

Chapter 3

In Quest of Principalsip



Petri Salo and Siv Saarukka

Abstract The chapter uses a scoping literature review of Finnish school research to make sense of the task and practice of principalsip in the Finnish educational context. The data consists of 20 doctoral dissertations from Finnish universities, year 2000 to 2020, in which acting and former principals study various aspects of their own professional practice.

The study aims of conceptualizing and comprehending principalsip using a two-step process of analysis, with two intertwined analytical frameworks. As a result, principalsip is firstly described as consisting of three intertwined practices: being a principal, doing principalsip and contextualising principalsip. In the second step of the analysis, a framework consisting of two basic dimensions for situating the research interests in the dissertation is constructed. The first dimension consists of school leadership understood as *an individual undertaking* or as *a shared, social and cultural practice*. The second dimension either locates principalsip in its *organisational, cultural and operational context* or focus on professional ambitions *for strategic development or change*. In summary, principalsip consists of tasks and duties, capacities and leadership styles, or can be constructed as a contextual social practice, for enhancing collaborative school development.

Keywords Principalsip · Leadership practices · School culture · Development · Scoping review

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Introduction

Although Finnish principals have a firm professional basis for leading and developing teaching and learning, as they are teachers themselves, research on school leadership in Finland confirms that administrative responsibilities and tasks occupy an increasing part of their time and energy. Principals have become more like managers and administrators, but they repeatedly express a desire for engagement in pedagogy and instruction (e.g. Kovalainen, 2020, p. 196). The role and tasks of principals, in Finland as elsewhere, have become more complex and demanding. The quantity and diversity of their work have increased, often resulting in a feeling of insufficiency and growing stress levels (Elomaa et al., 2021, pp. 1–2).

The aim of this chapter is to make sense of the task and practice of acting as and being a principal in the Finnish educational context from the principal's point of view. The method used is a scoping literature review of Finnish research on principalship conducted by acting or former principals during the last two decades. The data consist of doctoral dissertations from Finnish universities. Risku and Kanervio (2011) note that research on school leadership in Finland has been scarce. Only 4% of a total of 661 dissertations within educational research during the first decade of the 2000s studied principalship. Alava et al. (2012) characterised Finnish research on school leadership during the same period as being small-scale, methodologically diverse and often conducted in a local municipal setting. Moreover, the research seems to have focused on change, development and distributed leadership. Our hypothesis, based partly on our own research on school leadership (Saarukka, 2017; Salo & Sandén, 2015, 2016), is as follows: (a) a significant proportion of Finnish research on principalship has been conducted by principals researching their own professional practice, with the aims of (b) mapping out and clarifying what they actually do when they act as principals and (c) developing their leadership practices and their schools with regard to future needs and challenges. We can relate to the research on school leadership performed by principals as a means of professional meaning-making and development. We aim to answer the question, *How do principals conceptualise and comprehend principalship?* by studying the research interests, aims and questions in their dissertations. We will focus on principalship, that is, the formal assignment of acting as a leader in a school, within basic education (grades 1–9) and general upper secondary education.

We use the concept of 'principalship' to enable a comprehensive and systematic still reflective analysis and synthesis of the object of the study. The process of the professionalisation of principalship was initiated in the late 1970s, when the first schools within basic education got their first full-time appointed principals (Alava et al., 2012). The title 'principal' (*rehtori*, or *rector* in Finnish) was taken as the title for all school leaders in the educational legislation and union agreement formed in 1998. The eligibility criteria were provided in the same year (Decree on Qualifications for Personnel in the Provision of Education Act, 1998). During the last two decades, principalship has truly become and been developed as a profession, as various functions of school leadership have been developed and researched. The national

legislation in Finland formulates the tasks and duties of principals within compulsory and general upper secondary education in a concise manner: ‘Every school must have a principal who is responsible for the operations of the school’ (Basic Education Act, 1998). The content of this formulation is interpreted unambiguously, even to the extent that it is not deemed necessary to define the principal’s tasks in the curriculum or in other national governing documents. This ambiguity enables principals to create a personal–professional platform for school leadership on the basis of principles and guidelines formulated by local education providers, that is, municipalities. The absence of detailed overall instructions implies both the possibility of developing school leadership according to local and contextual needs and professional degrees of freedom in practicing and developing the leadership role. It contains the potential for developing and refining personal skills and leadership strategies, as well as insights into how to develop qualities in the profession and position of acting as a principal (Saarukka, 2017).

