Chapter 1
Grounding Higher Education Leadership Research in Non-affirmative Education Theory

Michael Uljens (iD) **and Janne Elo**

Abstract This chapter argues that higher education leadership research lacks sufficient theoretical underpinning and requires a more comprehensive theoretical framework. We propose that establishing a solid theoretical foundation involves a systematic exploration of three key perspectives: the why, how and what of leadership. First, recognising that leadership in and of educational institutions is relational and contextual, shaped by historical evolution, we advocate for a clarification of universities' roles and responsibilities from societal, cultural, disciplinary, economic and individual perspectives—the *why* of higher education curriculum leadership. We argue that education theory provides valuable insights into understanding how the university, as an institutional context, and its tasks relate to these dimensions. Second, considering higher education institutions as knowledge-intensive organisations, leadership's fundamental role is seen in facilitating the professional and personal development of both staff and students. Consequently, higher education leadership should articulate its position on pedagogical influence across various levels—the *how* of higher education curriculum leadership. Third, recognising that the primary focus of higher education leadership at different levels is the academic and professional learning of students, it involves providing direct and indirect support for leaders and teachers, as well as shaping the curriculum and organisation of study programmes. These aspects collectively constitute the *what* of higher education curriculum leadership. In light of these three perspectives, this chapter outlines the theoretical grounding for research on the pedagogical dimension of multi-level higher education leadership within the framework of non-affirmative education theory.

Keywords Higher education leadership · Multi-level leadership · Leadership for learning · Non-affirmative education theory

M. Uljens (✉) · J. Elo
Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Vaasa, Finland
e-mail: michael.uljens@abo.fi; janne.elo@abo.fi

Introduction

What is a university, what is it for and how is it led? These questions have been central topics of debate throughout the history of the university, and the answers have indeed varied and evolved over time (Barnett, 2004). Today, how these questions are practically answered is reflected in higher education leaders' activities. Most of these activities are founded on these leaders' professional identities, including their explicit or implicit ideas of how they understand higher education and the conditions under which universities operate. In addition, empirical research on higher education policies provides us with answers of this kind. However, in our search for a convincing vocabulary of what the university is and how it is led, we do not primarily turn to empirical research on education leaders' ideas or their practices. Rather, in this volume, we are searching for a theoretical grounding for higher education leadership research. The reason for this is that we find educational leadership research, in general, to be under-theorised.

Our central claim is that such a theoretical grounding requires addressing three perspectives. First, we need to conceptually clarify the *university's relation to other societal and cultural practices* because how we as researchers explain this relation is intimately connected to how we view its leadership. In this sense, we take seriously the idea that leadership in and of educational institutions is relational, contextual and a historically evolved practice. Second, *leadership is always the leadership of something.* We thereby claim that any leadership is always partly related to its object and cannot be fully understood as a content- and context-neutral generic activity. From this perspective, to theoretically explain what higher education leadership is about, we need an articulated position regarding pedagogical influence in education, teaching and studying. Another aspect of the importance of an articulated position on pedagogical influence is that all leadership in knowledge-intensive organisations feature activities facilitating professional and human growth this *leadership has a pedagogical dimension* to it. We argue that while leadership influencing learning activities is often identified as crucial in knowledge-intensive organisations, the literature on leadership too often lacks elaboration on the pedagogical qualities of leadership. Third educational leadership, and the pedagogical dimensions thereof, is a complex undertaking simultaneously operating at different interrelated levels that must be dealt with in a theoretically and conceptually coherent manner.

Given the three perspectives described above, the mission of this volume is to theoretically ground research on the pedagogy of multi-level higher education leadership in non-affirmative education theory. Parallel to this, this volume problematises the approach by bringing it into dialogue with previous significant and highly esteemed contributions to higher education leadership research.

This volume contributes to the international research programme on non-affirmative education (Non-affirmative Education, 2023). The programme is based on Dietrich Benner's interpretation of the non-affirmative theory (NAT) of education and Bildung (Benner, 2023). Dietrich Benner has developed this position since the 1970s but has primarily published in German. This approach garners

steadily increasing international interest. Due to its character and its grounding in modern European *Bildung*, the position is regarded as a promising language for education in the twenty-first century, drawing interest from researchers across the Western, Eastern and Southern global regions. How the approach has gained interest is described in Uljens and Ylimaki (2017) and Uljens (2023a). The present volume is the third in a series, published by Springer. The volume from 2017 discussed how non-affirmative education theory succeeds in bridging research on teaching, curriculum and educational leadership. A recent volume digs into the conceptual core issues of the approach and investigates how this tradition of thought has influenced, and relates to, other approaches (Uljens, 2023b).

A Short History of University Leadership

The history of the university dates back to the Middle Ages, when universities were teaching institutions, often connected to the church and mainly concerned with reproducing societal elites. Since the seventeenth century, through a stepwise movement towards modernity, the educational task of the university has shifted from socialising to an existing teleological order in premodern societies to a *modern* view of a non-teleological development of society whereby the task of higher education is to educate for a future that is neither known nor knowable. The establishment of the modern Humboldtian research-based university marked a difference between the pedagogical activities in schools and those in universities. While schools typically focused on teaching based on a predetermined curriculum or syllabus, the new universities emphasised the teacher's autonomy to construct a curriculum that was not only to be taught but that would serve as a point of departure for students, who would incorporate a critical treatment of its content into their studies. A unique difference between schools and universities is that both students' *and* teachers' personal learning is crucial in universities. The double and related processes of teachers' and students' *Bildung* provide a certain twist to educative teaching at universities. However, without digging into the sociological literature of professions (Abbot, 1988), it can be said that the differences between the disciplines are significant. The study of some disciplines aims at the achievement of qualifications for given professions, while that of others provides a more general understanding of a given field of knowledge structured as a discipline. In this respect, universities have always been connected to the labour market and citizenship in multiple ways.

In Europe, in particular, the nation-state became the dominant frame of reference, alongside working life, for universities. Education in general, with universities being no exception, became a key means of developing national identities 'from within' in many nations. Universities have played a special role in the education of the societal elite (state bureaucrats, officials, teachers and leaders) upholding, leading and developing nation-states. In this respect, universities have played a conservative and reproductive role in society.

With the gradual shift from a premodern teleological worldview to a modern view of the future as open, research has become one of the central tasks performed by universities. In the Western tradition, when knowledge was no longer perceived as something given from above or found within, but rather as something created or discovered by humans, research as an activity started to make sense. Although higher education institutions eventually became, and still mostly are, located in a nation-state framework financially, legally and policy-wise, the traditional Humboldtian idea of the university in the Western hemisphere has been that it is intended to provide *universally* valid knowledge that is public and accessible for all. The modern idea of educating the individual was directly dependent on the universal validity of shared knowledge. It was through this universally valid knowledge that the individual could be emancipated from the primary context, culture and socialisation. Moving into the sphere of universally accepted knowledge also gave rise to a new collective of intellectuals. Universal knowledge thereby, in a way, replaced religion and became connected to a new idea of humanity in the modern world. This view regards research as a *common good* that aims to benefit humanity, not merely as useful for single nation-states, nor did the Humboldtian idea view knowledge as a commodity or a private good on an exchange market. Although higher education institutions, in many ways, remain rooted in national frameworks, higher education has become increasingly interwoven in both local and global networks of influences, policy-wise, culturally, and economically. Paradoxically, parallel to various globalisation processes over the past three decades, universities have been localised and given a third mission: to instrumentally serve regional and national needs.

While we still very much live by the modern ideas of being and becoming an encultured and educated citizen, where acting out a self-directed will in relation to others' interests is crucial, the operational environment of today's universities is quite different from that of Wilhelm von Humboldt. With the move into a post-industrial economy, higher education has become a focal point for economic and labour market policies on a global level, and globalisation generates increased instrumental requirements in terms of the effects and use of knowledge produced, as knowledge is expected to serve regional needs for economic ends (Dobbins et al., 2011). Global discourses of a competitive knowledge economy, new public management and the entrepreneurial university affect higher education worldwide, although at varying speeds and in varying ways (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018; Frost et al., 2016).

In an era of academic capitalism, universities are not only expected to provide competence and innovations for a competitive market; they are also competing for fee-paying international students, research funding, rankings, prestige and the most productive and competitive scholars in a global educational and academic market (Kandiko & Blackmore, 2012; Kwiek, 2016; Maassen, 2017). During the twentieth century, especially after World War II, universities developed from institutions of elite education, clearly distinguishable from the rest of society, to institutions of mass education interwoven in many ways with the surrounding society (Barnett, 2004). The task of the mass university is to prepare a much broader range of societal

elites, including the upper strata of all of society's technical and economic organisations (Trow, 2007). The interpenetration of the university and the surrounding society has, in many ways, eroded the basis of the Humboldtian idea of the university as an institution. For instance, the creation of new knowledge through research is by no means the privilege of universities in a knowledge society, and the boundaries between universities and businesses have, in many cases, vanished through the emergence of the knowledge economy (Barnett, 2004).

If universities originally had a strong connection to the church, followed by a close affiliation with the state, at least symbolically, their affiliation with the state has, in many cases, been replaced by one with the market, for instance, through privatisation reforms. The increased formal autonomy of higher education institutions is often accompanied by increased control and steering mechanisms that involve more accountability and a diversified funding base (Christensen, 2011). Thus, increased autonomy has mainly been instrumental and efficiency-oriented and has seen the introduction of new managerial steering mechanisms within higher education institutions, resulting in the monitoring of leadership behaviours and functions. Research funding is largely guided by policies or other external instrumental interests. Institutionalised nation-state education, in general, is influenced by globalisation, technology and transnational policy-making and policy-borrowing, accompanied by a neoliberal shift towards new forms of governance that focus on the indirect regulation of the self-governance of institutions and researchers within and across countries (Lingard & Rizvi, 2009). In many cases, these trends have led organisational logic in higher education to be based on managerialism and marketisation (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018; Frost et al., 2016). As higher education institutions are developing from loosely coupled to more vertically connected systems, higher education leadership is increasingly in focus from many perspectives (Maassen & Stensaker, 2019).

Based on the short historical description above, it can be concluded that higher education is currently a focal point of interest for numerous actors and stakeholders in global society. It faces a multitude of expectations, ranging from economic and labour market considerations to political, social justice and environmental perspectives. In other words, many different and new actors in society want a say in how and where higher education should be led and developed, and the question of what a university *is* is itself on the table. Different views on what universities are are reflected in different positions regarding how they should be led and governed. The massification of universities, combined with the interpenetration of universities and the wider society and differentiation into sub-disciplines, has resulted in universities being, on the one hand, more internally heterogeneous and, on the other, more interwoven with different fields of societal practice than ever before. Thus, the questions of what higher education is and what it is for are at the forefront from several perspectives. Paradoxically, however, higher education leaders' increased focus on managing the performativity and productivity of universities has turned their attention away from an internally driven discussion of the idea of the university itself.

Contemporary Perspectives on Higher Education Leadership Research

Partly as a consequence of the increased and diversified societal interest in higher education, the *research* interest in higher education leadership has been growing in recent decades, with a substantial number of articles and volumes published on the topic. Grasping the field of leadership in general, and higher education leadership in particular, is, however, a challenge. In addition to the inherent complexity of the university as an object of study, a multitude of approaches, theories, models and doctrines applied to the study of this complex phenomenon coexist. Transformative, transformational, transactional, shared, distributed, heroic, systemic, curriculum, ethical and various other concepts and theories of leadership attempt to illuminate aspects or perspectives of this elusive topic. Many scientific disciplines apart from education focus on leadership, for example, policy research, law, organisation theory, sociology, psychology and economics. Higher education leadership is currently approached from various theoretical or ideological standpoints, ranging from instrumental efficiency-oriented approaches to critical emancipatory perspectives. All of these approaches can produce valuable insights into higher education leadership but simultaneously have various limitations.

