

Networked Educational Design for Novice Principals' Professional Development: Insights from Sweden

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Abstract

This paper focuses on professional development for school principals, drawing on literature on the education of leaders and school leaders' development. The Swedish National Principal Training Programme (NPTP) is a state-regulated executive education for professional principals in preschools, schools, and school-age Educare centres. It has been mandatory for all newly appointed principals in Sweden since 2010. The NPTP is a mandatory in-service programme and consists of three courses: school law and governance, governing with objectives and results, and school leadership. The programme runs over three years, parallel to working full-time as a principal. The participants are expected to spend 20% of their working time on their studies. The NPTP uses a networked educational design, which is a valuable research topic from a networked professional learning perspective. This pilot study aims to explore the role of networked educational design for novice principals' professional development and strengthened professional confidence and identity. The research question that frames the study is: In what ways do novice principals' experiences of professional development contribute to the development of their professional confidence and identity with a networked educational design? The study employed a qualitative case-study design with a purposive sampling method to include novice principals undertaking Sweden's national school training programme. Data were collected during 2018-2022 from post-programme evaluations, including individual digital questionnaires with close-ended and open-ended responses and small group oral evaluations documented in a log book. The participants were novice principals studying in the NPTP at one university in Sweden. In all, 321 school leaders from 10 cohort groups in the programme consisting of principals and deputy principals from preschool, primary, secondary, and adult education participated voluntarily. The programme evaluations were carried out during the participants' last residential stay in the programme. Results indicate the importance of residential stays and networking opportunities in the educational journey of principals. These opportunities help connect with peers, establish contacts, and acquire valuable strategies. Completing the training increased principals' professional confidence, particularly in their roles as school leaders. The study shows that the networked educational design supports the development of a professional network among principals, which enhances their professional identity and confidence. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of this networked educational design, which helps shape principals' professional identity and confidence. The findings emphasise the value of networked professional learning.

Keywords

Networked educational design, networked professional learning, principals' perceptions, principal professional development

Research context

The focus of this paper is on professional development for school principals, and the results will feed into a future study. It draws on the literature on 'the education of leaders' and 'school leaders' development (Huber, 2010; Jensen, 2020; Young & Crow, 2016). Following a new and strengthened position of school leaders, professional training and professional development have been placed on the agenda to professionalise school leadership (Bøje & Frederiksen, 2021). Various discussions exist about training future and existing school leaders (Huber, 2010). The Swedish National Principal Training Programme (NPTP) is a state-regulated executive education for professional principals in preschools, schools, and school-age Educare centres and for staff with a corresponding leadership function in curriculum-controlled activities (Jerdborg, 2022). The principal training programme has been mandatory for all newly appointed principals in Sweden since 2010 (SFS 2010:800). The NPTP consequently forms part of the state's steering of preschool and school activity. In Sweden, local authorities are responsible for the recruitment of principals, and the central government contributes to their basic training (Ärlestig et al., 2016).

The NPTP is currently hosted by seven universities at the request of the Swedish National Agency of Education (2020) and is based on an agreed national policy document that coordinates their expectations.

The Swedish NPTP is a mandatory in-service programme and consists of three courses: school law and governance, governance, organising and quality, and school leadership (Årlestig et al., 2016; Jerdborg, 2022). The programme runs over three years, parallel to working full-time as a principal. The participants are expected to spend 20% of their working time on their studies. The NPTP combines theoretical perspectives and local context examples to professionalise principals to a great extent (Brauckmann et al., 2023).

There are many studies on principals' professional development (e.g., Huber, 2010; Jensen, 2020; Sahlin, 2023; Young & Crow, 2016), but fewer on networked learning and its impact on professional development. In Sweden, one study focuses on the principal programme's development, design, and challenges and discusses the expected future demands for change (Norberg, 2019). Recent studies by Jerdborg (2022, 2023) focus on 'learning principalship,' which touches upon programme content and educational design. However, a recent Swedish study on experienced school leaders in a professional learning setting with a networked educational design showed two findings of importance (Sahlin, 2023): First, the school leaders in this study emphasised the value of the professional learning context in terms of the networked educational design, time, and formality. Second, the school leaders valued the opportunities for professional learning and interactions with professional peers, which they perceived as the most effective, beneficial, and relevant form of professional learning. This is strongly connected to the concept of networked professional learning (Littlejohn et al., 2019). This study draws on research and practice in networked learning, which involves collaboration, interpersonal relationships, and technology in valuable activities (Dohn et al., 2021). More specifically, we base the study on the merged definition provided by the Networked Learning Editorial Collective, (2020), which emphasises the importance of trust and shared challenges in promoting connections between people, sites of learning, ideas, and resources across time, space and media. In brief, the networked educational design includes 12 residential stays of three days each throughout the three-year programme, a blended design with a digital platform for work between stays. Participants are assigned to study groups that persist over the entire programme, peer mentoring, and assignments prepared or carried out in principals' professional practice in school settings (Jerdborg, 2022).

