

Chapter 12

Contradictions and Opportunities in Contexts of Everyday Leadership in Education



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Abstract In this chapter, we focus on the emergence of contradictions and opportunities in everyday leadership in five comprehensive schools. We discuss how principals, teacher-members of leadership groups and teachers with no leadership responsibilities understand and conceptualise leadership work, their relationships with each other and the practices of the school. Leadership and schooling are understood as contextual practices taking place in situated, professional, material and external elements of contexts. Power is seen as an essential part of leadership, existing in relationships and interaction, and through shared understandings, values and practices. The data were collected in five schools in Southern Finland in 2018 and consist of five interviews with principals ($n = 5$) and five group interviews with leadership group member teachers ($n = 21$) and five with teachers ($n = 26$). We approached the data by asking: How do the respondent groups define the leadership and the school-level practices stemming from that, and how do they describe the contradictions and opportunities for leadership in their school contexts? The results unravel a range of situations and positionings of leadership in Finnish schools indicating the nature of nonuniformity of the comprehensive school system.

Keywords Educational leadership · Contexts · Power · Comprehensive school

Introduction

During the past three decades, in many countries, the policy changes around education have moved towards decentralisation (Pont, 2021; Simola et al., 2002). This has led to the education systems becoming more complex through multilevel governance constructed at various levels of responsibility and greater autonomy afforded

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to local-level education administrations and schools (Pont, 2021; Simola et al., 2017). Within this wider education frame, various new dimensions have been embedded in the role of a school leader who along with leading learning and teaching is seen as a facilitator of collaboration and collective work of professionals in the school community (Pont, 2021). Leadership roles like this can be seen as being connected to approaches of leadership in education depicting leadership as an interactive, shared, and distributed practice between a leader and teachers (Jäppinen et al., 2015; Harris, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020; Spillane et al., 2004). The definition of educational leadership drafted by James et al. (2020, 632) “educational leadership practice is legitimate interaction in an educational institution intended to enhance engagement with the institutional primary task” sits well within this framework.

These phenomena regarding educational governance and leadership are traceable in the Finnish context (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021; Lahtero et al., 2019; Simola, 2015; Simola et al., 2017). It is typical that the principals as school leaders aim to create practices that disperse the responsibilities for school development and decision-making, and schools often have structures that enable sharing leadership tasks (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021; Lahtero et al., 2019). In many schools, there seems to be a leadership group or similar constructed by the principal and a group of teachers (Ahtiainen et al., 2021a; Lahtero et al., 2019). However, due to the autonomy of local educational organisers, and to some extent the autonomy of schools, the leadership structures vary, as do the tasks and responsibilities of the principal (Ahtiainen et al., 2019; FNBE, 2013).

Our understanding of leadership is contextual and relational, and the social practices of schooling and leadership in education are viewed as being positioned in a certain space and time (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Power comprises an essential element of leadership and a way of modifying and producing hierarchies and practices within the organisation and its connections with the external world. Power is conceptualised as relational, existing in relationships and interaction, and being based on shared understandings of the experienced reality and values, as well as hierarchies and practices within a certain context (Foucault, 1971). Within this frame, we see schools and their leadership practices as an essential part and product of the current and former social conditions, thus inseparable from their contexts.

This draws a framework for this chapter directing the focus on the emergence of *contradictions and opportunities* in relations between actors in the designated leader position (i.e. principal), leadership group members (i.e. teachers) and the larger teaching community of the school. It is of interest to look at how these actors understand and conceptualise the leadership of the school and their relationships with each other. The aim is to increase the understanding of the leadership practices and to highlight what the actors see as a contradictory element and what they see as an opportunity. We discuss the results by contrasting them with the model of situated, professional, material and external contexts (Braun et al., 2011; Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017).

This chapter presents discussion about the existing and potentially conflicting issues and contradictions related to school leadership, the relationships between the actors and different assumptions and expectations on leadership possessed by them. The empirical context of this study is based on five Finnish comprehensive schools, and their principals, leadership groups and teaching communities.

Composition of School-Level Leadership Within the Education System

Governmental regulations on comprehensive school education define a framework for organising schooling (Basic Education Act 628/1998; Basic Education Decree 852/1998). The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE], 2016) and Government Decree (422/2012) defines the objectives for subject areas and distribution of lesson hours. The National Curriculum also covers the mission, value basis and general objectives of comprehensive schooling and provides guidelines for the preferable school culture and collaboration within the school community. These legislative and norm documents form the grounds for the organisation of comprehensive school education at the local level, which is mainly the responsibility of the municipalities – only a small proportion of pupils (fewer than 2% in total) go to private or state schools (Ministry of Education and Culture, *n.d.*).

The municipalities are autonomous and have a lot of discretion in the organisation, governance and administration of their services (Risku et al., 2014). Consequently, there is a variation between municipalities in how they have structured the administration and interpreted and applied the government regulations (e.g. Basic Education Act or National Core Curriculum; Ahtiainen et al., 2021b; Risku et al., 2014). The municipalities are obliged to assess the impact of the education they organise, and the assessment data should be used to support local education development and decision-making as well as provide the basis of national education policy-making (Statute of the Council of State, 1061/2009).