Adding to this complexity, higher education leadership is recognised as a phenomenon occurring at many levels, being exercised in various forms from the transnational policy arena down to the individual teacher level. Grasping higher education leadership as a holistic phenomenon requires the ability to handle its multilevel character in a coherent way. For instance, actor–network theory (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005), discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), refraction (Goodson & Rudd, 2012), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Europeanisation research (Maassen & Musselin, 2009), curriculum theory (Wraga & Hlebowitsh, 2001) and complexity theory (Morrison, 2006) provide examples of approaches to studying educational leadership as a multilevel or multidimensional phenomenon. What most of these approaches have in common is that leadership is portrayed as a mediating activity between different levels and actors. A hermeneutic dimension of translation is demonstrated in the element of interpretation always present in the mediating of interactions, negotiations and discourses (Mielityinen & Uljens, 2023). Our view, however, is that such approaches are not sufficiently distinct. Most previous multilevel approaches to educational leadership have generated vocabularies that are general and neutral with respect to the context or practice in question. The same conceptualisations can be applied to understand, for example, healthcare, education, private businesses and policies for public transport. The strength of these general frameworks—that is, their general validity—is simultaneously their weakness.

The various leadership theories mentioned above and the various approaches to leadership as a multilevel phenomenon have a limitation in common when it comes to the leadership of education: they all lack a specific vocabulary for the studied object, namely, education, pedagogical interaction and pedagogical leadership.

Although they provide valuable perspectives, these theories are thus silent on the key questions of how we can understand what education is and what it is for. What is the societal role of the university in a liberal democracy? Given recent geopolitical developments, this is a highly relevant question that we argue that higher education leadership research needs to be able to handle conceptually and theoretically. While organisational, political, psychological, economic and sociological perspectives, for example, are important, they are not sufficient as a foundation for studying the leadership of *education.*

In addition to not fully meeting the challenges posed by conceptualising what education is, leadership theories also lack concepts for elaborating on what constitutes pedagogical influence. Such theories often state that leadership is about influencing the perceptions and understandings of others but remain silent on what constitutes this influence. As leadership theories lack a language for pedagogical interaction, they also lack a language to talk about the object of educational leadership: teaching and studying. This volume targets these perceived shortcomings and aims to explore how educational theory could be a fruitful point of departure for understanding leadership in and of education at various levels. We argue that the NAT of education and *Bildung* (Benner, 2015, 2023) could provide points of departure that can overcome some challenges associated with current higher education leadership research. In the following section, we develop this argument by pointing out three challenges that current higher education leadership research has not been able to deal with sufficiently.

Three Conceptual Challenges for Higher Education Leadership Research

As argued elsewhere (Elo & Uljens, 2023; Tigerstedt, 2022; Tigerstedt & Uljens, 2016; Uljens, 2015; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017), current research on educational leadership struggles to handle leadership of and in education at different levels in a theoretically coherent manner. We identify at least three dimensions of these challenges.

Challenges Related to the Societal Role of Higher Education

Leadership of and in universities always occurs in relation to, and in complicated dialogues with, different stakeholders in society. From a historical and contemporary perspective, most research agrees that higher education leadership and curriculum work cannot be understood in a decontextualised fashion (McLendon, 2003). The question is thus *how*, not if, the relation between university education and other societal practices is understood by different conceptual positions on higher education

leadership, policy and teaching. The question of what universities are for is therefore central. In this complex field, we identify two broad positions on how research understands the relation between societal fields and interests, on the one hand, and education and educational leadership, on the other.

In the first position, traditional leadership research has been based on structural functionalism, partly through organisational system theories (see Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017, pp. 48–54). Education and educational leadership are seen functionally, often subordinating them to contemporary economic or political interests. These positions can thus be seen as ideologically naïve. Educational leadership research in these positions typically either focuses on uncritically reaching some predefined present-day need or fails altogether to articulate how higher education and higher education leadership relate to other societal fields. Examples of such positions are distributed leadership (e.g. Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), instructional leadership (e.g. Apkarian & Rasmussen, 2021) and team leadership (e.g. Koeslag-Kreunen et al., 2021). If higher education leadership fails to address the critical question of the role of the university in society by treating it as a closed system, leadership and leadership research can be put at the service of virtually any agenda or ideology. Positions focused on topics such as student employability, labour market expectations (e.g. Varga, 2006) or higher education rankings are examples of positions focused on meeting present-day conservative needs. From these positions, it might be natural to view the task of education rather uncritically as merely educating an employable workforce according to current and fluctuating labour market competence needs or to determine the value and quality of higher education based on international rankings or external accountability criteria. Positions such as these thus risk instrumentalising higher education and higher education leadership to serve interests external to the core tasks of higher education in a liberal democracy, namely independent academic research and the education of students to become self-determined, ethically reflecting and politically aware subjects. These positions thus, often unreflectingly, give education and educational leadership an instrumental societal role, as they are (merely) expected to accommodate the needs and demands of other societal fields and actors.

Second, normatively loaded critical and transformative research, often with a touch of political activism, often superordinates educational leadership and education to contemporary society (e.g. Giroux, 1980; McLaren, 2014; Shields, 2014). The normatively critical positions, in contrast to the ideologically naïve functionalist positions, typically view higher education (in terms of both leadership and research) as a normatively driven force for transforming society. It is typical for traditional critical education research to view education as having the potential to 'shape those who will go on to become future educators, lawmakers, and politicians' (Tolman, 2019). Normatively loaded transformative higher education and higher education leadership, in their radical form, go beyond defending education's emancipatory task as aiming at negative liberty (i.e. liberating students from represented prejudices and conventional practices; Berlin, 1969, pp. 118–172), by positioning leadership as superordinate in relation to existing society by striving for predefined future ideals representing its own interests (Uljens, 2023c). Research positions specifically targeting normatively closed understandings of equality and social justice, gender

perspectives or sustainability, rather than identifying various positions to these issues as objects for elaboration, are examples of this category. Currently, these are topics on the rise in educational leadership research (McArthur, 2010; Wang et al., 2017).

The leadership research positions described above are viewed as end positions on a spectrum since much of contemporary research is positioned somewhere in between (e.g. Mezirow, 1991). What unites both positions is that they intentionally or unintentionally risk subordinating universities and higher education leadership to either existing societal interests or normative ideals of the future. Normatively closed external interests view education as a strategic instrument for reaching something decided upon in advance instead of treating universities, research or university students as representing ends in themselves, expressed in Kantian terminology. Cultural, political, economic and religious interests and ideologies, broadly speaking, represent societal practices regulating university research and teaching that can operate as both transformative and conservative forces. In our view, higher education leadership theory needs to represent a reflective position in this matter, striving to avoid instrumentalism. In other words, higher education leadership research needs to be theoretically sensitive and reflective towards the questions of what universities are, what they are for, and what their relations to other societal practices are. The non-affirmative position that this volume builds upon places itself beyond the positions described above, providing a third position and perspective on the question of the role of the university in a democratic society.

Challenges to Approaching Multilevel Higher Education Leadership

A shift in higher education leadership practices and policies from a collegial and bureaucratic model towards a neoliberally inspired model characterised by managerialism, accountability and leaderism has been evident in many countries (Bolden et al., 2014; Crevani et al., 2015; Croucher & Lacy, 2022; O'Reilly & Reed, 2010; Välimaa et al., 2016). Parallel to, and partly because of, this move from government in old public administration to governance in new public management, multilevel, contextual and situational approaches to educational governance and leadership research have strengthened, rooted in a variety of academic disciplines (Alvesson, 2019; Wang, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). A multilevel perspective is thus necessary for understanding the management, governance and leadership of higher education (e.g. Bolden et al., 2008; Elo & Uljens, 2023; Frost et al., 2016; Uljens & Elo, 2020). In the current research field, there are, however, challenges regarding how the multilevel character of higher education leadership is conceptualised and approached.

Actor network theory (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005), discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), refraction (Goodson & Rudd, 2012) and other system-oriented

models (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979) exemplify some of the current multilevel approaches to educational leadership. These approaches use different terminologies but share common ground in that leadership is seen as a mediating activity between different levels and actors. A hermeneutic dimension of translation and interpretation is always present in mediation in the form of negotiations, re-contextualising and discourses. The weakness of many previous multilevel approaches to educational leadership, despite their obvious strengths, is that they offer universal vocabularies that are neutral towards the practice/praxis in question. For higher education, these practices are both education and the creation of new knowledge through research. The challenge with universal approaches to leadership is thus their insensitivity towards what is led and where leadership occurs, as they offer identical conceptualisations to understand the practice and policy of any societal field, such as education, private businesses, national defence or healthcare. The universal validity of these frameworks is thus simultaneously a strength and a weakness, as they lack a specific vocabulary to grasp the studied object. Insights into both research-based teaching and studying (the object) and the societal role of education (the context) are necessary for understanding higher education leadership at various levels. The specific character of educational leadership is not captured if leadership is theorised as separate from its context and object. The rich traditions of organisational or policy implementation research, and other fields of leadership expertise, provide important additional perspectives and are not to be disregarded, but their limitations as foundational points of departure need to be acknowledged.

If the context- and content-neutral universalist approaches to multilevel educational leadership described above are viewed as one end of a continuum, the other end is represented by particularistic positions, characterised by an isolated focus on specific subthemes, aspects or levels of educational leadership. The macro level is generally in focus for research on policy and policy borrowing (e.g. Capano & Pritoni, 2020; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). The organisational or meso levels are generally in focus for research on academic leadership (e.g. Floyd & Preston, 2018; van Ameijde et al., 2009), while the micro level is typically in focus for research on learning and instruction *(Didaktik),* teaching theory, instructional theory and curriculum, (e.g. Bovill & Woolmer, 2019; Stes et al., 2010). The ability to provide vocabularies that capture nuances and details of the studied objects is an advantage of these particularistic approaches. Research-informed communication and dialogue *between* research on different levels is, however, hindered by the lack of a uniting theoretical framework, resulting in 'siloed' research leaving findings from different levels and fields unconnected (Wang et al., 2017). Thus, there is an obvious risk of losing the 'big picture' of higher education leadership. In this volume, NAT is proposed as a position capable of conceptualising important aspects of the multilevel character of higher education leadership without losing the how, what and where of leadership, namely, the pedagogical dimensions, content and context.

Challenges in Understanding Pedagogical Processes

Current higher education leadership research faces a twofold challenge in the under-theorisation of pedagogical interaction. This means first that the pedagogical qualities or dimensions of leadership interaction within and between different levels are under-theorised. Second, higher education leadership research often lacks a developed idea of the core object of this leadership, namely, research-based teaching and studying.

Pedagogical Qualities of Educational Leadership

A wide variety of assignments and tasks are covered by educational leadership at any level, related to, for example, organisation, jurisprudence/law, facilities, technology, communication and economy. One of these areas of leadership is creating favourable conditions for professional learning, growth and the development of all staff (academic and professional), either directly or indirectly, as well as initiating and participating in processes of organisational and cultural change. To pedagogically and intentionally support the learning of others by direct or indirect measures is thus included in the leadership of any organisation. In this context, it is therefore important to point out the distinction between educational leadership and pedagogical leadership. With *educational* leadership, we refer to the leadership and governance of all the aspects of institutionalised education in a broad sense—legal, organisational, ethical, economic, architectural, relational, psychological, curricular, political, developmental, etc. The understanding and study of educational leadership thus concern and rely on many different fields of knowledge, reflecting the multitude of tasks and perspectives involved in leading institutionalised education.