The concept of ‘pedagogical leadership’ has been characteristic of Finnish research on school leadership since the mid-1980s. It relates loosely to, but contains much more than, for example, curriculum leadership and school development (Hämäläinen, 1986). Like other contemporary leadership concepts, pedagogical leadership is a complex and ambiguous concept and phenomenon, both constrained and enabled by intertwined organisational, cultural and professional aims, ambitions and practices. Still, pedagogical leadership seems to express a professional intention and desire that are often expressed by Finnish principals (e.g. Juusenaho, 2004, pp. 61–66). The concept of ‘pedagogical leadership’ has been used throughout the years to focus and explicate the characteristics and essence of principalship in Finland (Lahtero & Laasonen, 2021). To handle and make sense of this concept and the leadership practices related to it, we will, later on in this chapter, use the distinction between ‘direct leadership’ and ‘indirect leadership’ (Kleine-Kracht, 1993).

Research on School Leadership

Contemporary research on school leadership illuminates and confirms the complexity of the object of our study. Daniëls et al. (2019, p. 110) note, as researchers often do, the growing importance of school leadership and its impact on school effectiveness. They also propose that the research is characterised by numerous theories, approaches and models that both complement and defy each other. They (Daniëls et al., 2019, p. 111) define leadership in education ‘as a process of influencing teachers and other stakeholders and not necessarily limited to a single person’. This process of influence is expected to keep the school organisation running smoothly, result in an effective learning climate and create an experience of added value. After presenting an overview of four school leadership theories (instructional, situational, transformational and distributed), they introduce *Leadership for Learning* (LfL) as an integrative conceptualisation of the phenomenon at hand (Daniëls et al., 2019,

p. 117). This refers to school-wide and multilevel leadership, acknowledges a wide range of leadership sources and is collective and collaborative by its nature. Furthermore, it pays attention to the organisational and environmental context of school leadership. Martínez Ruiz and Hernández-Amorós (2020, pp. 271–272) look at the different leadership models as positions on a continuum. At one end of the continuum, they identify an individualist managerial model. With this model comes a lonely superprincipal, working hard, aiming at ensuring the daily functioning of the school without the time and energy to reflect and communicate a vision for the school. At the other end of the continuum, school leadership is distributed within the professional community through a process of mutual influence. Positioning on the continuum is dependent on ‘who exercises leadership, how goals are set and how the leader works to achieve them’.

Within the context of Nordic countries, regarding educational policies, Moos et al. (2020, pp. 3–6) identify two discourses affecting and defining school leadership as a profession and practice. The *Democratic Bildung* discourse relies on professional trust and responsibility, focusing on relationships and collective practices. Schools are understood as inclusive, locally attached communities, open for discussions, negotiations, creative and critical interpretations and collaborative meaning-making. The *Learning Outcomes* discourse is instrumental, focused on the effective implementation of leadership and teaching practices and aimed at reaching goals and standards given and defined far beyond the individual school and its local context. School leadership is determined by accountability, formed top-down as a charismatic individual management task.

According to Kemmis et al. (2014, pp. 157–158), research on school leadership has unproblematically equated the phenomenon with ‘doing’ the principalship, focusing on the traits and capabilities of sovereign individuals capable of handling various management and leadership actions. As an alternative, they urge researchers to study the practices of leading as interconnected to a nexus of other practices that both form (e.g., local educational policies) and are formed by leadership practices (e.g., teachers’ professional development). Focusing on the practices of leading draws attention to situated knowledge and action and emphasises the various interconnected conditions under which practices of leading are shaped, reshaped and transformed.

Characteristics and Research on Principalship in Finland

School leadership in Finland has been described by external observers (Hargreaves et al., 2007) as systemic leadership based on moral, professional grounds. The educational system is embedded in a particular kind of culture, reflecting a social and professional commitment to inclusive, equitable and innovative social values. It is characterised by a culture of clear and common purpose (competitiveness, creativity and social justice) based on a commitment to in-depth and in-breadth learning. The politics of subsidiarity and participation enhance and interact with a culture

characterised by trust, cooperation and responsibility. Reliance on intelligent accountability and a trust-based professionalism and school culture result in high degrees of professional discretion and autonomy (Salo & Sandén, 2016, p. 109). In Finland, reliance on and functioning within the *Democratic Bildung* discourse seems to have resulted in reaching the aims of the *Learning Outcomes* discourse (Moos et al., 2020, pp. 3–6). Basic education has been performing well without focusing on performing well (Sahlberg, 2011).

The Finnish education system and school leadership within it are, in our understanding, reflected in a wider context. As in other Nordic countries, the research on school leadership has focused on formal, individual leadership, the contents and essence of leadership and leadership practices from principals' perspectives, often in relation to strategies for school development within a local and national context. Unlike in the other Nordic countries, issues of accountability or the effects of local and national steering have not been of interest in Finland. The same applies to research on the historical and social construction of the position and professional role of the principal. This is due to both historical (the role of education in nation-building and the formation of citizenship) and political reasons (Finland is a welfare state built on social democratic ideals). In the Nordic context, principals have often been framed as 'firsts among equals' or 'teachers in charge', having the overall responsibility of administrative tasks. They carry out their leadership duties within a policy context infused by democratic values, shared leadership practices and teacher autonomy. Furthermore, school leadership has been anchored in and of organic interest within the local community, understood as a shared responsibility of school administrators and local politicians (Johansson & Bredeson, 2011; Salo et al., 2014, pp. 4–5).