Aim and research question

This pilot study aims to explore the role of networked educational design for novice principals' professional development and strengthened professional confidence and identity. The research question that frames the study is: *In what ways do novice principals' experiences of professional development contribute to the development of their professional confidence and identity with a networked educational design?*

Method

In the pilot study reported in this paper, a qualitative case-study design (Yin, 2014) was employed with a purposive sampling method to include novice principals undertaking the NPTP in Sweden. The case in this study, 'the quintan' according to Stake (1995), is the role of networked educational design for professional development and strengthened professional confidence and identity. Data was collected from post-programme evaluations between 2018-2022. The evaluations were carried out continuously through digital questionnaires and small group oral evaluations documented in a log book. The objective was to understand how participants perceived the programme, covering aspects such as programme content, working methods, and impact on their practice. The participants were novice principals studying in the NPTP at one university in Sweden. Three hundred twenty-one school leaders from 10 cohort groups in the programme participated voluntarily. Qualitative content analysis (Miles et al., 2020) was conducted to analyse the data. In carrying out the empirical study, the ethical rules and guidelines for research provided by the Swedish Research Council (2017) were followed. In line with Cohen et al. (2018), a researcher without involvement in the NPTP was responsible for reviewing the results and the analysis to reduce the risk of bias in interpretation.

Preliminary findings

Collaboration and interactions with professional peers

Principals shared their professional development experiences in this theme, emphasising collaboration and interactions with peers. Collaborative settings supported the principals' learning. The analysis highlighted the vital role of the permanent study group constellations, with time to build relationships and the value of peer mentoring

throughout the programme. These study groups were important in the learning and development processes, enabling principals to support each other on specific issues and understand each other's everyday challenges. The practice of peer mentoring was evident, where the principals discussed 'wicked problems' with their peers. Peer mentoring emphasised the importance of reflection, offering an opportunity to exchange different skills and experiences. Additionally, it provided insights into the roles of principals in other municipalities and management groups, fostering a deeper understanding of problem-solving strategies and revealing similarities in the 'wicked problems' they face as principals. Many principals expressed that peer mentoring significantly advanced their development as principals.

The value of residential stays

Many principals emphasised the value and importance of residential stays in their educational experiences. These stays provided a valuable opportunity to connect and learn with professional peers, establish meaningful contacts, and delve into principal-related issues while temporarily disconnecting from their routine activities. Numerous principals appreciated the well-designed residential stays incorporating informative input, group processes and collective learning, focusing on principalship. Many principals expressed that different social interactions through dialogue in different groupings contributed to critical reflexivity and the co-construction of knowledge, identity and learning. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated adjustments, leading to the transition to digital online meetings. Principals' feedback during this period unequivocally underscored the significance of this networked educational design. They acknowledged the challenges posed by digital meetings, noting the difficulty in maintaining focus during digital lectures and teaching sessions. Despite these challenges, principals observed a positive evolution in digital online meetings.

Networking opportunities

In the third theme, principals highlighted the significance of networking throughout their education journey, expressing its significance in various ways. Networking opportunities, which were situated and context-dependent for in-service principals, included meetings held during residential stays and collegial learning sessions and were considered pivotal components in establishing professional connections. The collaborative nature of the group, central to the educational process, was underscored. Principals valued sharing their daily experiences with fellow professionals, particularly those working in solitary roles. Certain groups of principals emphasised the social aspects within smaller groups and the entire class, emphasising its immense value in their educational experience. Many principals noted significant learning outcomes during the training, acquiring valuable strategies from the course content and through dialogue and social interaction with their professional peers. Additionally, the training held personal significance for many, enriching their development on both professional and personal levels.

Development of professional confidence

In the fourth theme, principals' development of professional confidence emerged significantly. The majority of principals expressed that they experienced an increased sense of professional confidence after completing the training. One group articulated their sense of increased professional confidence in their roles as school leaders, stating, "We have become more confident in our role as school leaders. We've gained more knowledge, enabling us to strengthen our arguments in discussions." Another group emphasised that they felt more confident in their roles, attributing it directly to the education they received. Several principals highlighted that acquiring broader and more in-depth knowledge had played a crucial role in strengthening professional confidence, particularly emphasising the importance of understanding school law.

Discussion

The preliminary findings of this pilot study show that the networked educational design supports the development of a professional network. The COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to digital online meetings and the participants' clear experiences of a lowered quality with losses of opportunities to exchange experiences, formally and informally, and interactions with professional peers can be seen as a verification of the importance of the NPTP's networked educational design with physical residential stays and opportunities for collaboration (cf. Norberg, 2019). The principal's development of professional confidence during the training can be understood as a product of gaining broader and more in-depth knowledge, collaborating and interacting with professional peers (cf. Sahlin, 2023) and critically reflecting on theory and practice (Brauckmann et al., 2023; Jerdborg, 2022). The professional learning in the NPTP and the principals' professional peers can be understood as shaping their professional identity and making them feel more confident in their principalship, embracing participants' different professional experiences (cf. Dohn et al., 2021). From a global perspective, the findings in this study contribute

to how leadership preparation can be organised with a networked educational design for principals, emphasising the value of networked professional learning. Networked learning principles, therefore, clearly contribute to the quality and success of the NPTP. The findings may also be of importance for other sectors in work-life concerning networked professional learning. Future research will include continued analysis of the data materials presented in this paper and continuous data collection to cover missing areas. Further, a more extensive study involving all NPTPs in Sweden focusing on networked educational design would be interesting to study in more detail. Additionally, comparing the Swedish and Norwegian leadership preparation programs would be interesting to examine differences and similarities with networked educational design.

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