We use the term *pedagogical* leadership to refer to deliberately influencing the Other's understanding of oneself, the world and one's relation to the world and to others. Pedagogical leadership aims to facilitate learning by transforming the perceptions, values, knowledge, understanding or actions of an Other. In this context, the Other can be understood both as a 'generalised Other' and as an individual, organisation or nation. At all activity levels, from the personal, organisational, institutional and national through the transnational, action, interaction and interpretation are carried out by and between individuals or groups of individuals. Parts of this intentional influencing may be aimed at influencing how others perceive the world or act in the world, that is, aimed at facilitating the learning processes of the others involved. It is this that we refer to as the pedagogical dimension of the interaction on and across all levels of leadership. If leading an educational organisation is divided into management (leadership of things), leadership (of people) and leading development, the pedagogical elements are especially prominent in leading people and leading development. Pedagogical leadership is, however, not irrelevant for management either, as management, for example, through deciding on an organisation's frames and procedures, sets the stage for certain kinds of learning

while possibly hindering other kinds. The leadership literature is insufficient on the topic of supporting professional learning, despite it being a decidedly central dimension of leading any expert organisation. The literature frequently states that leadership is about 'influencing' (Alvesson, 2019) or 'influencing learning', but it remains surprisingly vague what these statements mean conceptually or theoretically. Thus, there is a disturbing gap in the international literature between the key role of pedagogical activities and the core notions of educational leadership theories and models explaining pedagogical influence (Alvesson, 2019; Niesche & Gowlett, 2019; Wang, 2018).

Pedagogical leadership refers to intentional direct or mediated influence on other individuals' self-directed activities, aiming to reach beyond a present state through a learning process. Pedagogical leadership can therefore occur in any societal field or organisation where human resources are crucial for the organisation's activity. The pedagogical aspect is especially dominant in the leadership of development work of various kinds. Development, be it individual professional development or development on an organisational level, involves individuals and groups of individuals learning to think about some aspect of the world, themselves or their relationship to the world in new ways (e.g. the organisation and its mission and their individual role in the organisation). Thus, leading development work includes leading learning processes, that is, pedagogical leadership.

The Object Led—Study Programmes, Teaching, Studying, and Research

Although pedagogical leadership occurs in, and is relevant to, private businesses, healthcare organisations, governmental or municipal organisations, NGOs, etc., this volume does not focus on pedagogical leadership in all conceivable contexts. Rather, it focuses specifically on the pedagogical leadership of higher education or, in other words, the *pedagogical leadership of pedagogical praxis and research*. When the end objects of higher education leadership are understood to be research and research-based university teaching, studying and learning become central. As previously pointed out, higher education leadership theories seldom pay attention to curricular issues (the aims, contents and methods of study programmes), nor do they pay attention to teachers' educational professionalism or research. In the higher education leadership research field, themes such as curriculum leadership (Stark et al., 2002) and instructional leadership (Shaked, 2020) are rare, although they are very common in school leadership research (Hallinger, 2005). Curriculum leadership can be defined as 'a facilitating process in which the leader works with others to find common purpose' (Wiles, 2009, p. 21). In addition, curriculum leadership concerns the university's autonomy to formulate the structure, aims and contents of teaching and research. Freedom to teach, learn and research are inseparable dimensions of academic freedom with long historical roots (Robertson, 1969). Simultaneously, curricular contents are central for discussing higher education institutions' role in contemporary society, and external expectations directed towards higher education often concern curricular contents.

   Since designing the structures and curricular contents of study programmes is typically in the hands of the university, the task of leading the collaborative process that develops study programmes is an issue at all leadership levels. These processes and their outcomes are heavily influenced by the underlying understanding of what teaching, studying and learning are and how they are interrelated. A pedagogical theory related to the respective disciplinary field can provide the necessary perspective and concepts for grasping what is being led. To lead and develop a university as a haven for academic learning also includes paying attention to teachers' professional development. The lack of knowledge of teaching and learning that emerges from empirical studies of instructional leaders' practices also appears to indicate a lack of pedagogical interaction theory.

   As illustrated above, the higher education leadership research field is associated with several challenges that all revolve around the lack of a theoretically and conceptually developed position on education and pedagogy, from the relational teacher–student level to the macro question of the relation between education and other areas of society. In all cases, the questions, in one form or another, revolve around how we can understand what education and educational interaction are at various levels of leadership, from the macro societal level down to teacher–student interaction. Our point of departure is that pedagogical theory could be well suited to overcoming the challenges described above. In the following sections, we first outline the main characteristics of NAT. Following this, we return to the three challenges and discuss how NAT would allow us to deal with the presented challenges fruitfully.

An Outline of NAT

As argued above, understanding the complexity of educational leadership cannot be achieved from any single disciplinary perspective. Although several perspectives are important, it is not indifferent which perspective is in the foreground and which perspectives are used complementarily. We argue that when attempting to understand the leadership of, and in, *education,* having an educational theory as the point of departure becomes paramount. It becomes even more important when attention is focused on the pedagogical interaction in educational leadership, the *pedagogical leading of pedagogical praxis*. As argued above, the development of, and in, higher education is in itself a partially pedagogical task as it relies on the professional development of higher education staff. Additionally, the development of higher education focuses on the key question of the role of higher education in contemporary and future societies. Pedagogical theory thus becomes important for elaborating on the questions of *what, where* and *how* to develop. We propose NAT and *Bildung* (Benner, 2015, 2023; Uljens, 2023a; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017) as foundational points of departure. NAT includes an interpretation of the modern *Bildung* tradition, as developed by Rousseau, Fichte and Herbart (e.g. Benner, 2015, 2023; English, 2013; Horlacher, 2004; Uljens, 2002), but it must be related to the concept of education to

be pedagogically meaningful (Siljander et al., 2012). In this section, we lay out the fundamentals of NAT, and, in the next section, we discuss how this theoretical point of departure can overcome some of the challenges pointed out above.

We begin our portrayal of NAT by looking at how education is related to society. It is widely accepted that the role of education is to prepare students for participation in, and the future transformation of, different fields of societal practice. The first step in NAT is to identify societal practices and how they are related. While pointing out that the list is not meant to be comprehensive, Benner (2023) identifies six fields of societal practice that are defined as having historical necessity, meaning that humans have been confronted with them in one form or another throughout history. These six fields, pedagogy, politics, ethics, religion, art, and work, are defined as non-hierarchical. It is, however, justified, and even necessary, to take a critical position on the claim of the historical necessity of these fields of practice and on the categorisation of the fields themselves. Different divisions regarding which fields of societal practice are legitimate have been made (e.g. Derbolav, 1987; Fink, 1995; Gruber, 1979), and various differentiations may be legitimate in different parts of the world in different historical periods. Thus, the historical necessity of the described fields is questionable. What is important, however, is not the exact nature of the division of fields but the general point that society consists of different fields of practice and that, in a liberal democracy, these fields are in a non-hierarchical relation to each other. Thus, all fields exert influence on each other without being either totally subordinate or superordinate to each other. We can thus divide society into fields other than those identified by Benner without losing the main point made. The role of public education is to prepare the new generation for participation in, and the transformation of, different societal fields, irrespective of how we choose to divide such fields. Education thus prepares students for participation in, and the transformation of, for example, politics, economy, culture and the labour market at the same time as it is itself influenced by political decision-making, economic conjunctures, cultural movements and labour market needs. It is also worth considering that different levels in the educational system have different focuses or emphases regarding the fields of societal practice for which they principally educate students. Whereas the labour market is the particular focus of vocational education, the field of scientific research has special relevance for universities.

On these basic assumptions regarding the division of society into non-hierarchical fields of practice, Benner constructs a theory describing the pedagogical task of introducing and educating new generations to participate in, and further transform, these societal practice fields. This theory is illustrated in Fig. 1.1.

NAT consists of the regulative and constitutive principles shown in Fig. 1.1. The regulative principles to the right focus on the relations between education and other fields of society, while the constitutive principles to the left focus on pedagogical interaction. The regulative principles thus focus on explaining institutionalised education in its context, whereas the two constitutive principles focus on explaining intersubjective relational pedagogical interaction, irrespective of the context in which it occurs. The constitutive principles are thus principles that come into play

	Constitutive basic concepts of the individual aspect	Regulative basic concepts of the social aspect
A *Theories of education* (*Erziehung*)	(1) Summoning to self-activity	(3) Pedagogical transformation of societal influences and requirements
B *Theories of Bildung*	(2) Bildsamkeit (*Bildsamkeit*) as attunement (Bestimmtsein) of humans to receptive and spontaneous corporeity, freedom, historicity and linguisticality	(4) Non-hierarchical order of cultural and societal practices
	C *Theories of educational institutions and their reform*	

Fig. 1.1 Two constitutive and two regulative principles organising four basic concepts related to the theory of education and the theory of *Bildung* (Benner, 2023)

whenever and wherever pedagogical interactions take place, whereas the regulative principles as such are applicable only to institutionalised education.

The regulative principle in the right-hand bottom corner focuses on how we define the relation between education and other societal practices in a liberal democracy. This principle relates to the first challenge described above and argues that modern democratic societies are characterised by a non-hierarchical relation between societal practices. Under such conditions, different societal practices exert influence on each other while simultaneously being influenced by one another. For example, laws are decided on by politics, but, at the same time, political practice itself is regulated by law. The needs of the healthcare sector place demands on and influence, for example, a state or municipal economy, while the economy simultaneously sets limits on what healthcare can do. Education is continuously influenced by many societal practices while simultaneously preparing students for participation in and the transformation of all such practices. The political system in different national contexts influences how higher education is organised in various ways, but simultaneously this political system is dependent on how education prepares new generations for participation in the system in question. Thus, education has to accept that it is influenced and governed by politics. However, in a democratic society, education cannot renounce its right and obligation to problematise and question this political influence. In other words, the point of departure for NAT is that no societal practice in a democratic society is either completely superordinate or completely

subordinate to another. Instead, such practices coexist in a constantly ongoing deliberational relation in which relations are re-negotiated, challenged and transformed. Education thus has to recognise all the legitimate interests placed on it but cannot uncritically affirm any of them. Affirming, for example, an educational policy would entail not taking a problematising or critical stance towards that policy by making it an object for reflection but simply accepting the policy and setting about implementing it. The basic argument for NAT is that in a liberal democracy, where the task of education is to educate self-determinate subjects capable of engaging in various fields of practice and leading themselves and society towards an unknown future, an affirmative approach to education is deemed inadequate.

Following a modern view of the non-teleological development of society, universities educate for a future that is not known or knowable. As universities strive to prepare their members—whether researchers, teachers or students—to address challenges of which we are as yet unaware, they must promote an education that guides learners from existing answers towards the questions to which this knowledge serves as a response. It is through such a process that *Bildung* at universities includes learning beyond specific content to reach a principled knowledge or theoretical understanding. To reach a capacity for self-determination, students cannot uncritically be educated to affirm the existing societal order, interests or ideologies. However, it is not sufficient to educate them to affirm predefined visions of a *new* order, as in various forms of critical pedagogy. Neither approach develops students' capacity to make judgements by themselves regarding a desirable future direction, that is, to educate them to '. . . participate in discourses on what is to be preserved and what is to be changed' (Benner, 2023). The non-affirmative position thus advocates for neither the preservation of the existing order for its own sake nor the transformation towards a new order. Instead, as a theory, it points out the importance of raising, and learning to deal with, the question of where to go next.