Research on school leadership in Finland has a quite recent history, often inspired by leadership research in general. In the 1980s, the research focused on principals' understanding and orientation regarding their work, role and responsibilities for school development. In the 1990s, the concept and phenomenon of pedagogical leadership, partly related to the challenges of understanding the principal's role and its constraints, was established on the research agenda. From 2000 onwards, the research has assumed various approaches to and models of school leadership (Pesonen, 2009, pp. 3–4, 185–186). Risku and Kanervio (2011) identify two overall research interests: the complex and overlapping contexts of doing school leadership and the very character of, challenges in and development of, principals' work. In an overview of the dissertations on school leadership for the period of 2000 to 2010, they characterise the body of research as versatile, multifaceted and unambiguous. It includes, for example, studies on themes such as principals' professional identity in relation to the complexity of their work. Some of the research has focused on specific perspectives and themes, such as principals' gender, self-image, well-being and survival. Further themes related to the school community, such as collegiality, collaboration, a futural orientation and knowledge management, have been on the research agenda. The complexity of school leadership is reflected in research that has the aim of handling the various and contradictory contexts of principals' work in relation to change and strategic development, developmental projects, local

implementation of the Basic Education Act, local evaluation and regional collaboration. Saarukka (2017, pp. 31–34) concludes, based on her summary, that principalship is formed in various manners in differing local contexts with regard to strong professional autonomy. The formation of principals' formal status and work is an outcome of professional autonomy, and the professional practices are formed within and by various and differing local contexts. Principals' professional-pedagogical orientation and ambitions are formed by a positive self-image and professional self-trust, enabling them to act for and serve both teachers and pupils.

Contexts and Conditions for Principalship in Finland

To understand the aims, functioning and impacts of practices of school leadership in Finland, some points of departure for the formation of the task and professional practices have to be clarified. These include the *professional background and qualifications for becoming and acting as a principal*, the *size and character of the school* and the *content of tasks and duties signed by the local educational authorities*, that is, municipalities.

In Finland, principals are required to have a master's degree, teacher qualification and sufficient work experience as teachers. As principals, they continue to be engaged in teaching. This affects and forms, in various manners, the professional identities of principals and their practices of acting as leaders and developing the school community. Teaching obligations lend principals credibility amongst teachers, keep them engaged in classroom practices and maintain their close connection to both children and parents (Hargreaves et al., 2007). Their leadership engagement is based on continuous first-person experience and hands-on engagement in teaching. Besides teaching qualifications, principals need a certificate in educational administration (25 ECTS, European Credit Transfer System) comprising courses in organisation, legislation, administration, management, school finance, strategic planning and curriculum requirements. There are no comprehensive systems or formal practices for principals' professional development. It contains various themes and subjects, often related to national or local educational development or changes in the national educational system.

The conditions and resources for acting as principal vary widely, depending on the municipality and school size. Finnish compulsory schools are public. Finland used to have a vast network of small comprehensive schools – so-called village schools with under 50 pupils. During the last two decades, due to school closures, especially in rural areas, the number of comprehensive schools has been almost halved. Still, Finnish schools are relatively small (with an average of about 240 pupils) and the number of large schools is still small, with about 100 schools with more than 700 pupils (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020). Municipalities, as local educational providers, decide on the character of principals' positions based on available resources and school size. In small schools (with under 200 pupils), principalship is a confidential post. Class teachers acting as school heads (with a

small compensation) mainly teach and have only a few hours per week appointed to school leadership tasks. In larger schools, a principalship is a full-time appointment to be applied for. Their teaching obligation contains some hours per week according to teacher union regulations. A full-time principal can also have a vice principal. Over the last decade, bigger cities have established district principals with an overall leadership responsibility for monitoring several schools in the municipality and assisting leaders of smaller schools because the organisation of the school structure is an internal municipality matter (Act on Service Holders in Municipalities and Welfare Areas, 2003).

The national educational legislation leaves the job description open for local educational authorities to determine. The National Curriculum provides principals with an orientation to the overall aims and a characterisation of the nature of organising the schoolwork. School leadership is thereby a task to be handled in a municipal organisation managed by a superintendent, board of education and local politicians. Principals' job descriptions, as formulated by municipal educational authorities, vary quite a lot. They often contain administrative and pedagogical duties, such as preparing work plans for teachers for the school year, deciding on the use of textbooks and teaching material, and evaluating students' wellbeing. Some tasks can be delegated to the vice-principal. Neither national nor local job descriptions specify what kinds of pedagogical principles should be practiced and furthered. Structures and practices for school leadership can be said to rest on trust-based local responsibility and autonomy. Still, due to the lack of detailed national descriptions of principals' duties, the formation and development of leadership practices are left to individual principals. The construction of acting principals' identities is a professional challenge that must be continuously handled and tackled in relation to local conditions and within the individual school community. (For municipal job descriptions, see, for example, Helsingfors stad, 2022; Jakobstads stad, 2021; Raseborgs stad, 2021.)

