics, control over rights to practice the profession and the level of autonomy in practicing the profession (2004). Almost similar contents are presented by Ullman (1997). According to Englund (2004), autonomy is the most important criterion when search for definitions about professionalism. Principals as well as teachers experience their professionalism more strongly the more autonomously they are allowed to practice their work

Related to research cited above, and common issues identified as descriptions of profession, my operationalizing of the phenomenon is as follows: profession includes activities based on scientific research, aspects of ethic and autonomy, and responsibility to develop the profession. As specific, regarding to educational leadership: professionalism is identified as relational and communicative, and demand abilities to handle complex situations.

In this article principal's profession according to awareness of autonomy in educational leadership is one area of interest. The complexity in principalship in light of lack of national guidelines, providers' rights to declare detail instructions, and the overall pedagogical mission is demanding for principals, and will be highlighted in coming discussions.

### ***Research on principals related to perspectives about position***

The principalship is a legal position in terms of leadership, and mandate given by the provider is the fundament of the position. To fulfill the overall leadership mission, a principal has to be aware of the core curricula as well as instructions about the position.

Research on principalship as a position can be found in Finland since the 1980s, but a significant increase in research studies on principals during the first decade of the 2000s can be noticed. This fact is to be related to changes in the formal position of school principals. According to Risku and Kanervio (2011) and Aho, Pitkänen and Sahlberg (2006), the change can be described as follows.

The role of school principals has dramatically changed since 1990. Principals are not only the educational leaders of their schools but managers who are responsible for financing, personnel, and the results of their institutions. Previously a school principal was an experienced senior teacher who was promoted for good service to education. Today's school principal must be a qualified leader who understands educational development and has solid management skills to lead a school. (Ibid. p. 119)

Finnish research findings are generally related to perspectives on position: areas of issues on leadership, educational development, the leadership profile of principals, visions of leadership and principal training (Tukiainen, 1999; Taipale, 2000; Kirveskari, 2003; Kuukka, 2009; Pesonen, 2009). The principal's formal position is experienced as being framed by everyday management routines and challenges to develop skills in order to be a responsible leader of the school. The position invites a situation of managing independently, but taking in account the provider's policy and strategies. The degree of autonomy varies because of differences in local authority policy.

Changes in the formal position in school leadership have dictated most of the research motives. The changes are connected to the effects on leadership according to the lack of regulations. This situation opens up a broad area

of responsibility in the leadership position and awareness about challenges, limits and potential. To be able to handle the responsibility increases all the contents in the leadership role (Mäkelä, 2007).

The leadership position rests on a high level of autonomy and a principle of subsidiarity; it means that decision-making is moved to the level most able to secure implementation in practice. This fact and the lack of regulations indicate that experience in leadership is crucial for the position (Lehkonen, 2009).

A brief view of research on principals across the European community (Johansson & Bredeson, 2011) shows that studies on school principals represent a rather new field in educational research. Reasons for the limited research are explained by differences in each country, and related to how the political, social and educational development in Europe has emerged. In German speaking countries, historically there has not been much research on school leadership, whereas in England there is a longer history of research on school heads. School leadership is for the moment an emerging field of study, supported by education reforms that have intensified the principals' work and responsibility.

Majority of research areas are related to normative and descriptive fields and concepts of instructional leadership has so far only limited traction. According to Johansson and Bredeson (2011): "The traditional role of principals is in transition – being reshaped, redefined and re-negotiated" when looking across European countries.

To sum up: This section is presenting a brief review of previous research about perspectives on person, profession and position related to principalship. According to the findings, there are a number of studies related to the position. Research about principals' traits, personality issues and behavior is limited, but findings on inner threads in the human system view elements for a deeper understanding of the person as well as analysis of components increasing self-knowledge. The profession of principal is complex and there have been only a few findings from basic research defining the profession according to school principals.

According to findings mentioned above, principalship seems to be a profession in transition, and research about today's requirements concerning person, profession and position might be needed in a near future. Findings presented in this article might contribute to the development of a broader view of educational leadership and its contents.

## Research questions and methodology

As related to the motives for this study, the intention is to investigate principals' leadership through the perspectives of person, profession and position, in order to analyze principals' awareness of leadership opportunities according to the mandates for principalship.

The research questions in detail are as follows.

1. What is the nature of principals' self-knowledge?
2. What perceptions do principals have about leadership as a profession?
3. What is the experience of principals of the leadership position?