In this respect, NAT is normative, as it stresses the importance of developing this capacity for the continuity of a democratic society. Non-affirmativity, however, should not be interpreted as relativistic or as the absence of influence. It is, rather, a question of the extent to which the Other is allowed and able to use and develop their self-determination and capacity for discerning thought and decision-making, given the surrounding prerequisites. Simply put, the aim of non-affirmative education is not primarily to instil correct answers or positive knowledge into learners. Instead, it aims to treat existing knowledge as a means to develop the capacity for independent thinking and to encourage thinking beyond established norms.

This position originally developed in the first half of the nineteenth century, moving from a pre-modern to a modern world, where the future came to be considered radically open. If the future is open, what the future brings with it depends on how we ourselves choose to act. Modern education comes with a view of the human being as somebody making history. When the position is critical to external interests, it is so for pedagogical reasons. This position accepts the right of democratic societies to establish policies, creating laws and regulations directing subjects. The question is, however, how should we deal with all this in a pedagogical descent way? If we stay true to ideals like the individuals' right to participate in

decision-making and to contribute in innovative ways to new knowledge and renewing culture, then all this requires a pedagogy of its own. For pedagogical reasons, and ultimately for societal reasons, affirmative pedagogy is not defendable. This does not mean that this position is value neutral or nihilistic, not confessing to any values. On the contrary, the position recognises democratic values and the human's right to self-directed action as fundamental. However, precisely because political democracy is acknowledged by the position, teaching about democracy cannot affirm a certain conception of democracy. The learners, younger and older, must be involved in pedagogical discussions of defendable forms of governance and democracy.

In order to be pedagogically involved in a self-transcending sense, learners' subjective experiences cannot be affirmed either. These experiences need to be recognised, though, and must be related to decently. If the learner's lifeworld were affirmed, it would not be summoned or challenged. In pedagogical settings, contrasting individual psychological knowledge structures with the logical structure of epistemic content may naturally be very challenging for the learner. The way the world is explained by established knowledge may be difficult for the learner to understand or perceive. The crucial point, however, is that the utilisation of existing knowledge in pedagogical settings does not entail affirming learners' preconceived ideas of the world but rather pushing them beyond existing ways of explaining the world. In other words, this is one way to understand the non-affirmativity of pedagogical influencing.

From the above, we should not conclude that when having used existing positive knowledge to challenge the learner, learning this content would be the ultimate idea of non-affirmative teaching. The pedagogical idea here is to help learners understand that there are other, and different, ways of perceiving the world, some of which may be deemed better by the learners themselves. This type of pedagogical action includes not only the learning of new content. It also includes developing the learners' critical thinking by comparing different ways of explaining the world. This comparative capability can be developed only in relation to some content. General capabilities are always developed as situated and content-related.

Earlier, we have pointed out that non-affirmativity has to do with not affirming external ideas, expectations and interests by getting the learner to think along these lines, and we have discussed that non-affirmative pedagogy does not affirm the learner's interests and experiences. A third aspect of non-affirmative pedagogy is that, for pedagogical reasons, it does not affirm existing knowledge either. This is especially true in higher education. A non-affirmative approach to curricular content means critically questioning its capacity to explain the world and our experiences of it. What are the premises of this knowledge? What are its implications? In who's interest, is knowledge developed? These are all questions that naturally have high significance in all research. However, in higher education curriculum work, students are led into the disciplinary tradition not only to learn these previous ways of thinking but also to learn that academic knowledge, scientific theories and conceptual models have changed over time. For these reasons, academic teaching in particular cannot pedagogically affirm the contents. In fact, higher education

explicitly nurtures the ability to transcend not only one's personal way of under-standing the world but also to surpass the collective level of established knowledge.

Benner (2023) points out that although the principle of the non-hierarchical relation of societal practices is not a pedagogical principle in itself, it is a necessary point of departure for a general theory of education, as it targets the question of what education 'is' in relation to the rest of society. Thus, it regulates educational activities, as it would not be meaningful to outline human education without an idea of the world and the future. A non-teleological view of the future and history is central to the *Bildung* theoretical position, meaning that the future is radically open and depends on what we and future generations make of it. We do not intend this principle to be read in a normative or dogmatic way, stating that relations *should* be non-hierarchical. Rather, we see the value of the first regulative principle as provid-ing an analytical lens and directing our attention to the ongoing renegotiation of the purpose of higher education and, on the one hand, the degrees of affirmativity embedded in the expectations placed on higher education and, on the other hand, the degrees of affirmativity in higher education's responses to these expectations.

The second regulative principle (right-hand top corner) relates to the second challenge of coherently handling how administration, financing, policy and other forms of leadership and governance, occurring on levels ranging from the suprana-tional down to the individual teacher, contribute to transforming societal interests into pedagogical work. The principle argues that the various aims set for education by various societal actors are transformed into educational practice (the teacher–student relation) through several levels of leadership. At each level, the goals are interpreted, transformed and renegotiated to a greater or lesser extent. This principle points towards the process of reinterpretation and asks to what extent autonomous non-affirmative action exists to determine the meaning and value of the aims and contents of educational influences on and between levels of educational leadership. The value of the second principle lies in directing our attention to the process of the translation of societal interests and the degree to which various levels of leadership maintain a space for autonomous action when influencing each other reciprocally, top down *and* bottom up.

Both constitutive principles on the left of Fig. 1.1 relate to our third critique of the lack of a theory of pedagogical interaction in models of educational leadership. Pedagogical interaction is dependent on what is known in German as the learner's *Bildsamkeit*, the first constitutive principle (bottom left-hand corner). The notions of *Bildsamkeit* (originally developed by J. F. Herbart) and *Bildung* are interpreted differently in the literature (Benner & Brüggen, 2004; Lenzen, 1997). In the current context, *Bildsamkeit* refers not to the human *ability* to learn (i.e. to human plasticity) but to the subject's never-ending dynamic, spontaneous and self-active relation to the world, in which we relate to and can transcend our current way of understanding and being in the world (Benner, 2023). If the first regulative principle (right-hand bottom corner) describes an assumption regarding the interdependent dynamics on the societal level operating in a non-hierarchical way, *Bildsamkeit* describes a similar relational assumption regarding the dynamics on the individual level. This means that the learner's experience of the world is constantly open to transformation. The

content of the individual's experience emanates from the world and is thus not produced by the individual in a solipsistic sense. Simultaneously, the world as experienced is always dependent on the learners and their interpretations. As the learners fundamentally represent an open relation to the world, they are susceptible to influence from the surrounding world but are not determined by these influences. Similarly, the world as experienced is susceptible to influence from the learners but is certainly not determined only by the learners' activity. Metaphorically expressed, the world makes resistance. Phenomenologically, we may talk about a noetico-noematic correlation or how the act and content of consciousness co-exist (Greasley & Ashworth, 2007; Gurwitsch, 2020). It is this open relation between the learner and the world that, on the one hand, makes pedagogical influence *possible* but, on the other, *limits* the extent of possible pedagogical influence.

The second constitutive principle (top left-hand corner) defines a pedagogical intervention as a summons to self-activity. It rests on the assumption that the Other is already a self-active individual, capable of directing their attention and activities autonomously. A pedagogical intervention is an invitation or provocation to this self-active Other to direct their attention in a specific direction in order to engage in a self-transcending activity that carries the potential of resulting in intended changes through a process of learning. This means that a pedagogical intervention can be seen as an interruption in the open and dynamic relationship between the Other and the world. The summoner is unable to directly transfer ideas, knowledge, values and competencies to the Other and does not possess coercive power over the Other's way of perceiving themselves and the world due to constitutive subjective freedom. Pedagogical leadership, conceptualised as a pedagogical summons, thus entails directing an Other's self-activity with the aim of transcending their current state through a process of self-directed transformation. All actors are both potential objects and initiators of pedagogical summoning, meaning that pedagogical leadership is not dependent on any formal leader position.

Learning emanates from the learner's own activities, which, in turn, are influenced by pedagogical leadership summons. Learning is thus not a direct linear consequence of the intentions or actions of the summoner; rather, it is something that *may* occur as a consequence of the learner's own actions. Learning thus results from the interplay between the context, the summons, the learner and the learner's interpretations. Both summoning and *Bildsamkeit as learner's self-activity* thus come across as relational concepts: summoning assumes *Bildsamkeit*, which always points to experiencing influences. How the subject develops is therefore dependent on, but not determined by, pedagogical intervention.

All actors in higher education leadership stand in an open relation to the world, meaning that they are in constant transformation as opposed to being stable entities. A pedagogical intervention, defined as the summoning of self-activity through pedagogical leadership or teaching, is thus an act of directing the Other's attention and thereby self-activity in a certain direction, with the ambition of inducing activities that may result in learning. In the context of teaching, the process can be described as a teaching–studying–learning process (Uljens, 1997). Teaching and studying are concepts referring to human intentional activity, while learning is not

something we do, but something that may happen to us as a result of studying. Teaching therefore only facilitates studying activity, as the teacher and student intersubjectively construct a situational shared experience and understanding within which the teacher may direct the student's attention to new forms of self-activity (Uljens & Kullenberg, 2021). In other words, it is the activity of intentional *studying* that may lead to learning, whereas teaching is limited to aiming at an influence on the study activity. Teaching is by no means necessary for learning; humans learn continuously and unintentionally. We are also highly capable of engaging in studying activities on our own initiative without being summoned by teaching. When transferred to a leadership context, the relations between teaching, studying and learning put the roles of the leader and the co-worker into perspective. When the aim of leadership is to influence co-workers' perceptions, understandings, knowledge or competencies, thereby possibly influencing future actions and development, the leader's possibilities of exerting direct influence on co-workers and achieving some predefined results are non-existent. A leader simply cannot directly influence a co-worker's perceptions, values, etc., or how they may act. The leader's role encompasses summoning, inviting and creating favourable conditions. However, it is the co-worker's engagement in these activities, when summoned, that ultimately brings about a transformation in how the co-worker perceives the world and themselves. This line of reasoning puts pedagogical interaction at the centre of change- and development-oriented leadership, where the focus is on influencing how co-workers and entire organisations understand and think about themselves, the world and their place in the world.

We suggest that the non-affirmative approach makes use of the concept of recognition, originally developed by Fichte and Hegel (Williams, 1992) and later elaborated on by, for example, Charles Taylor (1989) and Axel Honneth (1995). While we see the concept of recognition primarily as an analytical category, we do not use it to denote specific pedagogical acts. Rather, recognition is seen as a prerequisite for pedagogical interaction. Recognition points to the fact that when somebody recognises someone or something, they are always recognised *as* something or *as* someone. Here, we differ between the four aspects of recognition. First, the notion points to the importance of each recognising the other as an *anthropologically indetermined subject*. This is about recognising an *a priori potentiality* featuring humans. Second, in addition to recognising the individual as indetermined, practical pedagogy needs to pay due respect to the experientially established life realities of the other. Through recognition of the Other, the other's orientation and *life reality or lifeworld* becomes a reference point for pedagogical summoning, but recognition is still not equated with the pedagogical act. In most social interactions, paying due respect to each other is crucial. Third, in educational settings, recognition also refers to acknowledging the individual's *a posteriori or experiential possibility* to develop into a subject able to act out of free will. In other words, there lies a difference between recognising human beings as fundamentally indetermined beings, their a priori freedom and their a posteriori possibility. Otherwise, without the first, pedagogical influence would not be possible; without the second, pedagogical influencing would be meaningless. Differently expressed, in this approach, the

individual is recognised, first, as an *already* self-active subject. To already be self-active as a human being does not necessarily mean to act out of reflected will and insight but can mean to act following conventions and tradition. When humans act conventionally, it is reasonable to say that they are self-active, but conventional activity is not what is meant by *free* self-activity. This human being, originally self-active, may be summoned to 'self-transcending self-activity'. This summoning aims at supporting the individual to become a subject capable of acting out of reflected will or acting as 'free self-activity'. This argumentation draws ultimately on Fichte's critique of Kant's theory of how human beings become aware of themselves as free beings. We will return to this later on in this chapter.