Pedagogical Leadership

Pedagogical leadership has, since 1980s, been used in Finnish research as an overall concept referring both to leadership practices in their entirety and to specific skills and capacities defining the principals' ways of relating to and handling a comprehensive set of tasks and duties. The concept is ambiguous, and its expressions in professional practice have been interpreted in various ways. Pedagogical leadership operates in relation to bundles of concurrent practices. It is formed by organisational structures, school culture, teaching staff and their professional ambitions. Uljens (2015, p. 9) notes that pedagogical leadership operates at different levels and is expressed in various forms. It is formed by, and thereby has to be studied in its, organisational and societal context. Pedagogical leadership influences the formation of principals' self-understanding, professional expectations, future orientation and ways of acting and collaborating, and subsequently affects their

understanding of and relation to change and development. Anglo-American concepts and practices, such as instructional, situational, transformational, distributed and shared leadership, have been used by Finnish researchers to illuminate certain aspects of pedagogical leadership. In Mäkelä's (2007) interpretation, pedagogical leadership coincides with instructional leadership. Even if the Anglo-American conceptualisation of instructional leadership has evolved throughout the years, it still reflects an orientation towards principals' hands-on supervision and evaluation of teachers' work in classrooms. In our understanding, these factors do not apply to school leadership in Finland. According to other interpretations, pedagogical leadership explicates a sense of professionally shared, distributed and collegial leadership practices in which the principal is engaged in collaborative professional practices and co-producing leadership together with teachers (Salo et al., 2014, pp. 4–5; Raasumaa, 2010, pp. 153–164).

Mäkelä (2007, p. 66) refers to Kleine-Kracht (1993, pp. 189, 209), who in the beginning of the 1990s used the concept of 'indirect instructional leadership' to describe principals' professional practices related to the internal and external environment of the school, the physical and cultural context of teaching and the meanings of principal's actions for the teachers. This conceptualisation is useful when relating to Finnish principals' pedagogical leadership (Lahtero & Laasonen, 2021). Pedagogical leadership, in its indirect form, substantiates and creates favourable conditions for teachers' work, professional ambitions and development. It touches on teachers' work in classrooms without interfering with teaching as such. Indirect pedagogical leadership relies on professional trust in teachers' expertise and experience. Principals' own background and engagement in teaching and closeness to and understanding of teachers' concerns result in professional legitimacy.

Principalship in Light of Dissertations on School Leadership from 2000 to 2020

In the following, we will study principalship in Finland based on research on school leadership performed by acting or former principals themselves. The study covers a 20-year period from 2000 to 2020. This is appropriate for several reasons. Until the late 1990s, Finnish principals were mere administrators handling administrative routines. By the reform of 1998, they had become autonomous school leaders with a mandate to handle the practices and routines of their schools according to their professional ambitions. The reform was foregrounded by an overall educational policy transformation from centralised, norm-based and system-oriented governance to decentralised, information-based and results-oriented leadership. Municipalities obtained constitutional autonomy, responsibility and freedom for organising comprehensive education and general upper secondary education at the local level. Regarding principalship, this resulted in an extended professionalism, accompanied by greater responsibilities and an increased workload. The tasks to be

taken care of expanded and became more diverse (Lahtero & Risku, 2012, pp. 524–525; Risku & Tain, 2020, pp. 49–50; Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016, pp. 1270–1272).

As suggested above, our aim is to study how principals conceptualise and comprehend principalship, that is, how they make sense of the task, position and practice of acting as and being a principal. As the method for our study, we used a scoping literature review. A scoping review is often used to examine the extent and nature of research activities in a certain domain and map the research without having to explore, summarise and report the findings in detail. In a scoping review, the research questions are often broad syntheses; reporting is more qualitative and is used to identify either gaps or main focuses in the domain of research at hand. Based on existing methodological frameworks for scoping reviews (Armstrong et al., 2011, pp. 147–150; Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, pp. 19–23; Booth et al., 2021, pp. 74–80), we describe the stages in our scoping review as follows: (a) elaborating the research questions, (b) searching and selecting relevant studies, (c) identifying the nature and extent of the research and (d) charting, collating and summarising the data and reporting the results.