To guide the education locally, the municipal education administrations formulate a local curriculum that “complements and emphasises the goals, policies that direct the activities, key contents and other aspects related to the organisation of education specified in the core curriculum from a local perspective” (FNBE, 2016, 9). The local curriculum is seen as a strategic and pedagogical tool for defining and linking together the policies for operation of the municipal education organiser and the work of the schools (FNBE, 2016). That is, the education organiser is responsible for the process, yet it can delegate responsibilities to schools regarding the school-level curriculum or specific areas within it.

The work of the schools is directed by the local curricula, annual school year plan, local strategy for education, and other locally decided frameworks. The Basic Education Decree (852/1998) defines some responsibilities placed at school level,

e.g. assessment and legal protection. The Finnish principals are among the ones having the highest degree of autonomy in Europe (OECD, 2019). In general, principals are responsible for the use of the school's resources (i.e. financial, human) and the professional learning of teachers (FNBE, 2013). However, the range of responsibilities given to the school-level leaders varies between education organiser, as the municipality can decide on the extent to which it delegates decisional power to school principals concerning teacher recruitment, etc. (Ahtiainen et al., 2019; FNBE, 2013). The international assessments of the OECD indicate that as with many of their colleagues globally, Finnish principals must deal with multiple duties and spend much of their time doing tasks related to administration (33%; OECD, 2019). They see that the biggest factors functioning as barriers to quality education are lack of time for pedagogical leadership (42%), time for pupils (26%), and lack of school support personnel (25%; OECD, 2019).

The school-level leadership structures are often dependent on municipal regulations, the size of the municipality and its schools (Lahtero et al., 2019), and the service delivery structures that can be complex and multifaceted in larger municipalities if compared with the smaller ones (Risku et al., 2014). However, many schools apply team or working group structures related to various target areas of schoolwork development (e.g. curriculum, well-being), and most of the middle-sized or large schools have leadership groups that are formed of principals (i.e. principal, executive deputy principal, vice principal) and a selected group of teachers (Ahtiainen et al., 2021a; Lahtero et al., 2019). The creation of a leadership group is about teacher involvement in decision-making processes at the school level. In many cases, the leadership group structure has been coupled with teacher teams formed around a specific task, and every team has a representative in the leadership group (Ahtiainen et al., 2021a). Due to the tradition of professional freedom of individual teachers, decisions related to organising their classroom work have been strong in the Finnish context (Sahlberg, 2014), the collective ways of working are sometimes perceived as being challenging, and principals may struggle in getting the whole teaching community involved (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021).

Although the role of a leadership group may be limited to the local application of the national curriculum at a school and advancement of ongoing development goals, the group members often function as a bridge between the wider school community and the leadership (Ahtiainen et al., 2021a; Ahtiainen & Heikonen, Chap. 16 in this volume), but the principal and executive deputy principal have the decisional power based on their designated positions. In this context, it is interesting to explore the leadership of educational organisations from the perspective of the people in leadership positions and people not being involved in those – how they conceptualise the leadership, its constraints, contradictions, and opportunities.

Materials and Methods

Research Questions

The focus of the chapter is on exploring the conceptualisations of leadership (RQ1) and contradictions and opportunities arising in school contexts (RQ2) defined by various groups of actors. The research questions are the following:

RQ1: How do the various actor groups (principals, teacher-members of leadership groups, other teachers) define the leadership and the school-level practices stemming from that?

RQ2: How do the actors describe the contradictions and opportunities for leadership in school contexts?

Participants

The participants represented five schools involved in a 2017–2019 in-service training project “Broad-based Pedagogical Leadership”, targeted at developing the work of leadership groups (LG). In their development work, schools had chosen school-specific targets for their work and focused, e.g. on restructuring the practices of the LG, creation of means to increase teaching community involvement, or work with specific goals in their schools (e.g. well-being). The schools met with university experts five times during the programme. Most of the time, the schools worked independently.

The participants were principals, teacher members of LGs, and teachers not involved in leadership tasks. The two former participant groups represent the school-level leadership. The teacher groups were formed with the help of the principal. The aim was to have teachers from a range of grade levels or teacher positions (e.g. classroom teacher, subject teacher). The participants worked in comprehensive schools having grades 1–9 ($N = 3$) or 7–9 ($N = 2$). The schools were located in a range of municipalities outside the metropolitan area. The schools were middle-sized (350–500 students) or large (800–900 students). To ensure the anonymity of the five principals, the data have been presented at a general level. Information that could reveal or connect information concerning the education, age, specific school sizes, or gender of the participants in detail have been left out because of the close collaboration between the schools during the development programme.