The fourth and final meaning of recognition refers to the individual being summoned, the learner, who may or may not recognise the summoner and the summons directed at them. On the learner's part, recognising pedagogical summons is crucial. Recognising the summons means that the individual summoned accepts the summoning act directed at them as legitimate. A summoning act, irrespective of it, is in the form of an invitation of a provocation; it is still an act that takes the liberty to intervene in the Other's relation to themselves, other individuals or the world. Consequently, the moral aspect of this summoning act may not be overlooked. For this reason, summoning needs to be tactful. The concept of recognition helps us direct our attention towards questions such as *what universities are recognised as* or what an individual academic or student is recognised as.

The Potential of NAT for Higher Education Leadership

Having outlined the foundations of NAT, we proceed by spelling out how NAT could be used to productively overcome the three challenges pointed out at the beginning of this chapter.

What Is the Role of Higher Education in a Liberal Democracy?

The fundamental freedom in research, teaching and studying that characterises universities in the Western tradition, often referred to as the Humboldtian model of higher education, requires that the creation of new knowledge through research, and the teaching of this knowledge must not be externally determined by religious, political or economic powers and authority. This view relates education constitutively to the societal role of an institution. Even though this ideal of independent university research and teaching is proclaimed and accepted on a rhetorical level, for example, by the Bologna Declaration of 1988—the 'Magna Carta of European universities'—the 'market state' has become a dominant model since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, resulting in a development bringing together liberal and vocational forms of higher education (Anderson, 2006).

The discourse around the knowledge-based society requires research and teaching to be economically relevant, thus influencing the governance, leadership, and financing of higher education. Currently, a multitude of societal voices want to have a say in defining the goals and mission of universities. Being able to deal with the question of universities' relation to other societal practices—that is, what a university is and what it is for in contemporary society—thus becomes a necessary point of departure for higher education leadership theory.

An analytical–descriptive lens is necessary to clarify how NAT deals with education's relation to other societal practices. The question in focus is to what extent education is subordinate *and* superordinate to other societal practices. Universities can seldom, if ever, stand above the interests of other societal actors and act independently in absolute autonomy. It is, however, equally rare that universities are completely determined by or subordinate to religious, economic or political interests. Different societal practices, of which higher education is one, must therefore *recognise* the interests of each other but are seldom forced to comprehensively *affirm* them. Educational institutions and educational actors thus typically have relative autonomy, as they are not operating totally without either boundaries or outside influence, nor are they in total subordination to these influences (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017). NAT provides a non-hierarchical and non-linear view, offering a theoretical construct for empirical analysis of the extent to which societal actors with a superior position in relation to other societal practices recognise the relative autonomy of these action levels. If universities are strictly governed by external interests, or if there is a strict top-down hierarchy within them, leadership forces actors to affirm external or internal interests. The consequence of universities not only recognising but also affirming external interests is that education institutions subordinate themselves in relation to these and become instrumental. In the context of this volume, the non-affirmative concept is interesting as an analytical concept. If applied to the pedagogical interaction that takes place within educational leadership, it directs our attention to the question of the extent to which different acts of leadership, understood as pedagogical summons, expect or require an affirmative response. For example, national educational policies can be more or less affirmative; that is, they allow more or less space for action and decision-making at lower levels of educational leadership. Thus, affirmative policies come with an expectation that they will be implemented immediately, while more non-affirmative policies leave room for action and decision-making on the meso and micro levels. Similarly, leadership initiatives within an organisation can either respect and value the decision-making ability of lower levels (non-affirmative) or adopt a more top-down affirmative approach requiring lower levels to adhere to, for example, centrally defined visions or strategies. As our introduction implies, many of the developments in higher education in recent decades point towards an increase in affirmative management and leadership practices, such as tighter external accountability and policy steering, as well as more managerial internal leadership practices.

The argumentation above applies to empirical studies regarding how and to what extent various interests and actors require affirmative action from others. NAT itself takes a critical position in this question, arguing in favour of recognising the interests

that are external or superior to each operational level but reminding us of the importance of maintaining a capacity and space for autonomous action, recommending actors not to uncritically affirm external interests. Supporting non-affirmative educational leadership and teaching is motivated by the societal tasks of universities described previously. Affirmative leadership and pedagogy may fall short in achieving universities' aim of promoting the development of critical, reflective and self-determining citizens capable of contributing to existing practices and developing new ones. The aim of education in general, and higher education in particular, is to educate generations capable of guiding themselves and society towards an unknown future, with the capacity to solve previously unencountered problems and challenges. The aim for education should thus be set far in the future and have a long 'best-before date'. Educational policy and practice solely focused on affirming *present-day* social orders, societal challenges and external interests are thus obviously not ideal for reaching this aim. The same applies to policies and practices that affirm normatively closed perceptions of social transformation. Both fall short since they are preoccupied with providing the correct answers to predefined questions, thus affirming predefined positions and claims to the validity of knowledge. Given that the future is radically open, a focus on dealing with the *questions* that current knowledge is thought to answer, keeping in mind that future answers might differ from contemporary ones, holds greater potential to develop a capacity for self-determined moral action. This approach would entail making present-day claims for the validity of both knowledge and the questions that knowledge is thought to answer objects for critical scrutiny—that is, recognising them without affirming. Education aimed at the future cannot uncritically affirm present-day expectations.

As described initially, the questions of what higher education is and what it is for are at the forefront of the debate, and many societal actors would like a say in this matter. It is somewhat paradoxical that while higher education is currently called upon to educate innovative, 'out-of-the-box' thinkers, this call is often accompanied by leadership and governance practices that are, metaphorically speaking, forcing higher education *into* a box by requiring it to affirm, for example, expectations of immediate utility or targeted funding based on local or national present-day needs. NAT can provide a language with which to approach this complicated relationship. Striking a balance between providing education and research with relevance for present-day society and challenges and simultaneously having the autonomy to push the boundaries of research into the unknown by engaging in research with no immediate utility or value that, however, *might* prove fruitful in the future is a key question for higher education leadership. An excessive focus on short-term performance or economic or political utility can prove detrimental to higher education's capacity to provide answers to the key questions of the future, which, by definition, are still unknown to us. We have to accept a certain amount of '(re)searching in the dark', during which we *might* end up finding something. A telling present-day example of this is the story of Katalin Karikó's work on mRNA, which, after decades of persistent struggle and having funding applications turned down, ended up 'saving the world' from Covid-19. Luckily for humanity, a focus on the immediate

applicability of research results did not put an early end to Karikó's decades-long research process. This kind of 'inefficient' research accepts that the future is unknown and open and will present us with new and unknown questions, challenges and solutions. However, it does not fit into the paradigm of efficiency and output focus. Simultaneously, an 'ivory tower' approach to research ignoring present-day questions of societal relevance altogether is not beneficial for research, humanity or the future either. It is therefore essential to strike a balance between recognising the current expectations placed on higher education, maintaining an autonomy to not uncritically affirm all such expectations and a capacity to pursue lines of enquiry in spite of the scepticism of peers, politics and funders.

The question of striking a balance between focusing on present-day society and simultaneously heading towards an unknown future is as important for teaching in higher education as it is for research. NAT maintains that many of the previous answers advanced to explain the relationship between society and education have been problematic. On the one hand, socialisation-focused approaches conclude that the role of education is to prepare new generations for life in existing society, that is, to reproduce society in a normative way. We can call this a reproduction-oriented approach. Other approaches have concluded that present-day society is unjust or flawed in different ways and that the role of education is to transform it towards a better future. These transformation-oriented approaches have, however, generally already defined what the problems are and what this ideal future looks like and are thus equally normative. Transformation-oriented approaches are often critical–emancipatory in nature but can equally take forms such as entrepreneurship education or normatively closed conceptions of education for sustainability or social justice. What they all have in common is that future ideals are already defined, and the role of education is merely to achieve them. In this respect, NAT proposes a third alternative, maintaining that the role of education is to lead the new generation to grasp and understand present-day society, but in a constructively critical manner, enabling it to develop new answers to existing questions or identify entirely new questions in the future. This position builds on a non-affirmative approach, recognising present-day society in all its complexity and with its multitude of perspectives while also not uncritically affirming any particular position or perspective. Education is thus not a matter of delivering the right answers to predefined questions; rather, it is a matter of learning to live with the constant 'question' of the open future. The question of the relationship between society and education is especially relevant for higher education, as the role of both higher education teaching and higher education research is to develop a capacity to solve the major, but still unknown, challenges that the future holds. It would be paradoxical to try to achieve this through governance practices that, to an excessive extent, force higher education to focus on and affirm present-day short-sighted needs.

The position offered by NAT thus provides an analytical construct for relating higher education to other societal practices beyond the functionalist and transformation-oriented positions. It offers an analytical perspective that emphasises that higher education institutions are expected to recognise the legitimate aspirations and interests of different stakeholders but points out that these aspirations cannot be affirmed without

serious consideration. At different levels of leadership, recognition without affirmation creates a space for joint, collaborative reflection and the repositioning of activities undertaken by individuals and organisations. Non-affirmative analytics questions to what extent educational leadership recognises and considers the interests of various societal fields and actors, such as politics, the labour market and science, without affirming these. Thus, it aims to strike a balance that avoids instrumentalisation, ensuring the preservation of higher education's relative autonomy in both research and teaching. Safeguarding educational institutions' autonomy in liberal economies and political democracies is crucial, as education has an emancipatory task aiming at developing students' professional, personal and societal self-determination. This educational task entails supporting students in developing their ability for critical and analytical reflection by problematising existing theoretical answers to various dilemmas. Existing knowledge thus offers itself as a necessary medium through which learners can develop their reflective abilities.

How Can We Handle the Many Layers of Pedagogical Leadership Coherently?

The second challenge with research in educational leadership pointed out is related to its capacity to deal with educational leadership as a multilevel phenomenon in a coherent way. Many contemporary approaches appear either to run the risk of providing universal languages capable of covering several levels of any societal practice, thereby making the specific nature of education invisible, or to generate a particular vocabulary limited to certain levels or aspects in isolation, thereby missing the big picture. We have argued for the need for a third position capable of providing a vocabulary that (a) is relevant for the leadership of educational institutions and (b) addresses the pedagogical character of leadership and governance initiatives across various levels of higher education leadership. We illustrate this dialogue in Fig. 1.2.