As set out in a quite lengthy manner above, (a) the overall research question and its components were elaborated based on international research on school leadership, characterisations of school leadership in Finland as well as existing Finnish overviews of the research within the field. In order (b) to identify and select research on school leadership done by principals in Finland, a search was conducted in the Melinda database (the National Metadata Repository in Finland) on the second and third of October 2021. This database allows search results to be limited to doctoral dissertations. The period covered in the search was 2000–2020. The search strings (Basic and Boolean) used were 'principal', 'principal and leadership', 'school and leadership' and 'pedagogical leadership' (in English, Finnish and Swedish). These searches resulted in 63 dissertations. In the first step of narrowing down the search, dissertations outside the field of education (19 dissertations) were excluded. In the second step, dissertations not studying school leadership in elementary schools (within basic education for grades 1–9) and general upper secondary education were identified and excluded (23 dissertations). The studies excluded focused on leadership within early childhood education and vocational and higher education. The last step in narrowing down the search was to identify the dissertations composed by acting or former principals. This was quite easily done by reading the forewords and introductions to the dissertations (another three dissertations were excluded). As a result of these three steps of narrowing down the search, 20 dissertations form the basis of this study (see [Appendix](#)). It is noteworthy that 45% of research on leadership within the field of education in Finland during the last two decades consists of principals within basic and general upper secondary education researching their work as principals.

In the third stage, (c) identifying the nature and extent of the research, we focused on the research object, aims and questions and the contexts of the 20 studies identified in the previous stage. As is common in scoping reviews, our intention was to (d) collate and chart the research rather than analyse and report it in detail. Because of

the complexity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon at hand, this is done in two steps, with two intertwined overall analytical frameworks. The first step can be described as an overall, inductive and thematic qualitative analysis, with the aim of identifying the main aims, focuses and research interests of the studies. This analysis resulted in identifying and describing the data with the help of three overlapping and intertwined themes: **being a principal**, **doing principalship** and **contextualising principalship**.

The studies in the first theme, **being a principal**, focus on principalship from a personal–professional point of view. The research interests relate, for example, to *the gender and identity* of the principal, their *leadership characteristics* and *the capacities* required in of principals. In some studies, the focus is on *coping* with doing principalship or on *the professional well-being* of the principal. Principals' professional learning and development are also included in this theme. Being a principal is exemplified by the following two dissertations.

The purpose of this study is to describe how leadership in educational institution settings is constructed, and to characterise leader identity as narrated by headmasters. The key questions of the study focus on two areas: How do headmasters narrate leadership in educational institutions and their own leader identity? This is a leadership study, and it belongs specifically to the research field of socially constructed leadership. Secondly, this is an identity study, because it examines headmasters' narratives of leader identity. (Ahonen, 2008, *Leadership and leader identity as narrated by headmasters*).

This thesis examines desire and disillusion in the professional role of a head teacher. The overall aim of the study is to capture the determinants and circumstances that increase and decrease a head teacher's incentive to lead and produce desired results [...] Leadership is perceived to be constructed and reconstructed at the intersection of three different arenas: the individual, the professional and the interactive. The individual arena and understanding of the head teacher's motivation are scrutinised. (Sandén, 2007, *Desire and disillusion in school leadership. Head teachers and their work at a time of change*).

Within the theme of **doing principalship**, the focus is on principals' *everyday professional acting* in their schools. We interpret the purpose of these studies as making sense of *what principalship is* and *how to do* principalship. Describing and reflecting on *the tasks and responsibilities*, as they are uncovered in everyday doing within the context of one's own school, constitute the focus and the lens in these studies. Principalship is *about engaging and collaborating with and leading teachers*; moreover, it is about *sharing and distributing leadership*. Doing principalship *also includes developing, evaluating and coaching, at times strategically and in a future-oriented way, according to certain aims and visions*. In some of these studies, the aim is to capture the doing of principalship in its complex entirety. Doing principalship can be exemplified by the purposes and aims of two studies.

The purpose of this study was to clarify the principal's tasks in the twenty-first century comprehensive school. On the other hand, the principal's task domains were to be clarified, and also, whether the domains that were established in the 1990s are still valid in post-modern comprehensive school, these domains being administrative-economic leadership, staff management and pedagogical leadership. [...] Furthermore, my task was to find out if the principal's duties are different in the autumn and in the spring terms. (Mäkelä, 2007, *What principals really do. An ethnographic case study on leadership and on principal's tasks in comprehensive school*).

The main aim of the research was to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of shared leadership in culturally different school contexts. Another aim was to find out how school leaders understand their part in sharing leadership. The very essence of school leadership implies a high degree of multifacetedness and multilayeredness due to the versatile character of the phenomenon itself. (Paukkuri, 2015, *How is the phenomenon of shared leadership understood in the theory and practice of school leadership? A case study conducted in four European schools*).