The research design is qualitative and based on a narrative approach framed by hermeneutic theory. The ontology is the school leadership in reality as narrated by a group of principals. According to Johansson (2007) narratives are accepted as basic factors expressing knowledge about the social reality. Epistemology in this study is based on principals professional experiences collected through interviews. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) stress that philosophical aspects can be raised on knowledge based on interviews because of contextual issues according to language, life stories and relations.

Through interviews transferred to narratives the intention in this study is to interpret the principals' statements in order to achieve an understanding of them, and to investigate the qualitatively different ways in which people experience something or think about something (Ricoeur, 1995). The research focus is on human experience as narrated by principals, and on analyzing the knowledge about educational leadership and aims expressed in research questions through the narratives.

The sample consists of seven principals from comprehensive schools in the Swedish speaking area of Finland, geographically located on the west coast, and southern part of the country. All principals' works as full-time school leaders. Contact was made through e-mail, with a brief description of interview proceedings and question about acceptance to participate. The research process started with an interview, conducted in Swedish language and lasting approximately two hours, it was audio taped and later transcribed into a narrative by the researcher. The narrative was sent back to the participant to ensure that there was no misinterpretation of data or facts in the process of translation. All informants were given a new and neutral



name. After confirmation from the research participant, the narrative was ready for analysis.

The knowledge and experience recounted by principals belongs specifically to the research field of social constructivism, where knowledge is created through meanings, experiences and values in social contexts and formed in social interaction (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Principal	Years as principal	Number of students/ staff	Grade
Albert	10	250/35	Secondary
Ellen	10	240/30	Secondary
Erik	14	520/75	Secondary
Esther	12	220/28	Secondary
Lovisa	11	240/32	Secondary
Maya	14	230/35	Primary
Sven	13	250/38	Secondary

*Table 2. List of participants in research group.*

## Findings about person, profession, and position

A variety of expressions about experiences, strategies, leading challenges and individual reactions and solutions emanated from the interviews with the principals. Based on the principals' life stories as school leaders verified in findings in previous research, it can be claimed that school leadership is a complex profession and leadership actions are conducted by educational frames of national curricula, and that influence from municipalities as the main providers of public services is significant and highly affects principalship. When investigating the narratives, similar patterns illuminating person, profession and position became visible despite individual differences in the expressions.

The three major findings according to research questions are described in the following sections.

### *The nature of principals' self-knowledge*

The principals had no problem identifying their personal traits and the importance of personal strengths in their leadership. Both strengths and weaknesses were identified and expressed through personal comments. In the following some descriptions are selected as excerpts from narratives.

**Albert** describes himself as calm and diplomatic; he has humor and is standing with both feet on the ground. Albert's traits that fit well in his leadership style are humor and diplomacy. He claims to be sensitive and have a strong intuition that he relies on in his leadership.

**Maya** identify herself as a person with a happy and joyful mind, although she also can be serious. She is vibrant, confident in herself, has a tendency to develop trust, and sees herself as a person who can be trusted. She can also be persistent and stubborn. Maya's ability to prioritize and avoid being easily influenced and affected has changed with increasing experience.

**Esther** describes herself as versatile, energetic, competitive and impatient. She has a great ability to see the overall view, and her feelings are often fluctuating. She thinks she has the personal qualities needed in school leadership

According to the principals' expressions about themselves as individuals it can be noticed that the ability to identify personal traits is quite good. In relation to the knowledge about basic threads in human dynamic processes, principals' self-knowledge includes expressions that can be identified among the emotional, mental and physical principles and their attributes (Seagal & Horne, 1997/2004; Saarukka, 2012).

The principals are able to express themselves in characteristics demonstrating how basic threads in personality are visible in their leadership role.

**Sven** states that he has ambitions and activities to fulfill; he is good in translating plans into actuality and does not like to leave initiatives half finished. (Physical + mental attributes)

**Albert** has strong intuition, helping him to deal with growing dilemmas. He has a very relational connection to his colleagues, and prefers to practice his leadership in a policy of open-ended problem-solving. (Emotional+ physical attributes)

**Maya** sees herself as participative and communicative and identifies herself as a person easy to establish confidence with as well as trustworthy. (Emotional attributes)

**Lovisa** describes herself as objective and receptive. She can look at activities and people from a distance perspective and work with whole systems. Lovisa identifies her need for developing a stronger personalized communication. (Physical + mental attributes)

**Esther** is good in adapting systemic issues; she is open to challenges and risks, and able to see emerging possibilities. She is good with structures and timelines and identifies herself as very good in motivating her colleagues. (Emotional + physical attributes).