   Figure 1.2 elaborates on the second regulative principle of NAT and attempts to visualise the systemic structure of the multilevel leadership of universities. It is in the dynamics of this structure that the aims and expectations directed at universities are transformed into pedagogical practice and research. The formal organisational hierarchy of higher education leadership, as illustrated in Fig. 1.2, operates in the symbiotic tension between the scientific community to the left and various external stakeholders to the right; at the same time, however, universities contribute to the self-construction of these stakeholders. Higher education leadership can be seen as an organisational hierarchy and a rhizomatic network simultaneously (Välimaa et al., 2016). Individual actors are located at specific organisational levels arranged in a hierarchy while simultaneously interacting with actors at other levels in dynamic and changing networks. It is thus important to differentiate between the hierarchical organisational structure on the one hand and the dynamic and open processes of
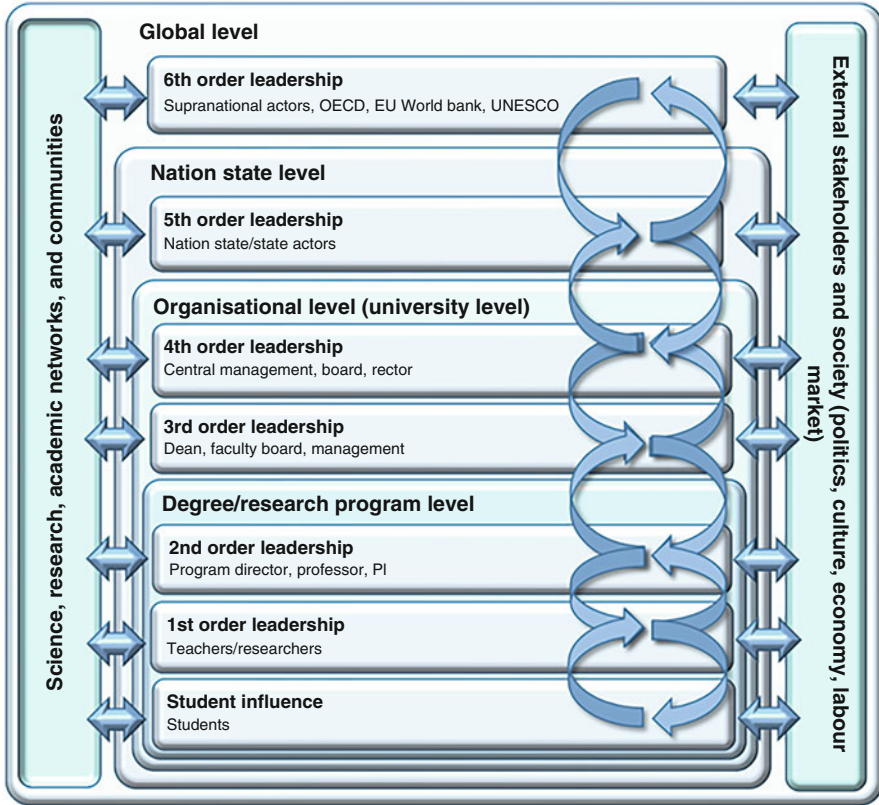
Fig. 1.2 Higher education curriculum leadership as a multilevel and multi-actor phenomenon (Elo & Uljens, 2023)

interaction that occur within the networks within this structure on the other. Any actor can participate in the leadership process that emerges in these networks. The circular arrows represent the reciprocal influences between actors on different organisational levels. NAT argues that understanding the pedagogical dimensions of higher education leadership cannot be limited to focusing on either individuals in isolation or on the activities of any particular group in an entitising sense, thereby bringing a system perspective to the forefront. To grasp higher education leadership, it is necessary to see it as part of a larger dynamic process of creating direction collaboratively, spanning several leadership levels and including a multitude of actors. For example, when a study focuses on pedagogical leadership between two individuals or within a group, this interaction cannot be meaningfully understood in isolation from the pre-existing larger context, while this larger context is simultaneously discursively co-constructed by micro-processes (Crevani et al., 2010).

Within a multilevel system, different kinds of mechanisms influence the practices of universities simultaneously. Economic aspects related to both public and private

funding of universities frame university teaching and research, and the principles for the external and internal allocation of funds and the expectations of productivity that follow are negotiated within and between the different levels of leadership. The ways in which these negotiations can materialise include internal models for allocating funds. Similarly, educational policies on or societal expectations of curricular contents are recognised, interpreted and acted upon within the networks spread out over the organisational levels. Strategic leadership within the university, concerning topics such as staffing policies, campus development, educational offerings and research profiling, occurs in dialogue across levels. Educational leadership thus covers a wide range of tasks, including organisation, law, economy, communication and distribution of work. Leading institutionalised education consequently requires knowledge from many scientific disciplines.

One of the dimensions of leadership is to create conditions for the learning of others. This happens both directly and indirectly, and educational theory provides us with a language capable of conceptualising this pedagogical dimension. From the perspective of pedagogical leadership, a formal leader or actor, or, more broadly, a level of leadership, has to recognise summons from many different levels, actors and directions. These initiatives and influences may point in different directions, be at least partly contradictory, and be driven by different interests. It is not possible to affirm all of them. Instead, the actor has to make a judgement of a feasible and appropriate course of action given the historical and cultural context at hand. Different organisational levels of educational leadership are thus not entirely sub- or superordinate to each other but maintain a certain capacity and space for autonomous action, as they reciprocally influence each other in complex, rhizomatic webs of summons. In the case of the total affirmation of external influences, leadership is reduced to the instrumental implementation of interests external to the pedagogical situation.

Leadership, in general, often includes mediation between levels or actors, as do the pedagogical dimensions of leadership. The recognition of the life realities, values and aims of the other is the starting point for summoning the other to self-activity, challenging the Other to transcend the current state by not affirming these realities, values or aims. Complete affirmation of the Other would entail uncritically accepting all aspects of the latter's understanding of the world and themselves and rendering pedagogical influence impossible. Pedagogical leadership comes across as a process of interpretative mediation involving the recognition of external influences without affirming them, as well as recognising but not affirming the Other. In a pedagogical leadership process, actors control certain degrees of freedom to deliberately engage others when co-constructing a mediational space whereby Others are invited to self-transcending activity. As an analytical concept, affirmation is a continuum of different degrees and forms of affirmation rather than a binary question of yes or no. Non-affirmative summoning provides a tool to analyse the ways in and extent to which pedagogical actors, leaders or institutions affirm either vertical or horizontal interests in their collaboratively mediating leadership activity in a networked multilevel system. Additionally, it provides a tool for analysing the extent to

which pedagogical summons are affirmative in character—that is, the extent to which they require an affirmative response.

We want to stress that identifying different organisational levels of higher education leadership does not mean that such levels are in a strict hierarchical relation to one another or always appear, as in Fig. 1.2. On the contrary, NAT points out that different levels of leadership are neither totally sub- nor superordinate to each other but exist in reciprocally influencing relations. Each level contributes to higher education leadership in particular ways and can only be understood in relation to the other levels. Furthermore, as higher education leadership can be understood as an organisational hierarchy and a rhizomatic network simultaneously (Kandiko & Blackmore, 2012; Välimaa et al., 2016), various actors are situated in a hierarchical organisational structure but act in dynamic networks where horizontal or vertical relations between them are reciprocal, sometimes temporary and not easily predictable. Viewing leadership from an individual actor's perspective would reveal a network of summons and recognition with multiple actors on other levels and elements in the framework, with the actor having the agency to interpret, shape and alter this network. While Fig. 1.2 serves as a valuable tool for rendering various levels and elements visible, it also carries the potential drawback of oversimplifying the complexity inherent in the phenomenon.

Another reservation regarding Fig. 1.2 is that it does not capture the structural complexity of higher education institutions or their leadership. Within the university, the division into organisational layers such as faculty, department, degree programmes, etc., can vary, and the different layers of management within a unit—for example, a faculty—can vary largely. Different variations of university–business partnerships, centres of excellence, cross-disciplinary centres and inter-university centres are common and increase complexity (Maassen, 2017). On a national level, different systems can have layers of leadership or nationally crucial actors not depicted in the model (e.g. Välimaa & Nokkala, 2014). For example, Nordic countries are characterised by a relatively strong nation-state, with matters such as policy formulation and financing mechanisms decided nationally. The federal government/nation-state level has less influence in the United States and Germany, while the state/*Länder* level has more. In certain national contexts, the fifth order of leadership could thus be divided into further levels. Another weakness of Fig. 1.2 is that it can be seen to emphasise the structural similarities between national higher education systems and thereby unintentionally lead us to overlook the differences in the social dynamics between such systems. The fact that national higher education systems are structurally similar does not mean that they function in the same ways (Välimaa & Nokkala, 2014). The language of NAT could be a tool to examine these differences in dynamics between higher education systems.

What Is Pedagogical Interaction?

The focus of the third challenge identified is that pedagogical influence is under-theorised in research on leadership, educational leadership and pedagogical leader-ship, although this research often claims that leadership is about influencing people or influencing learning. Educational leadership research seldom elaborates on how we can conceptualise the pedagogical relation and pedagogical influence, regardless of whether it occurs in or between levels of leadership or as a pedagogical influence in higher education teaching. The two constitutive principles of NAT provide us with a language to address pedagogical leadership influence, regardless of context.

NAT draws on philosophical anthropology as developed within the German and Nordic traditions of *Bildung,* elaborating on assumptions of what a human being is. The complex concept of *Bildung* originally emphasised that the human being is not determined by anything innate or by external conditions, thus leaving a premodern, teleological view of the subject and the world. In this tradition, the core concept of *Bildsamkeit* points out that existing in the world involves a subject–world relationship. This relationship does not solely pertain to the external object or the isolated experiential dimension within the subject. Instead, it refers to the world as actively experienced and shaped through meaning-making activity. The process operates in both directions: while the subject embraces culture in this process, coming to share it with others, the individual simultaneously develops their unique identity or personality. Thus, the processes of personalisation (developing a unique identity) and socialisation (learning to share a culture with others) are interrelated. When individuals make culture their own, they make it *their* own, interpreting and relating to it in unique ways. The *Bildung* tradition analyses human growth and learning in terms of experiential cultural contents rather than through psychological processes, such as cognitivist learning theory, but still accepts that education may develop general capabilities, such as critical thinking or ethical responsibility.

The roots of *Bildung* are found in J. G. Fichte's (1796/1992) critique of Kantian transcendental idealism. A key question in this critique is how humans develop an idea of themselves as acting based on their own, reflected will. In other words, how do we come to develop an awareness of ourselves as free? Fichte was critical about Kant's argument that a human being's awareness of themselves as free and indetermined is made possible by their *a priori* awareness of moral principles in the form of the categorical imperative as well as in terms of innate structuring categories such as time and space. This original awareness of moral principles, in addition to the individual's reflective capacity, allowed them to reflect on the morality of their actions. Fichte's argument asserts that although humans are born indetermined, their awareness of themselves as culturally free arises from being recognised and treated as such by the empirical Other. In other words, our realization of freedom unfolds through being summoned to active engagement with the world. According to Dietrich Benner, the modern paradox of education lies in treating the Other as if they *already would be* somebody or something that they *may become* as a result of their own activity in the relational pedagogical process. This relational

tradition of thought, which emphasises the importance of the empirical other, began with Fichte and was later developed by Hegel, Vygotsky, Mead, Dewey, Habermas, Honneth and Taylor. Currently, it typically manifests itself in non-entitative, processual approaches to leadership research and communication, although this is not always made visible. Following the non-affirmative position, being and becoming human reflects a relational social philosophy that is processual in nature, where being is constantly about becoming. Bildung is a life-long, never-ending process. The individual continuously establishes and reforms their relation to others, the world and themselves, and the direction or end of human activity is not determined by any immanent sources. Rather, we see the activity of 'determining direction', often considered central in leadership theory, as an inherent dimension of the process of *Bildung*, namely, to live while keeping open the question of which direction to choose. The question of direction requires permanent engagement and position-taking, assuming that the future is not predefined, but something that follows from indetermined human action.