Data Collection

The data were collected in 5 schools in April–May 2018 by conducting 3 sets of interviews, which formed 15 interview sessions: individually for principals ($n = 5$) and in groups for LG member teachers ($n = 21$) and teachers ($n = 26$). That is, 52

educators participated in the interviews. The sizes of the groups varied from 3 to 5 in LG teachers and 4 to 6 in teacher interviews. We employed the qualitative attitude approach (QAA) in the data collection. The QAA is based on statements given to interviewees who are supposed to position themselves in relation to these statements in the interviews (Vesala & Rantanen, 2007). The formulation of the statements is aimed at triggering discussion, and the purpose is that the interviewees argue in favour or against each statement.

In this study, the statements were drawn from the approach of broad-based pedagogical leadership that describes school leadership from a wide perspective (Fonsén & Lahtero, Chap. 8, in this volume; Lahtero et al., 2021; Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015). The approach was chosen as a basis for the formulation of the statements because it includes direct and indirect leadership and also the symbolic level of leadership. The statements covered themes of the nature of leadership and communication performed by the principal and leadership group (e.g. “the leadership in our school is conflicting in many ways, and the way the principal and the LG members act and talk is not consistent”), the principal and LG supporting and guiding teaching, learning, and other daily activities in the school (e.g. “the principal and leadership group have provided a necessary common framework for teachers’ practice that supports the work on a daily basis”), and the principal’s presence in the school (e.g. “the principal is available for teachers and students”). In the interview sessions (individual, groups), the statements were presented one by one, and before moving forward, interviewees were given enough time to discuss each of them. All interviewees commented on and discussed the same statements, which were adjusted according to the participants’ perspective (i.e. principal, LG teacher, teacher). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

To organise the data, discover patterns, and make sense of the definitions of leadership in a comprehensive school context, and the descriptions of opportunities and contradictions in these definitions, we employed the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2012). Our thematic analysis approach leans more towards a deductive orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2012) guided by the understanding of the relational and contextual nature of social constructions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) of leadership and the essence of power related to the leadership (Foucault, 1971).

The analysis proceeded through four main phases, of which the first consisted of both researchers becoming familiar with the data by reading and rereading the material (Braun & Clarke, 2012). During this phase, we started searching for meanings and making notes guided by our pre-understanding about connections between the actors. In the second phase, we started to form codes and name the meanings and relations between the emerging codes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The codes were used to capture the various aspects of leadership (e.g. definition: what is leadership; leadership practice; leadership activity), validation of leadership, the role of actors

within the defined leadership, and possession of the leadership. The third phase was about constructing two themes, contradictions and opportunities, and organising the coded data under them. To reach the variety of nuances of the thematic nature of the coded excerpts of the interviews required careful reading of the meanings given within each code. However, the distinction between themes was not always clear, and the same element could be presented as both (i.e. opportunity, contradiction). Finally, we reviewed the themes, discussed their composition, and made some adjustments to reach the final thematic form of our findings.

Ethical Considerations

The University of Helsinki has research ethics regulations that are binding on all researchers, but this research did not require ethics committee review. All the participants were provided with information about their rights (e.g. withdrawal), the aim of the study, and data collection methods, the storage, and use of the data. All participation was voluntary. The data were pseudonymised. Names (i.e. schools, principals) were replaced with artificial identifiers. The data were stored in the secured network of the University. Only the researchers had access to the data.

Findings

The conceptualisations of leadership were constructed from the understandings and meanings given to it. The descriptions of various research participant groups reflected the actual practices connected to the concept of leadership and roles given to the leader(s), and through that, the leadership was positioned within and in relation to the teachers, LG member teachers, and the principal in the school. Following our research questions, the findings are presented in two phases. The first covers the conceptualisation of leadership in each of the five schools and draws a picture of meanings connected to it within them (RQ1). In the second phase, the findings are summarised and reflected under the two thematic areas of the study, opportunities and contradictions (RQ2). In the discussion, the findings are contrasted to a heuristic framework on the contexts of schooling and educational leadership borrowed from Braun et al. (2011) and further applied to leadership contexts by Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017).

Conceptualisation of Leadership

In the following, we present the conceptualisations of leadership according to the (groups) of actors in each school. In conceptualisation, the focus has been placed on RQ1: How do the various actor groups define the leadership and the school-level practices stemming from that.

School 1

Principal

The principal depicted leadership at School 1 through the concept of distribution and explained how leadership occurred within the school. The main components of the leadership were the principal and two vice principals. The opportunity to share duties with the vice principals was perceived as crucial in a large school. The LG formed one part of the school's leadership structure, yet the principal emphasised the central position of the three principals – they formed an essential part of the leadership in the school. Moreover, the principal saw the LG teacher members' role as being vague and unestablished and wondered if LG members should take on more leadership in the future. The principal wanted to point out that in a school, one arena for leadership was at the classroom level, at which the leadership position belonged to teachers having the main decision-making power in pedagogical matters. At School 1, the principal mentioned that there was a lot of responsibility for pedagogical problem-solving, and discourse had been placed at the level of teacher teams.