The subject in qualitative interviews is a human being and her/his relation to her/his life. Through interview a researcher can interpret the meaning of essential issues in a life story. According to the principals' personal reflections, self-knowledge is on a good level, but could be developed. None had any difficulties expressing personal issues or qualities about themselves. Comments from principals in this study expressing that "through formulating a personal description one get new aspects about oneself" verify that from an interview the informant can obtain new knowledge and discover new aspects of him or herself. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

### ***Principals' perception about leadership profession and professional leadership***

As viewed in the section previous research, definitions about principalship as a profession in terms of an independent issue is not clearly revealed in research findings formulated in basic definitions. Related to earlier research and findings in this study, a profession is relational, communicative and complex, and it takes time to create a professional identity.

Principals practice their profession as leaders in schools as professional organizations that consist of professionals, i.e. teachers. The profession of teacher is characterized as skilled according to learning issues and subject teaching. Research comparing leadership in Nordic schools states that principalship is not a popular profession because "all followers are their own professionals" (Kolam & Ojala, 2001). This fact might be one of the components causing complexity in principalship.

The profession of principal generally expressed by informants in this study is "to practice leadership in school as a socio-cultural organization". In this section principals' opinions about educational leadership as a profession and practiced as professional leadership is presented. The findings

focus on autonomy, neutrality and identity as common results from analyzing the narratives.

Autonomy in the leadership profession is high according to the context and mandate for Finnish principals. This is also confirmed in this study. Expressions about professional leadership related to autonomy as excerpts from the narratives:

**Sven:** I feel safe and secure in my leadership, I can make independent decisions.

**Albert:** I'm very satisfied in my leadership role. I'm the "captain of the ship", and I have enough power.

**Lovisa:** I like to work alone, my work is very independent, I can delegate work if necessary.

**Esther:** I am free to create visions, it's my duty to be a road pointer, a pilot and an opinion maker.

**Erik:** It's my duty and challenge to create cooperation among my staff, I have to create the structures for our whole system and I have to negotiate with politicians about money and resources.

Principals' professional leadership is also based on their personal ability to handle relations (Ciulla, 2011). According to professional leadership, the perspectives of person and profession are closely connected. Professional leadership also includes the capacity to identify expectations from the staff and to be aware of how to choose activities in relation to the professional development of teachers (Raasunmaa, 2010).

In this study, findings about the need for principals to act neutrally in relation to staff members is underlined as important, and expressed by all participants. Below are some excerpts from narratives as examples:

**Maya:** I can't be a close friend with anybody in our school, I must be equal friendly with all.

**Erik:** I must act very objectively in all internal relations.

**Albert:** A principal must treat all equally, not show any special feelings to anyone in the staff.

The identity of a principal is closely related to professional leadership. The leadership identity is sometimes compromised by the identity as a teacher, especially in Finland, where principals also have to teach classes. Despite Ahonens' findings (2008), the double role of being both teacher and principal was not mentioned as a problem by anybody in this research. According to the number of years spent in the leadership profession, all informants expressed confidence in their leadership role as well as support and legitimacy for leadership by practicing the teachers' role. This finding should be noticed as an example of developed professional leadership.

### ***Principals' experiences about the leadership position***

The aim of this section is to find a structure to indicate how principals have developed their leadership through the years in the leadership position, as well as identifying what changes in managing leadership tasks principals are able to express.

According to the interviews, the analysis focuses on (a) how principals did act when new in the leadership position, (b) how principals experienced their position in the present situation, and (c) how principals look at their leadership position and the future of the school. The analysis focuses on school leadership as a developing process related to three time dimensions: the past, the present and the future. As an overarching perspective the principal's life stories indicate evidence of developmental changes in the leadership profession and position.

### ***Principals ways of acting when new in the leadership position***

All the informants had at least 10 years of practice as a school leader, and none had any problem remembering the first year as a principal. A broad variety of pre-opinions about the content of principalship could be noticed. A common experience was that content in the early stage of leadership comprised managing daily practice, and taking care of activities running the school as an organization. A summary of experiences of the principals' first time in the leadership position is expressed in the interviews as follows:

The challenge was to manage everyday work and learn the overall responsibility for the school (Albert, Maya).

The leadership was much more paperwork than expected (Sven, Erik, Esther).