Pedagogical activity builds upon the recognition of the Other within a cultural space that is already shared. Within this space, a self-active Other is summoned to redirect their attention by engaging in activities that may lead to their transcending their current way of understanding some aspect of the world, themselves or their relation to the world. In other words, in this shared process, pedagogical leadership initiates conditions for learning. NAT emphasises that pedagogical influence is not linear but mediated through the activities of the summoned. It is not the summons in itself that leads to learning; instead, it is the activities of the summoned that were initiated by the summons that may result in learning and a change of perspective.

NAT accepts that leadership theories are not devoid of values. The normative dimension manifests itself in NAT defending educational ideals to support the development of a mature, critically reflecting, self-determinate citizen and subject in an autonomous nation-state able to actively collaborate and contribute to the non-determined development of society in a globalised world. This educational ideal is clarified by the distinction between negative and positive liberty (Berlin, 1969, pp. 118–172). Negative liberty refers to freedom from external restraints or limitations, whereas positive liberty refers to the capacity for or possibilities of self-determination and practising one's intentions in relation to others' interests. For example, formally recognising civil rights (negative liberty) does not guarantee that an individual has the genuine capacity to execute these rights productively. For this to be possible, positive liberty is necessary: the citizen must be recognised as having the right to be offered the cultural tools to act in one's own interests as related to others' interests. Education is a central part of reaching this capacity for self-determination in practice.

The processual character of pedagogical leadership is visible in three ways. First, from a *Bildung* theoretical perspective, each subject is in a lifelong, open processual relation to the world. As the individual is constantly 'in the making', pedagogical leadership intervenes in this continuous process, providing input for change and

development without determining the outcomes. Second, the relation in pedagogical leadership itself is an open, processual relation, being both symmetrical and asymmetrical with respect to roles and experiences. The result of a pedagogical summons evolves in the interplay between the summoner, the summoned and the context and is therefore not knowable beforehand. The third perspective on the processual character of pedagogical leadership lies in the processual nature of the development of organisational culture. Directing others' self-activity in a way that results in learning is an act of 'shaping movement and courses of action', which is at the core of leadership work (Crevani, 2018, p. 89), regardless of whether this occurs on an interpersonal or organisational level. Multilevel non-affirmative pedagogical leadership, seen as a socially shared phenomenon, is therefore in line with a process ontology of leadership. This approach to pedagogical leadership in higher education portrays it as a processually evolving multilevel and multi-actor phenomenon that is not strictly tied to the traditional positions of leader and follower or academic and professional staff. Pedagogical leadership rooted in the *Bildung* tradition reminds us of what Crevani (2018) describes as a processual production of direction in various forms of relations and interactions evolving over time, as well as over organisational space. The direction of the development is not predetermined but shaped in the interplay of summons between actors.

Our argument is that being able to conceptualise pedagogical influence has three advantages. First, it enables us to conceptualise one of the core activities in higher education, namely teaching, and thus conceptualise one of the core objects of higher education leadership. We argue that academics and professional staff engaged in higher education leadership are more capable and successful if they can theoretically conceptualise the work carried out within the organisation—in this case, teaching. To lead pedagogical praxis pedagogically is a very specific type of leadership. If a university wants to educate self-determinate subjects capable of not only understanding the questions that present-day knowledge answers but also to have the capacity to develop new answers or altogether new questions in an open future, certain requirements are made of university teaching. Reaching such a capacity requires the acquisition of a deep and nuanced understanding of various phenomena. Superficial or normatively closed understandings of democracy, sustainability, economy, gender, etc., are simply not sufficient to reach a critical awareness of such multifaceted topics. Having a critical capacity is not a matter of having opinions or ideologies but a question of reflective awareness and deep knowledge. Reaching such awareness includes having one's own preconceptions questioned and put up for discussion. Education thus includes not only not affirming external ideologies or expectations but also not affirming students' preconceptions. Non-affirmative teaching is thus based on recognising that students have preconceptions but taking the liberty of questioning these in a constructive manner.

Second, the ability to conceptualise pedagogical leadership influence provides us with a language for understanding the leadership influence that occurs within and between actors at all levels in higher education. NAT thus provides us with a language to talk about pedagogical leadership influence regardless of level or context. Adopting NAT as an approach to pedagogical leadership in higher

education provides a language and framework for studying pedagogical leadership interaction as a continuous process of creating direction. NAT consequently provides a theoretical foundation to talk about pedagogical leadership influence, which has rarely been theorised in research to date. The non-affirmative concept focuses our attention on what degrees of freedom are created in pedagogical summons, irrespective of the organisational level: local, national or global.

Third, the development of organisations' operative culture is increasingly related to and in focus of leadership and management. Leadership of such developmental processes is pedagogical in nature, as it aims at influencing and developing organisational culture through the learning processes of groups of individuals. Developmental leadership thus has a pedagogical element at its core and is consequently an object for educational theory to study. We believe the above argumentation provides strong reasons to approach educational leadership, especially its pedagogical dimensions, by utilising a theory of education. We argue that a non-affirmative approach can overcome some of the challenges identified and avoid the typical dilemmas of both functional–reproductive and ideological–transformative approaches to education.

An Empirical Research Perspective on NAT

The Primacy of the Ontological Perspective

Often, educational research or research on education is divided into three main directions, representing different ideas about what kind of knowledge this research is looking for. The directions are positivism, hermeneutics and critical theory. Related to the type of knowledge, appropriate methods for reaching such knowledge are then argued for. Each is represented by a larger number of sub-categories. From the perspective of non-affirmative education theory, it is a fundamental mistake to ground the categorisation of education research in such epistemological positions. Taking the point of departure from epistemology, the nature of the object of research itself remains invisible or is somehow deduced from these positions. In contrast, the non-affirmative position maintains the primacy of *ontological* reasoning as the point of departure for empirical research. Empirical education research must start from some idea of the object studied, instead of general ideas about the nature of scientific knowledge.

Is then all reasoning about epistemology obsolete in empirical non-affirmative education research? By no means. NAT broadly positions itself between the hermeneutical human science tradition going back to Schleiermacher and Dilthey and the critical tradition ultimately drawing on the Hegelian tradition. Following the hermeneutical line of thought, NAT argues that human cultural growth is constitutively related to language. It is by language that we may transcend our unique subjective experiences of the world. Conceptual knowledge having a central role in all education is unthinkable without language. Language operates not only as a mediating tool

but also contributes to constituting the meaning of our experiences themselves (Mielityinen & Uljens, 2023). Here, hermeneutics represents a position in philosophical anthropology and a point of departure for social theory in general. In this light, hermeneutics says something essential about what it means to *be* a human being (Kögler, 2006). This position defends the idea that reaching linguistically constituted intersubjectivity—that we share a common language—is crucial for the constitution of oneself as a unique individual. The idea of education as summoning the Other to free self-activity is then largely an undertaking in the medium of language. However, as in the case of epistemology, non-affirmative education theory argues that teaching and education cannot be reduced to or explained by communication theory or language (Uljens & Kullenberg, 2021).

In addition to viewing language as a constitutive dimension of human existence without reducing education to language, hermeneutics is crucial in the non-affirmative approach because of the simple fact that pedagogical work includes interpreting learners, their actions and communication, their hopes and fears, and their life-world and identity in order to find out the best ways to support her growth. The pedagogue acts in the same manner in relation to the context. How should various kinds of external interests, recommendations, expectations and regulations be interpreted? Which are defendable ways to act pedagogically, given the situation and context? In discursive practices, educational leaders often act as mediators between followers and the context. Leadership often means having a privileged position regarding access to information, insights or the like. Interpretation here refers to decision-making as balancing interpretative acts aiming at optimising pedagogical action. When we have emphasised the multi-level character of educational leadership, this means that hermeneutic interpretation is constitutive for activities on all educational leadership levels and across these levels. To conclude, while interpretation is a crucial feature of educational leadership as summoning to free self-activity, the unique character of pedagogical acting, whether in the form of educational leadership or teaching, cannot be derived from interpretation theory or hermeneutics.

A core idea in non-affirmative education theory is to view the attainment of self-determination and autonomy as a core task of any institutional education system, from schools up to universities. Self-determination and autonomy mean different things at different levels, but from a general perspective, Western political democracies, liberal economies and plural societies require citizens able to act out of reflected knowledge and will, in relation to others' will. This is what the notion of non-affirmative education refers to. It is about recognising individuals' and societies' interests but maintaining the right not to affirm these interests. Only by being allowed such a mediating pedagogical problematisation of external interests, including problematisation of the other's experiences and interests, pedagogical activity is capable of offering the summoned possibilities for self-transcendence with the help of critical treatment of cultural practices and knowledge. In this respect, NAT is a critical theory. It acknowledges the political, ethical and normative tasks of education, thereby holding emancipation as a foundation value.

These features gesture towards how NAT connects to critical theory. However, this type of critical education theory may also be described as functional given that an open society cannot sustain itself without such a pedagogy. The position is functional, given political democracy, liberal economy and a culturally plural society. Here, 'functional' is not used in an instrumental sense. Rather, functional refers to coherence. NAT is consistent with the societal characteristics mentioned. In this sense, non-affirmative education theory gives priority to the ontological question.

Exemplifying Four Empirical Research Topics

From the above, we have seen that in approaching empirical research, NAT defends a certain idea of human growth, and how to promote such growth, as its point of departure. This means giving priority to the ontological question over the epistemological one. However, this is not to suggest that the ontological perspective substitutes the epistemological perspective. While both are necessary, the contributions from empirical research must be based solely on a theory of the object in question, not its epistemology.

Our point is that empirically studying an object requires some kind of theory about the object studied. If we intend to study education but lack a theory of education, we are, in fact, conceptually blind. We very well understand the double-edged sword in play when talking about initial concepts and theory in empirical research: without concepts, we risk seeing nothing; with concepts, we risk seeing nothing but what our concepts allow us to see. The non-affirmative approach denies simple empiricism as reflected, for example, in grounded theory-like approaches. Such an inductive approach reflects naïve realism, according to which the world exists out there, just waiting to be uncovered. Similarly, in our interpretation, NAT takes a distance from pure deductive methodology. According to pure deductive methodology, we construct measurement instruments allowing us to see nothing but what was measured. NAT operates not in between these traditional positions but beyond them. NAT is most comfortable with an abductive approach. This means that the researcher may start either from a more open-ended position or from a more limited perspective in gathering data. Starting from an open-ended data-gathering position, which is reasonable in contexts that are not very familiar, does not mean that data are analysed irrespective of the theory of previous research. Rather, analysing empirical data in a second step with the help of theory reflects what Kvale (1994) identified as theoretical validation. On the other hand, in data collection and analysis, we may start out from a more theory-guided approach. This does not hinder us from being sensitive to anomalies that do not fit in. Rather, these anomalies may be used for developing or refining theory.