Through these aspects, the principal was distanced from the leadership taking place at different levels within the school, by themselves and by others. The principal described the leader's role as something that was a facilitator encouraging and supporting the whole school community, and if needed, the principal was available for discussions with teachers in issues related to their professional (e.g. pedagogy) or private life. Consequently, the principal was not aware of the quality or methods of actual teaching and learning processes at the classroom level. Consequently, this set-up created slight uncertainty as it was difficult to know the extent to which the elements that they had agreed on together were applied in practice.

Leadership Group

LG member teachers connected leadership to the concepts of decision-making and school development. Also, they saw that assessment of the current situation and ambitions for future direction along with identification of development needs were central at School 1. The annual school year plan as a frame for schoolwork was seen as being loose, and the LG teachers felt that the frame lacked a pedagogical touch. The main responsibility for leading these processes seemed to be included in the tasks of the principal and two vice principals, but the principal seemed to hold the definite vision and power over the direction of the school. LG teachers had recognised challenges in the mutual power relations between the three principals (i.e. principal and two vice principals) that affected the smoothness of the workflow. It seemed as though the tasks and duties were delegated but that practice did not provide decision-making power to a vice principal. The LG teachers positioned themselves on the margin regarding the decision-making power in their school. The actual leadership appeared to be distributed between those occupying the senior

positions (i.e. the principal, vice principals). Moreover, the LG teachers called for the principal's stronger presence within the teaching community.

Teachers

For the teachers, leadership appeared as a guide to the school's course of action at a practical level. At School 1, the principal and the LG formulated rules, drew up an annual school year plan, and gave direction to the work and instructions for various practices (e.g. supervision of recesses). Teachers appeared to be unaware how the leadership in their school was constructed and who made the decisions, but they noted that one of the vice principals probably had more leadership responsibilities in these areas than the others in principal positions. Elements concerning aspects of pedagogy or values or ideologies behind education seemed to be lacking in the shared discussions among the school community members. However, the teachers felt that the principal encouraged professional learning, and several opportunities for participation were available according to one's own interests, and the same applied to a number of responsibilities in teacher teams.

School 2

Principal

The principal described the leadership structure of their school as a team organisation that had been developed further regarding the roles of teacher team leaders. Together, the principal and LG had considered the purposefulness of frameworks for schoolwork regarding the balance between common guidelines and the space for individual leeway. Consequently, the guidelines were written rather loosely. The LG was a place for discussion, and the LG teacher members had been given responsibilities in finalising common processes and giving guidance to others. The principal described the working methods through interactions within the LG (including the principal) and LG member teachers and other teachers. Further, the principal pointed out the importance of pedagogical discussion led and facilitated by the principal, but there seemed to be a lack of time for it to be done regularly. Nonetheless, the principal stated that pedagogy is an area that requires sensitivity from the leader's side as that was the area of expertise of teachers.

Leadership Group

LG member teachers perceived leadership at School 2 as a practice based on collaboration and joint discussion aimed at defining the main framework within which teaching and learning along with other daily activities took place. The LG teachers felt that they worked with the principal, had a common understanding, and that a

way of working that had a strong sense of distribution of leadership and responsibilities existed at their school. The concepts of transparency, support, interaction, and being easy-going were used to describe the leadership of the principal. In general, the LG teachers contemplated the meaningfulness of specific rules or guidelines given by the principal and LG regarding practices. LG teachers did not see it to be necessary to restrict the task of decision-making on these matters to the selected few (i.e. the principal and themselves); instead, they thought that the things concerning everyone should be decided at the school level and that these processes would benefit from the participation of the whole teaching community.

Teachers

Teachers at School 2 appeared to be satisfied with the way the principal involved them in discussion about the guidelines for teaching and learning, listened to, and gave them a voice. The principal encouraged trying out new pedagogical ideas and methods and also participated in them. These characteristics of a leader were perceived as being in contrast with their previous authoritarian principal. Further, teachers reflected on how the principal tended to present ambitious plans and ideas and also aimed at their realisation. Teachers perceived the leadership of the principal and the LG as being trustworthy, yet they were uncertain about the transparency of the decision-making processes in the LG. However, they suspected that they had not done enough to find out about it either. The teachers saw the leadership of the principal or vice principal as being clear, whereas the LG's position and role were more obscure. Nonetheless, the principal and LG appeared to work in a collaborative manner with the teachers and also considered the pupils' viewpoints.

School 3

Principal

The principal described the processes of making plans, formulating frameworks, and making decisions as a shared practice within the LG, and with the wider school community, because some matters touched all teachers and could not be discussed only within a small group of people. The increasing involvement of everyone seemed to necessitate interaction and collaboration. Further, the principal thought that the work between the principal and LG should be developed in an even more systematic direction to put more emphasis on joint discussions. The principal pointed out that one task of a leader is to be able to "read the situations" and make interpretations about when teachers need support, and about the extent to which the leader should intervene and give guidance. The teachers had to be given enough autonomy, and it was unnecessary to build rigid frameworks or guidelines for schoolwork – there had to be room for modifications during the school year as the

situations changed constantly. The lack of time seemed to limit the principal's opportunities for classroom visits and pedagogical discussions with all teachers.