The focus in the third group of studies, **contextualising principalship**, is on *the organisational and cultural context* of doing principalship and being a principal, often with the aim of *developing the school and its central function*. Studies in acting as a leader in and *developing the practices of a learning organisation* might be an outcome of national steering, as the latest National Curriculum for basic education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016) intends. Studies in knowledge management and shared leadership are included in this group of studies and exemplified in the aims of the following two studies.

This research aims to study the perceptions of the basic school principals in leading the education staff and the school towards learning organisation. It researches the crossings of school development and pedagogical wellbeing. (Liusvaara, 2014, *If only the principal has the ears open – Pedagogical wellbeing through school development*).

The aim of this qualitative study is to chart the operational context of the upper-secondary school principals and the historical, cultural and structural factors that steer their day-to-day work. The concepts regarding the study environment and operational culture are defined and analysed in terms of how they are interrelated. Furthermore, it is explained why the upper-secondary schools must describe their operational culture within the curriculum. (Kunnari, 2008, *Towards the outer boundaries. The description of the operational culture in the upper secondary school from the view of steering and leading*).

For the second step of the analysis, we constructed a framework consisting of two basic dimensions or continuums in which the dissertations on principalship could be situated. This was done with reference to both research on school leadership and the themes identified above.

The first dimension consists of school leadership understood either as an *individual undertaking of a single responsible person with certain characteristics and competencies* or as a *collective, collaborative, cultural and organisational practice – a social phenomenon*. The latter understanding can be related both to the concepts of ‘shared’ or ‘distributed leadership’ (Lahtero et al., 2019) and to a practice theory perspective in which leadership is conceptualised as ‘leading’, a complex practice taking place in a set of interrelated practices (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015).

The second dimension deals with the organisational, cultural and operational context of principalship, including local and national educational frameworks and the process of professionalisation. At one end of the continuum, principalship is constructed as a reciprocal process of influence between principals’ professional actions and the operational culture within the school (Fig. 3.1).

Principalship is formed by a *conscious process of relating to and taking the organisational and cultural context into account*. At the other end of this continuum, principalship includes *a professional ambition and striving for strategic*

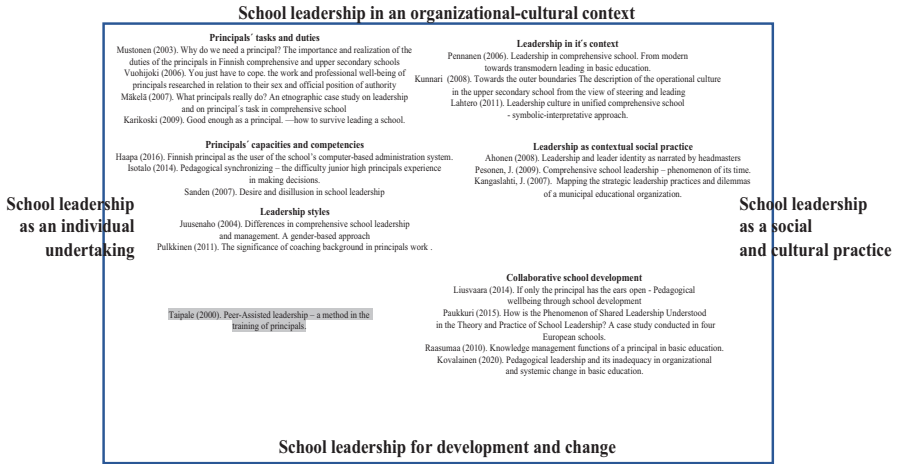


Fig. 3.1 A map of Finnish principals' dissertations on principalship

development or change regarding the functioning of the school as a community of professionals, with various new challenging tasks and duties. Both 'knowledge management' and 'pedagogical leadership' relate to this latter aspect (Alava et al., 2012).

As suggested in the beginning, we focus on the research interests, aims and questions in the dissertations and use them to cluster and position these studies on a map constructed by the two dimensions described above. The clusters, with short headings to describe the contents and focuses of the studies, are often overlapping and intertwined. The studies in the first cluster focus on, intend to both scrutinise and clarify, **principals' tasks and duties**. This is done by observing principals' work and use of time on different tasks and duties, in Mäkelä's (2007) case by an auto-ethnographic method and in Karikoski's (2009) study by shadowing colleagues. In Mustonen's (2003) comparative study (principals from Finland, Germany and the Netherlands), the aim was to clarify the importance and realisation of the duties of a principal, concerning both actions and experiences, by interviews and questionnaires. Vuohijoki (2006) studied principals' understanding of their duties and responsibilities from the point of view of gender and formal position in relation to their professional well-being.