In defending the primacy of the ontological perspective, from an NAT perspective, the key empirical research problem is how and to what extent educational activities, at different levels of the education system, operate along and promote the ideals of non-affirmative education theory. This theory is value-bound in that it

recognises the subject's right to be pedagogically introduced in a culture in ways that aim at developing the subject's autonomy, conceptual understanding and ability to think critically. In other words, it recognises emancipation in terms of negative freedom. Negative freedom means that education liberates the individual from the tradition by making the tradition into an object of critical reflection. This type of education aims to develop the subject's productive freedom. This means aiming at the subject's real possibilities to act in the world out of one's own will and in relation to others' interests (Rucker, 2023). Following this main question, we identify four distinct research ideas (Uljens, 2023c) to be explored.

First, *empirical educational leadership research must recognise the societal role of institutionalised education.* This is the why and where question of higher education leadership. As educational leadership also operates in historically developed organisations, we need to ask: how do actors at different levels interpret what the societal task of an educational institution is? What is the role and task of higher education institutions? How do educational leaders and leadership practices carry out activities given their relative freedom to make decisions (e.g. Tigerstedt, 2022)? What kinds of prerequisites do individuals, operational sub-systems or networks possess in promoting the realisation of the ideals and realities mentioned? Is it possible to identify hindrances of various kinds that may influence the realisation of a non-affirmative pedagogy?

How universities and other HE institutions perceive their societal role is visible in how they construct their curriculum and study programmes. How do various actors within higher education work with curriculum making? Traditionally, comprehensive schools are directed by nationally agreed curricula, while a main pedagogical feature of universities is to base teaching on research and thereby construct their own curricula. Universities' classical freedom of research and teaching is thus visible in how independently they are allowed to construct, approve and develop their curricula. Self-directed curriculum making is essentially what we mean by the freedom of research and teaching. However, the universities' self-directed curriculum work is no longer self-evident. For example, the policy programme called *European Higher Education Area* reflects a strong movement towards externalising curriculum making (Curaj et al., 2018). As Rucker (2023) argued, we think that the notion of 'educative teaching' that is fundamental in NAT may operate as a normative principle or criterion against which actors' initiatives, policies, organisations and evaluation systems may be analysed. To what extent are the principles of non-affirmative pedagogy accepted, defended and practised at different levels?

Second, empirical educational leadership research in the NAT tradition *helps us identify in what ways and to what extent educational leadership practices, as a broad category, demonstrate pedagogical qualities?* This is the how-question of higher education leadership. Which features do these pedagogical qualities demonstrate at different levels? Leadership-wise, it is of special interest to study the vertical dynamics in an education system, as exemplified by Uljens and Ylimaki (2017). Studying such vertical bottom-up and top-down dynamics is certainly not a new proposal. However, directing the empirical focus precisely on these pedagogical qualities in operation within and between levels is considered a novel approach. For

example, how are visions and missions expected to operate within an organisation? What initiatives or new practices are launched to support and put new directions into practice? Are these organisational policies just implemented instrumentally to get the staff to dream the same dream as the top level, or does such policies operate as non-affirmative actions that reserve space for colleagues to interpret, critique and contribute?

Third, this position argues that educational leadership, as any form of leadership, is not only contextually framed and operates through pedagogical measures but is also about leading *something*. It has an object. This is the what-question of leadership. While much research sees leadership as a generic competence, valid across organisations, institutions and contexts, the position advocated in this volume does not share such a universalist and context- and content-neutral view. Rather, this volume argues that it is essential for a leader to have an understanding of *what* they are leading. Therefore, it is surprising that such a large portion of contemporary empirical research about educational leadership stays silent about the object led—teaching, studying and learning. Consequently, following NAT, it is of interest to focus on the relation between various leadership levels and the actual teaching–studying–learning process in a given institution. To be able to empirically understand the practice of teaching as the object of educational leadership, a theory of this object is required. In most educational institutions, schools and universities, the division between leadership activities and teaching is not always very strict. Very often, teachers are involved in a collaborative fashion to develop pedagogical practices. This volume argues that NAT, which was originally developed as a theory for understanding the nature of pedagogical practice, is applicable for these purposes.

Fourth, *NAT values research-supported practice development carried out as a collaborative multi-level effort with practitioners.* Given the ontological point of departure, NAT differs in its approach to established interventionist and collaborative approaches, as most practice developmental initiatives typically approach the empirical educational reality not from an educational but from an epistemological and methodological perspective. These research-supported developmental methodologies and designs are thought of as applicable in any societal context. This is true for cultural-historical activity theory, theory of practice architectures, the communities of practice approach, and other action-theory-based approaches.

As a phenomenon, applying practitioner research in higher education is by no means anything new. Various forms of action research and practitioner research have been applied for decades in higher education (Kember & Gow, 1992). There are a number of complementary approaches (Bruheim Jensen & Dikilitas, 2023). Today, action research as an umbrella concept covers a broad family of approaches, such as the Community of Practice approach (Denscombe, 2008; Omidvar & Kislov, 2013), Theory of Practice Architectures (Mahon et al., 2017) and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Engeström, 2011, 2016; Sannino, 2011). These three methodologies have been applied in empirical collaborative research in very different contexts. This context-neutrality is their strength but, at the same time, their weak point.

However, it is not as if these approaches are totally silent regarding human learning. Typically, grounded in various positions in social philosophy, all three significantly developed during the 1990s. As anticipated, they all criticize subject-centred, cognitivist approaches to human learning, opting instead to emphasise the distributed, material and contextual nature of problem-solving and learning. However, in line with the perspective in the socio-cultural and linguistic turn in learning research, they have mostly focused on non-formal learning outside schools and universities. When educational institutions have been the empirical object, this research has typically not focused on teachers' teaching and students' learning but on teachers' collaborative professional learning and development. As this professional development was treated as adult workplace learning in general, it was not very closely connected to research on teaching.

Non-affirmative education theory is closer to cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) than the others. The main reason for this is that CHAT has its background in educational learning research, as established by Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky, in turn, draws on the Fichtean critique of the Kantian approach as developed by Hegel. In this light, NAT and CHAT emanate from the same history of ideas—the empirical Other is considered constitutive for higher-order learning. Also, what appears attractive in CHAT is an elaborate idea of the pedagogical nature of the interventions when practice is developed as a joint effort among practitioners and researchers (Mäkiharju et al., 2023). The methodological implication of NAT to this kind of developmental work research is a more reflected position of what it means to intentionally engage in various practices as a researcher. The point made is that in such developmental research, *the researchers' intervention in collaborating with practitioners is considered non-affirmative in nature.*

In other words, while NAT prioritises the ontological perspective, claiming the necessity to approach educational research on the basis of education theory, this very theory also points out that the researchers' input in the shared cultural-historical process is pedagogical in nature. It is pedagogical in a non-affirmative sense. Non-affirmative action research allows itself to intervene in practitioners' work, but with the motive of emancipating practitioners to reach levels that perhaps would be the case without external support. Thereby, the ontologically defined theory about the object, pedagogical work in modern education institutions, also has methodological implications in collaborative action research (Su & Bellmann, 2023).

Coming Back to History

This chapter started with a short historical overview of the development of universities, pointing out that the idea of what a university is has been evolving throughout its history. Universities have always, to some degree, been instruments for reaching goals external to themselves. Broadly speaking, the main affiliations of a university in the different stages of its development can be described as being the church, the state and, currently, the market. Our point of departure is that research on higher

education leadership has to take a reflective position on the question of what a university is. Doing so entails having an idea of how to conceptualise the relationship between a university and other fields of society, as well as being able to conceptualise the core activities within a university, namely, teaching, studying and learning. Our argument is that the NAT of education can overcome some of the blind spots in current leadership research: a theory of education may not be sufficient for understanding all aspects of educational leadership, but it has the potential to function as a foundational point of departure. We thus still need psychological, organisational, economic and other types of policy approaches to studying leadership in and of universities, but we recall that which perspectives are in the foreground and which are in the background is not a matter of indifference.

In current society, where the university, or the *multiversity*, is more differentiated and interpenetrated with the surrounding society than ever before, and the future is characterised by its openness, Barnett (2004) argues that defining the core mission and idea of universities is more difficult than ever. Barnett concludes that in this 'new' situation, where we cannot know what the future brings, the core mission of universities could be to teach students to live with the question of the uncertain future as an open one. NAT argues for a very similar position, the main difference being that this is by no means regarded as a *new* state of affairs. On the contrary, according to the *Bildung*-centred tradition of education, learning to live with the future as an open question has been at the core of education since the beginning of modernity. Although the operational environment of the university has transformed rather radically, the foundational theoretical perspectives of educational theory still appear highly viable and relevant as foundational points of departure.

The Rationale and Structure of This Volume

Our ambition in this volume is not to encompass all aspects of higher education leadership or provide an exhaustive overview of current approaches or positions. Nor do we aim to present a theory that comprehensively explains every facet of higher education leadership, and our focus is not to produce a volume of 'best practice' tips and tricks for higher education leadership. Our specific focus is to work out how and to what extent the pedagogical dimensions in higher education leadership can be illuminated using *pedagogical theory*. Our point of departure is that approaching pedagogical leadership of pedagogical praxis through a pedagogical theory can enable us to tackle some of the challenges with which the current educational leadership field is struggling. However, this is an open question, and the answer remains to be seen. Our approach to NAT itself is thus non-affirmative; we raise the question without having a pre-decided idea of the answer. Thus, the ambition is not to cover all aspects of what it means to lead higher education in one volume. We maintain that a multitude of perspectives on leadership is valuable and necessary for grasping the complexity of higher education leadership. Simultaneously, however, this multitude runs the risk of creating a field that is so fragmented

that the foundations and the overarching perspective are lost. The pedagogical elements of leadership, present at all levels and *common* to the phenomenon as a whole, risk becoming invisible. Pedagogical leadership in the context of pedagogical praxis is a distinct form and context of leadership. Leading pedagogical praxis pedagogically is different from leading pedagogical praxis with, for example, an economic or efficiency focus. Moreover, pedagogically leading education in a pedagogical manner differs from pedagogically leading development in a private business or governmental institution, for instance. As we have posited, leadership in education requires an understanding and a theory of the object of that leadership, along with its relationship to other areas of society.

Naturally, pedagogical leadership manifests in diverse ways across different levels. In this volume, each chapter focuses on examples of pedagogical leadership at different levels. Our examination of these examples using NAT explores both the theory's possibilities and limitations in the context of higher education leadership. However, the chapters are not strictly bound to individual levels, as many of the phenomena discussed span several levels. After the introduction chapter, Elo and Uljens, in Chap. 2, link the theoretically focused introduction to the subsequent chapters by providing a general overview of the pedagogical dimensions of higher education leadership as a multilevel phenomenon, drawing on contemporary higher education literature to exemplify what kind of pedagogical leadership activities we might find at various levels of leadership. In Chap. 3, Lili-Ann Wolff, together with Janne Elo and Michael Uljens, focus on sustainability in the Anthropocene era as an example of a global curricular topic transcending national boundaries. In Chap. 4, Jussi Kivistö, Janne Elo and Michael Uljens discuss the pedagogical dimensions of national higher education funding models. In Chap. 5, Jussi Välimaa, Michael Uljens and Janne Elo discuss how different logics of higher education governance produce different prerequisites for academic staff to maintain a non-affirmative position. We continue in Chap. 6 with Ingunn Hybertsen and Bjørn Stensaker's discussion of the pedagogical dimensions of quality assurance in higher education. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons discuss the nature of higher education studies in Chap. 7. In Chap. 8, Romuald Normand, Michael Uljens and Janne Elo approach the pedagogical influence on individual teacher/researcher roles and professional identities in current higher education. The volume is summed up in a concluding chapter by Elo and Uljens.

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