Leadership Group

The LG teachers at School 3 talked about LG discussions concerning the joint direction of schooling and saw that the processes genuinely were participatory and interactive. There had been an effort to develop the work of teacher teams and their connections to LG to increase the involvement of all teachers. However, the LG teachers felt that too tight internal schedules and external regulations and tasks coming from the local education (i.e. municipal) administration sometimes hindered the implementation of their plans. Moreover, they had noted that team structures were not perceived positively by all teachers, and the team leader position seemed to be lacking a shared understanding within the teacher teams despite the long tradition of circulation of the team leader role. The LG teachers mentioned that their school had a history of strong principal-centred leadership culture, which still echoed in the discourses of some teachers, even after 20 years. The principal was perceived as an approachable leader who supported teachers in many ways, but the current role of a principal was seen as being loaded with many duties outside the school and the tight economic situation being faced by the municipality. Consequently, that had probably affected the principal's opportunities to focus on pedagogical issues.

Teachers

The work culture at School 3 had changed during the past few years and had led to the development of practices that involved everyone in annual school year planning and other processes central to schoolwork. Teachers felt that they being involved more and more, and it was not just the principal and leadership group who worked with these processes. Ways of working like this appeared to move the school forward, increase transparency, and create commitment among the teachers. Although the principal and LG guide these processes, there also appeared to be leeway for all members of the teaching community to take the initiative. Teacher teams were seen as being one means for realising these working methods, and the framework for teams had been facilitated and guided by the principal and the LG. However, the teachers said that freedom and autonomy given to the teams entailed challenges. Teachers had noted how not all teachers were willing or ready to self-direct their teamwork or accept responsibilities, which affected the work of some teams. Teachers thought that some teachers saw that their school duties covered only their classroom work, not the wider school community. In general, teachers viewed the leadership of the principal and the principal as a person as being trustworthy and approachable and often being present and available for teachers to consult. Nevertheless, the teachers wished that their leader could visit their classrooms and give positive feedback and encouragement more often. Moreover, sometimes the

principal should delegate the tasks more and through that reduce the workload that teachers perceived being too large.

School 4

Principal

At School 4, the principal was responsible for several schools, which required the sharing of leadership and delegation of the responsibilities to vice principals who were more present in each of the schools. This was especially relevant to pedagogical issues. The principal found the leadership at the school mostly to be a coherent activity, with the exception of certain contradictory issues. The principal pointed out the good atmosphere between the LG and principals but reported on the critical comments from teachers who seemed to have experienced the discussions as being interrupted. The principal also hesitated when asked about their experiences regarding the clear and systematic guidance towards a future vision. Moreover, the principal felt that some of the teachers expected more discussion on pedagogical issues, support, and direct disciplinary action in difficult situations with students. Yet, at the same time, due to the autonomic nature of the teaching work, the principal found it difficult to intervene in classroom situations, and their responsibilities and duties were heavy, and therefore there was usually no time for discussing pedagogy. The principal pointed out that teachers were supported in their aims for professional development and well-being at work.

Leadership Group

At this school, the LG members defined the leadership activities and decision-making as shared processes between the principal, vice principals, and the LG. They saw the leadership as being collective and distributed and pointed out how there were several leadership organs and planning groups. LG members described their role as being responsible for the everyday leadership practices at the school. Activities included the planning of the everyday matters of the school, events, and leading the pedagogy. LG members' relationship with the principal was contradictory. They perceived the principal as being easily approachable but also called for stronger vision and more presence from the principal, such as visiting classrooms, and a firmer touch in solving problems regarding difficult situations.

LG members found the leadership to be an activity through which several (sometimes conflicting) targets set by different actors were encountered: the municipal, national, and local level goals intermingled at the grassroots leadership work in the school. LG members pointed out how the strong governance based on the national curriculum, and the traditional autonomy enjoyed by teachers, and the different work cultures experienced by the teachers of lower (1–6) and upper grades of the comprehensive school defined the cultural context of the school and leadership

work. However, the contradictory element as part of the leadership work was mentioned as something which enabled the LG members' opinions to conflict with each other and, as such, formed a fruitful platform for new solutions. The time available for discussion and definition-making around pedagogy and vision was interpreted as being a scarce resource.

Teachers

For School 4, the teachers reported the absence of leadership and vision, especially regarding the principal's role and work and, at the same time, related to their own work as teachers. Mostly, when discussing leadership at school, the teachers talked about the principal's role and work. According to the teachers, there was a lack of frames for teaching, and no clear idea on where support and help could be sought. There seemed to be problems in organisation of everyday leadership practices, e.g. the meetings seemed not to be prepared or no one took notes at the meetings. Teachers reported that some teachers were teaching some subjects without being properly qualified in the content area, and in some cases, it seemed as though the substitute teachers did not get enough teaching hours. However, no information was available about who should be responsible for these issues.