The challenge was to find a balance between educational/instructional leadership and management (Erik, Ellen, Sven).

It was hard to be a young principal among older colleagues in one's former school (Maya, Esther, Albert).

I experienced a certain status in the role, but loneliness in the position (Esther, Lovisa, Ellen).

Human relations in a school are a big challenge and unexpected relational situations occurred (Lovisa, Erik).

According to the findings, it can be noticed that when new in the leadership position, the principal's main question is "what has to be done?" in order to manage everyday routines. Questions about how to manage in the leadership position, or what type of leadership should be practiced, does not have high priority for a principal when new in the position.

### ***Principals recognizing their present leadership position***

According to the principals' evaluation of their leadership at the present moment, a development about how to handle the position is obvious. Through experience the leadership position has become familiar and strategies about how to practice the profession have developed. Working independently and recognizing autonomy in leadership have developed an awareness of how to identify relevant strategies in the position. Security about decision-making processes and confidence in relational issues are some of the components involved in building strength in the leadership position.

Principals have come to accept the complexity of their position. According principals' experiences of providers, parents, teachers and students who each have their opinions about education and school policy, principals express their self-confidence and self-awareness in the leadership role as follows.

**Albert:** I feel confident and secure in my leadership. I have developed a sense of the "right time" when it comes to strategic initiatives.

**Ellen:** I'm able to handle everyday challenges and I feel safe in the position as responsible for the school.

**Lovisa:** When everyday routines are under control, I have time for policy making and educational development

**Sven:** Awareness of how I can practice different types of leadership, e.g. distributed leadership and instructional leadership is proof of my professional development in relation to the position.

**Maya:** When being confident in my leadership roles I can wait for the right moments to take initiatives.

Among the principals in this study, autonomy in the leadership position varies in relation to different contents in the position decided by the provider. Finances, resources and money-making are areas where the provider's regulations differ. According to information given in interviews, e.g. Erik has total responsibility for the budget in his school, and Ellen, Sven and Esther are responsible for the budget excluding salaries for staff and finances for properties.

The narratives confirm principals' broad responsibilities in the position as well as nuances in autonomy concerning administration and pedagogy. Principals experience their profession and position as rather complex but have developed abilities to handle occasional situations and act strategically. The findings confirm that every day is filled with unexpected occasions outside their control, as shown by results from previous research (Augustinsson & Brynolf, 2009). According to development in leadership roles principals' sayings express awareness about "how to do" as well as "when to do" as proved by excerpts above. When leaders are allowed to interpret information and make independent decisions the competence to lead a complex reality is engaging and constructive. Success in the leadership position is based on experience and a growing awareness about limits and autonomy, as expressed by the informants in this study. The lack of detailed regulations is a support for principals' professional development in the leadership position.

### ***(c) Views about development in principal's leadership***

Principal's self-reflections about the past and the present in their leadership career highlight the fact that experience from practice is an important educative process. The principals in this study express that they feel secure in their leadership role. They can motivate and describe the 'what' and the 'how' and also the 'when' in educational processes at school. These

attained leadership qualities could be referred to as 'wisdom' according to Branson (2010). Branson points out, in accordance with Strom (2007), that three qualities can be expected when wisdom influences the leadership processes:

- Wise people read life and its patterns well.
- Wise people apply these insights skillfully to the choices at hand
- Wise people act with integrity and care (Ibid. p.29)

Principal's life stories related to experience in the leadership position provides proof that leadership activities are grounded on quality and wisdom:

I feel safe when making educational and administrative decisions as well as solving conflicts and dealing with problems (Sven, Maya).

Challenges from outside school are demanding and I have to be aware of how to prioritize (Erik, Ellen, Albert).

We are creating the future. We work continuously with knowledge, skills and values needed for the present and future. (Esther, Lovisa)

During their time of leadership practice and experience as educational leaders, principals have developed their skills and abilities and reached wisdom in their leadership. The type of leadership practiced among the informants in this study could be identified as related to transformational leadership. Northouse (2010) gives the following description of transformational leadership:

Transformational leadership is a process that changes and transforms people. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals. It includes assessing followers' motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings [...]. It is a process that often incorporates charismatic and visionary leadership. (Ibid. p. 171)

The fact that the national curriculum is the frame for Finnish principals' educational leadership demands the ability to achieve both long-term goals and visionary leadership. The principals' comments in this study reflect an awareness of overarching responsibility for fostering and education.

**Lovisa** is concerned about students' motivation and the need for foste-



ring them to take responsibility and to be aware of common values in society.