In the second cluster, the dissertations focus on principals' handling of rather specific tasks on the basis of their personal–professional **capacities and competencies**. Haapa (2016) focused on principals' perceptions of their capacity to use a computer-based administration system for pedagogic and administrative purposes, and also their understanding of the usefulness of these systems in their administrative work. Isotalo (2014) used narrative interviews to scrutinise the most demanding, time- and energy-consuming decisions that principals have to make regarding their overall responsibility for their schools. Sandén (2007) examined the desire and disillusion in the professional role of a principal to capture both the determinants

and circumstances that increase and decrease their incentives for a leadership aiming at desired results.

Both Juusennaho (2004) and Pulkkinen (2011) discuss **leadership styles** in their dissertations. In the first case, they do so with the aim of studying possible differences in leadership and management styles on the basis of the gender of principals. The purpose of the second dissertation is to study leadership styles and possible transferences between sports and school by interviewing principals who have functioned as top-level team sport coaches.

The dissertations under the heading **leadership in its context** are anchored in principals' everyday leadership practices, which are studied and given meaning in relation to and in terms of their operational environment, that is, the local organisational and cultural context. Lahtero (2011) observed leadership practices in a case study school and described them as reciprocal interactional processes. His aim was to describe the leadership culture and its subcultures in terms of various artefacts in the cultural and organisational context. Pennanen's (2006) intention was to describe school leadership in its local, municipal context, based on principals' conceptions of the situation at hand as well as the changes in their work related to its operational environment. Kunnari (2008) used national and local steering documents and interviews with principals to study and clarify the operational context of upper-secondary school principals' day-to-day work. This was done in relation to and in terms of the historical, cultural and structural factors that affect and form it.

The studies under the heading **leadership as contextual social practice** study school leadership from principals' points of view but construct it as a contextual, social and interactional practice. Ahonen's (2008) narrative study looks at leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon and aims to describe principals' ways of narrating their leadership identity in its institutional context, which is understood as a social space. Pesonen (2009) studied school leadership as a multidimensional professional practice by studying principals' experiences and views of school leadership and development as well as the challenges they face at various stages of their careers. The focus of Kangaslahti's (2007) dissertation is on the development of strategic leadership practices in a local educational organisation. However, it includes an interview study on principals' understanding of how to enact and develop strategic leadership by enhancing professional trust through constructive interaction.

The last cluster of principals' leadership studies, **collaborative school development**, focuses on leadership for school development in terms of collaborative concepts and practices, that is, knowledge management, shared leadership and learning organisation. The aim of Paukkuri's (2015) comparative ethnographic case study was to study principal's understanding of their function and role in realising shared leadership, and further to deepen the understanding of shared leadership in culturally different school contexts. Liusvaara's (2014) 4-year study in a municipal context focused on principals' leadership practices regarding school development and their quest for enhancing pedagogical well-being and developing their schools as learning organisations. Raasumaa (2010) studied principals' leadership practices in relation to teachers work in basic education in terms of knowledge management,

focusing on how knowledge is understood and how it can be developed through intentional and unintentional knowledge management. Kovalainen's (2020) dissertation on pedagogical leadership has two intertwined aims: to explore and define pedagogical leadership in basic education in relation to the concepts of 'pedagogical' and 'learning community', and to study, through interviews with principals, the assumed inadequacy of pedagogical leadership in relation to change at the organisational and systemic levels.

Finally, the last of the 20 dissertations differs from the others regarding its theme and focus and was not related to any of the clusters described above. Taipale's (2000) case study examines the peer-assisted leadership method as a means and formal procedure for the professional development of principals. This procedure, which consists of principals working in pairs, shadowing and interviewing each other during their workdays, can be classified as a professional and collegial sense-making practice.

Conclusions

Why do (some) principals engage in researching their own professional practice? It is because acting as a principal has become more complex, demanding and stressful, and the professional assignment as such is both all-inclusive and open-ended. In our understanding, based on our scoping literature review of 20 dissertations by Finnish principals (within basic education grades 1–9 and general upper secondary education) engaged in researching their own leadership, the answer lies in the hypothetical title of this chapter – in quest of principalship. Based on the scoping review presented above, the principals in this study have made meaning of their principalship by scrutinising their tasks and duties, capacities and competencies and leadership styles within their immediate context and, at times, as a social and shared practice. By doing this, they have become agents in a process of further professionalisation within an educational system and culture characterised by professional autonomy and trust-based professionalism. The principals in our study have relied on their firm professional platform, with a master's degree and teaching qualification, for orientating themselves and initiating various forms of practices regarding organisational, pedagogical and educational development. They have responded to the research question *How do principals conceptualise and comprehend principalship?* as a starting point and means of professional development. As we note above, these 20 dissertations constitute almost half of the total amount of dissertations on school leadership during the last two decades.