The teachers called for stronger leadership, which to some extent became defined as a supporting and disciplinary authority in relation to students and difficult situations with them. In the teachers' opinion, the vision for the school was deficient, nor did the teachers have a clear idea of "how things get done". Based on teachers' opinions, it also seemed that they would like the leaders to have a more grassroots understanding of the everyday life at school, the classroom realities and the teachers' work.

School 5

Principal

From the perspective of the principal, the leadership of the School 5 was built up as coordination and overseeing the whole, and as more practical activities such as payment of salaries or planning the use of temporary facilities were needed. Leadership was mainly constructed as activities done by the principal and the vice principals, with the vice principals being the ones who worked on the more hands-on practices, while the principal had the responsibility for defining the direction of the organisation. The teachers' needs for professional development and training were evaluated by the teachers themselves and then discussed with the principal in performance appraisal discussions. The principal appeared to be clearly aware of the needs of teachers for more pedagogical support and physical presence from the principal. Lack of time and resources were mentioned as challenges for work, as well as the need for more concrete work on special education.

Leadership Group

LG members perceived leadership as decision-making and as processes related to organising everyday school life and activities in their school. They also defined it as sharing responsibilities between the tasks central to schoolwork and as discussing and planning the common goals and directions for development. However, LG teachers described the leadership as unstructured and unclear because of the challenging current situation at the time of interview. According to LG members, planning and implementing activities within the school were a collaborative process, and there were working groups for goal setting and decision-making on activities. There was a need for the creation of a clearer framework for common action, the need for more discussion on specific school targets and the understanding of the relationship between goals and actions. That is, they found the commitment of the staff to be an important goal. Actually, the role of the principal was not widely discussed, despite comments on the limited amount of time. LG members discussed the willingness of staying/leaving the personal or professional comfort zone of the teacher as a factor which had an impact on attitudes about development.

Teachers

For teachers, the activities of the leadership group and principals seemed to be quite coordinated, but the information did not always reach the teachers, and consequently, teachers did not find the common goals or direction well defined. They perceived the principal as being quite distant from themselves and from the students. Teachers brought up several issues about the challenges related to leadership. They discussed limited resources (funding, time), as well as the relationship of the school leadership with the municipal governance, and contradicted the position of the principal, as being the one presenting the voice of the school/teachers and/or the voice of the municipal actors and policies. Teachers found the practices in the various relationships of the school (e.g. the principal and teachers, teachers and students) as something which had an accumulating impact from one relationship or level of action to another: if the principal felt stressed and overloaded, this would lead to a situation in which the principal spread the stress rather than support in the meetings with the teachers, who then forwarded the emotion to classrooms. In addition, teachers discussed their own role and responsibilities related to agenda setting of the common discussion, and the needs for balancing personal and professional expectations and needs.

Contradictions and Opportunities

In this second phase of findings, we move around RQ2: How do the actors describe the contradictions and opportunities for leadership in school contexts? In the interviews, the actors representing various groups explained the experiences of

contradicting issues and opportunities for leadership, relationships between the actors, and the whole school community. By a “contradiction”, we refer to issues that are potentially or already conflicting and that often are characterised by the lack of clarity. “Opportunity” is defined as something – potentially bad or good – which might occur in the future. In Tables 12.1, 12.2 and 12.3, these elements have been organised and presented per groups of actors.

Among the principals, the contradictions were formed around balancing between their distant position in relation to classroom activities, caution regarding getting involved with the teachers’ work, and lack of opportunities for pedagogical discourse in the school community. The opportunities stemmed from the existing or evolving practices that relied on collaboration between the various actors in the schools.

According to LG members, contradictions arose from unclear structures of leadership (Table 12.2). Frameworks were unclear or undefined, and the sharing of power or positioning between the principals in the schools was unclear. Further, the LG members seemed to position themselves at the margins of leadership. Like the principals, the LG members voiced the need for increased pedagogical discussion among the teachers and with the principal.

In several comments, LG members contrasted the “old” and “more traditional” leader-centred leadership practices with “new”, collaborative ones. Some of the respondents were aware of the difficulties arising from increased teamwork, and responsibility of teachers over the school level-issues, while some of them had an optimistic attitude about getting involved with decision-making. They also saw the role of a principal as contradictory; on the one hand, the principal was a representative of the school (and teachers) to municipal actors, and on the other, the principal was the implementer of the external policies internally.