**Albert** underlines the challenge to develop educational contents and methods to keep up students' motivation for higher education.

**Erik** stresses the role of the school as an environment for learning and developing skills for the future, and underlines the principal's duty to be aware of the school as a whole system, and create it wisely in order to fulfill the goals of education.

To sum up the principals' opinions about the leadership position: The professional development process is obvious according to the principal's perceptions about early leadership (what) and present leadership (what + how). The lack of regulations creates opportunities for creativity, engagement and strategic development of the leadership role (what + how+ when). Accordingly, the developmental process in the leadership position could be defined as a process of how to lead the school wisely.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article presents an investigation of principals' awareness about leadership opportunities according to the mandates for school leadership. The context is Finnish comprehensive schools.

The motives, as expressed in the introduction, was to recognize principals' awareness of personal traits in terms of self-knowledge as components in leadership, to analyze principals' perception of leadership as a profession and professional development, and to view principals' experiences about leadership as a position and find out if principals are able to identify development and transition in the leadership role according to time and experience.

The aim was divided into three research questions focusing on (1) the nature of principals' self-knowledge, (2) principals' perception about leadership as a profession, and (3) the principals' experiences of the leadership position. The approach in this qualitative research is narrative. Research information was collected through interviews transferred to narratives. The group of informants consists of seven full time principals from comprehensive schools, primary and secondary levels.

According to research question (1) the findings from analyses of the principals' life stories provide evidence of self-knowledge concerning personal abilities and strengths. Principals are able to identify traits in personality convenient in leadership actions on a general level. Principals'

self-knowledge is experienced as important according to the freedom in the mandate. This finding supports the necessity of being aware of personal traits and capacities when dealing with challenges according to relational issues in school leadership. Awareness about personal traits and needs related to communication is not clearly identified according to the narratives. As previous research (Svedberg, 2000; Nordzell, 2007) highlights, awareness about relational issues and communication needs are fundamental in leadership.

The complexity in principalship in light of lack of national guidelines, providers' rights to declare detail instructions, and the overall pedagogical mission is demanding for principals, Research question (2) highlights the progression when moving from being a teacher to becoming a principal. As a profession, leadership is experienced as an interesting and challenging step in the career. Awareness of the complexity in the role is identified and expressed as demanding. When growing into the professional role, the development of acting efficiently emerges. According to findings, essential elements in principals' professional development are: confidence in decision making, increasing the professional leadership identity and operating with neutrality in relational roles in the school. Principals express their qualified professionalism in terms of safety when making decisions, credibility among colleagues, developing strategic thinking and planning, acquaintance with learning outcomes and awareness of responsibility for operations of the school. Awareness about autonomy in leadership was noticed in practice, but not clearly expressed as an opportunity, neither was freedom in leadership roles discussed.

According to research question (3) the leadership position is viewed from a timeline perspective. Due to findings in narratives, an obvious observation of past, present and future was identified. When new in the leadership position the main task was to manage the 'what' in schools everyday life. When more experienced, principals became aware of the 'how' and the 'when' as motives for activities and leadership strategies. The right time (when) was specially mentioned as an example of being aware of the crucial moment for initiatives. Principals were able to identify their professional development as independent decision makers and initiators; a finding of interest supporting the purpose of this study. Areas recognized for development concerns educational and instructional leadership.

The overall aim, related to the motives, was to analyze principals' awareness about leadership opportunities according to the national mandates for school leadership. The aim has been illuminated in this article through perspectives on person, profession and position. In conclusion, it can be

noticed that implications about principals' awareness about significant issues in their leadership has been established but there are still room for development. Related to the narratives it is obvious that principalship in the Finnish context has more signs of profession than semi-profession. When applying for principalship a person must have qualification for the profession, and elements in the leadership profession as formulated by Brante (2009) can be identified.

According to personal motive for this study, findings concerning communication might lead to effects when developing training programs for aspiring principals in the future, as well as studies about how to handle relational issues in principalship. The overall findings in this study will support analyzes of how to develop self-knowledge, leadership profession and principals' position according to professional development programs for principals.

Results discussed in this article are related to the mandate for principals given in the national legislation. To create a more nuanced and detailed picture of challenges and opportunities in the mandate of school leadership, components in the providers' instructions for principals has to be investigated as well as frames for principalship according to the national core curricula. Through these essential elements added to findings in this article, the overall school leadership mission will be identified and created.

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