The most often mentioned contradictory issues by teachers related to the distance of the figure of the principal and the practices perceived as being unclear or

Table 12.1 Contradictions and opportunities defined by principals

Principals	
Contradictions	Insufficient level of understanding regarding the state of everyday life in classrooms, the actual teaching, and learning Pedagogical expertise and decisions sensitive topics to discuss with teachers due to the professional autonomy Not enough time for facilitating and leading pedagogical discussions with teachers, or to visit classrooms Teachers would need more pedagogical support and physical presence from the principal Lack of time and resources challenge the work as a leader
Opportunities	Sharing duties with vice principals is crucial in larger schools The delegation of work between the principal and LG should be developed in a more systematic direction and to put more emphasis on joint discussions There is a room for LG members to take on more leadership in the future The increasing involvement of everyone necessitates interaction and collaboration

Table 12.2 Contradictions and opportunities defined by leadership group members

Leadership group members	
Contradictions	<p>The annual school year plan as a frame for schoolwork was too loose and lacked a pedagogical touch</p> <p>Leadership unstructured and unclear</p> <p>The time resource for discussion on pedagogy and vision was too short</p> <p>Challenges in the mutual power relations between principals (including vice principals) affect the smoothness of the workflow</p> <p>The LG teachers positioned themselves on the margin regarding the decision-making power in their school as the actual leadership appeared as distributed between the people in senior positions</p> <p>LG teachers called for the stronger presence of the principal among the teaching community, e.g. visiting classrooms and firmer problem-solving of difficult situations, and stronger vision</p> <p>Team structures were not appreciated by all teachers, and team leader positions were unclear or not taken on</p> <p>LG teachers did not see it necessary that they with the principal would provide specific rules or frameworks for schooling</p> <p>Old leader-centred leadership culture had its impact on teachers’ expectations on the principal role</p> <p>Role of a principal was loaded with many duties outside the school and the tight economic situation faced by the municipality</p> <p>Too tight internal schedules and external expectations and tasks coming from the local education (i.e. municipal) administration sometimes hinder the implementation of the internal plans</p>
Opportunities	<p>Several issues could have been decided at the school level (instead of at the principal or the municipal levels), and among the whole teaching community</p> <p>LG members’ conflicting opinions were seen as a fruitful platform for finding novel ways to solve issues in the school</p> <p>There would be a need to create a clearer framework for common action, the need for more discussion on specific targets of this school, and the understanding of the relationship between goals and actions</p> <p>The commitment of the staff was seen as an important goal</p> <p>Willingness of teachers staying within/leaving the personal or professional comfort zone was seen as a factor with an impact on attitudes about development</p>

unfair. They called for more grassroots level leadership and support for pedagogical development, discussion, and discipline. Lack of relevant information, structures for teaching work, and fluidity in the everyday organisation of schooling were seen as challenging for one’s main work, teaching.

Above, we have interpreted the “contradictions” as activities, role conflicts, and mismatches between expectations versus the experienced reality and as being present in the current situation described by the participants. These contradictory issues were seen as causing tensions and misunderstandings among the actors at schools. The “opportunities” often tend to be understood as situations leading to potentially positive futures, but in this study, we did not presume that. However, the participants’ speech on the future was mostly positively charged, and the future was

Table 12.3 Contradictions and opportunities defined by teachers

Teachers	
Contradictions	<p>The organisation of leadership and who made the decisions were unclear</p> <p>Lack of leadership and vision, especially regarding the principal's role and work</p> <p>No discussions on pedagogy or values or ideologies behind education</p> <p>Lack of frames for teaching work, and no clear understanding of the sources for help and support</p> <p>Practicalities were not maintained properly, e.g. meetings were not prepared, nor were notes taken</p> <p>Unfair treatment of teachers: e.g. someone taught a subject without being properly qualified, substitute teachers were not given enough teaching hours</p> <p>Teachers called for more grassroots knowledge about classroom work and realities from the principals</p> <p>Teachers hoped for classroom visits, positive feedback, and encouragement more often</p> <p>Not all teachers were willing or ready to self-direct their teamwork or take responsibilities but saw their duties covering only their classroom work</p> <p>Teachers called for stronger leadership, supporting and disciplinary authority in relation to students</p> <p>The information did not always reach the teachers</p> <p>The principal was distant from teachers and students</p> <p>Limiting resources (funding, time) were mentioned as a challenge for leadership</p> <p>Contradicting the position of the principal, being the one representing the voice of the school/teachers to municipal actors and external policies to staff</p> <p>Teachers found the practices in school relationships (e.g. principal and teachers, teachers and students) to be something with the accumulating impact from one relationship or level of action to another: If the principal feels stressed and overloaded, this might cause him to share the stress instead of providing support while meeting the teachers, who then spread the emotion while at classroom</p> <p>Teachers discussed their own role and responsibilities related to agenda setting of the common discussion and the need to balance personal and professional expectations and needs</p>
Opportunities	<p>Teachers were encouraged to further educate themselves</p> <p>Teachers were provided with opportunities for participating and taking responsibility in shared planning</p> <p>Teachers were satisfied in the way of involving their opinions in discussions and guidelines for teaching and learning</p> <p>Teachers were happy for the encouragement to test new pedagogical ideas and methods</p> <p>The increased involvement of teachers in annual school year planning and other central processes experienced increasing transparency and commitment</p>

interpreted as a promising opportunity (cf. Simola, 2022 on emotions in development work). This may have been influenced by the fact that the schools were voluntarily participating in a research and development project with the aim of improving the leadership practices of the school.

Different Contexts of Schooling and Educational Leadership

The focus of this chapter has been on the definitions of everyday leadership by principals, LG members, and regular teachers. We have looked at the contradictory issues explained by the research participants and the opportunities the representatives were able to see as possible future happenings. In the following, we discuss the findings through the heuristic framework of situational, professional, material, and external contexts of schooling and educational leadership (Braun et al., 2011; Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017).

Situated contexts are historically and locationally linked to the school, such as a school's setting, its history and intake, school's history, and reputation (Braun et al., 2011; Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017). Elements of situated contexts were present in our schools and discussions, such as mentions of "current situation" related to repairs to the school buildings. The need for and difficulties with pedagogical discussions were the most essential element of *professional* contexts present in interviews with all groups of actors. Professional contexts refer to values, teacher commitments and experiences, and policy management in schools (Braun et al., 2011). Pedagogical discussions were perceived as being difficult because of the lack of time of principals had, but also because traditionally the teachers' autonomy in decision-making on didactic matters has been important in Finnish schools. Quite often teachers called for the more authoritarian figure of the principal, especially when it comes to disciplinary issues in relation to pupils. All schools were participating in a university-led project in which they were supported and facilitated to develop their leadership practices to be more collaborative, shared, and involving. The perceived change from "old", "traditional", and "authoritarian" to more involvement of staff in decision-making or teamwork was experienced as being contradictory. *Material* contexts mean staffing, budget, buildings, available technology, and surrounding infrastructure, e.g. layout, quality, and spaciousness of the environment and buildings (Braun et al., 2011). There were few mentions of actual, material school infrastructure. Few mentioned how the principal often could not be present at one site due to their responsibility for several schools. Lack of time and resources were presented as a limiting element by all actors, but actual budgeting processes or financial limits were not mentioned at all.

Broader decision-making and governance structures of the state and the municipality which cause pressures and expectations form *external* contexts (Braun et al., 2011). Especially the LG members of the schools saw the leadership as an activity in which the municipal, national, and local level goals met. At one school, they pointed out how the impact of national curriculum, the autonomy of teachers, and different cultures among class teachers and subject teachers created culturally different contexts for leadership work at elementary and lower secondary schools. Because of the choice of focus in the interviews, municipal and governmental regulation and their impact on everyday leadership at schools were not mentioned many times. One reason for the relative lack of those mentions might also be because there is no school inspection system in Finland, which in some countries and regions

might have an impact on leadership targets. Also, schools operate relatively autonomously in relation to municipal governance.

Conclusions

We have presented leadership in education as a contextualised and relational practice. In the first part of the findings, we described how the principals, teacher members of the leadership groups, and regular teachers define the leadership in their schools. We also pointed out the ways these groups of actors define their relations to each other. In the second part of the findings, we discussed how they saw the opportunities and contradictions faced in the everyday life of schooling. In the discussion part, these findings were again contrasted to the model of contexts of educational leadership (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Braun et al., 2011).

Based on this study on schools with the will to develop their leadership practices towards a more collaborative and shared model, the change was not always perceived as an easy one. Different groups of actors experienced the situations and each other differently. There were existing school-specific differences in cultures and the understanding of the leader. At some schools, the upper secondary school subject teachers contested leadership by a person with a background in elementary education and as a class teacher. The most mentioned was the need for leadership on understanding the everyday realities of classrooms, teaching, learning, and their practical framework. However, the lack of time caused challenges for all actors, and pedagogical domain was traditionally considered as the teachers' private area. At the same time, some actors called for the more disciplined, authority figure to guide and provide direction, while others were happy with the more shared decision-making. It seemed that there was a need for situational flexibility in that sense. In addition, the expectations of different actors and leadership appeared to differ, as did the contexts.

Often, the leadership models show practices as idealistic, individualistic activities performed by leaders, in school contexts the principals, and lacking the messiness and richness of the organisational realities. Likewise, the research on leadership and organisational change often tends to idealise the leadership at the expense of sensitivity to contextual differences and positioned interpretations. Based on our study, the conceptualisations of leadership, different actors, and their relationships differed based on the position of the actor and the context of each school. Meanings given for leadership were constantly in flux and negotiated, interpreted, and translated in daily discussions and further enacted by the local actors in their local contexts. In general, understanding of this fluidity of meanings and contextuality requires research orientations which can focus on how policies and leadership are constructed in the local contexts. To do that in this study, we employed the heuristics of contexts developed by Braun et al. (2011) and Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) which have enabled us to discuss further the observation of the nonuniformity of the situation in Finnish schools and their leadership. We argue that a more

realistic, context-sensitive, and everyday-focused orientation (e.g. Ball et al., 2011) will give researchers and practitioners tools for their work. These perspectives might help in solving the conflictual situations in a new way, understanding the possible clashes between the expectations, ideals, and practices of different people not as errors of the specific tool or method but as products of the current conditions and culture.

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