To be able to relate to the title of the chapter – in quest of principalship – we used a scoping literature review to identify and organise, synthesise and report, from an overall perspective, the research interests, aims and questions in 20 dissertations conducted by nine female and eleven male principals. To chart and map the studies, we designed a two-step process with two intertwined analytical frameworks. In the first step, three overlapping themes were identified: *being a principal*, *doing*

principalship and *contextualising* principalship. We exemplified the contents of the themes by briefly referring to the purposes, aims and themes of two representative studies in each of the themes. In the second step, based on overviews of contemporary research on school leadership, we constructed a four-field framework. It consists of two continuums, the first relating to the conceptualisation of leadership (from being an individual undertaking to being understood as a social practice – *what is?*) and the second focusing on the essence of leadership (from making sense of leadership in its context to the function of initiating change and development – *for what?*). The dissertations were thereafter clustered regarding their research interest and focus and organised in relation to the two continuums. To summarise the result of the second step, about half of the dissertations focus on principals' tasks and duties, capacities and competencies and leadership styles, and consequently the other half highlight school leadership as a contextual phenomenon and a social practice, at times for enhancing collaborative school development.

In quest of principalship – what images and contents do we get of principalship in Finnish schools with reference to these 20 dissertations? We provide a concentrated summary: principals have examined what tasks and duties belong to a school leader. Furthermore, they have reflected on what leadership capacities and competencies are needed and how to develop them. Analyses of particular aspects and development areas of leadership styles have been interesting research objects. Other broad subjects in the research gallery are leadership in its context, leadership as a social practice and leadership as a contextual social practice. A separate group amongst the research themes comprises topics about collaborative school development. Here, we can find research results about principals' interest in shared leadership, knowledge management and development of pedagogical leadership.

Our overall, two-step scoping analysis of the research interests and aims of doctoral dissertations on principalship in Finland aligns largely with the earlier research and findings. The body of research on school leadership is versatile and multifaceted; consequently, principalship as a formal position and professional practice is complex and dynamic. The complex and overlapping contexts both constrain and enable various forms of being a principal or doing principalship. The same applies for making sense of principalship, both by reflecting on the very character of principalship as well as seizing the challenges and possibilities of developing principalship as a compelling and momentous profession.

Appendix: The Dissertations Included in the Scoping Literature Review

- Ahonen. (2008). *Rehtoreiden kertoma johtajuus ja johtajaidentiteetti* [Leadership and leader identity as narrated by headmasters]. University of Jyväskylä.
- Haapa, P. (2016). *Suomalainen peruskoulun rehtori koulun tietokonepohjaisen hallinto- ohjelman käyttäjänä* [Finnish principal as the user of the school's computer-based administration system]. University of Eastern Finland.

- Isotalo, K. (2014). *Pedagoginen synkronointi. Vaikeus johtamispäätöksissä yläkoulu-rehtorien kokemana* [Pedagogical synchronizing – The difficulty junior high principals experience in making decisions]. University of Jyväskylä
- Juusenaho, R. (2004). *Peruskoulun rehtoreiden johtamisen eroja. Sukupuolinen näkökulma* [Differences in comprehensive school leadership and management. A gender-based approach]. University of Jyväskylä.
- Kangaslahti, J. (2007). *Opetustoimen johtamisen dilemmoja kartoittamassa* [Mapping the strategic leadership practices and dilemmas of a municipal educational organization]. University of Turku.
- Karikoski, A. (2009). *Aika hyvä rehtoriksi. Selviääkö koulun johtamisesta hengissä?* [Good enough as a principal—How to survive leading a school]. University of Helsinki.
- Kovalainen, M. T. (2020). *Pedagoginen johtajuus ja sen vaje yleissivistävän perusopetuksen järjestelmä- ja systeemitason muutoksessa* [Pedagogical leadership and its inadequacy in organizational and systemic change in basic education]. University of Jyväskylä.
- Kunnari, E. (2008). *Kohti ulkorajoja. Lukion toimintakulttuurikuvaus ohjauksen ja johtamisen näkökulmasta* [Towards the outer boundaries: The description of the operational culture in the upper secondary school]. University of Helsinki.
- Lahtero, T. (2011). *Yhtenäiskoulun johtamiskulttuuri – symbolis-tutkinnallinen näkökulma* [Leadership culture in unified comprehensive school, symbolic-interpretative approach]. University of Jyväskylä.
- Liusvaara, L. (2014). *Kun vaan rehtori on korvat auki. Koulun kehittämisellä pedagogista hyvinvointia* [If only the principal has the ears open – Pedagogical well-being through school development]. University of Turku.
- Mustonen, K. (2003). *Mihin rehtoria tarvitaan? Rehtorin tehtävät ja niiden toteutuminen Pohjois-Savon yleissivistävissä kouluissa* [Why do we need a principal? The importance and realization of the duties of the principals in Finnish comprehensive and upper secondary schools]. University of Oulu.
- Mäkelä, A. (2007). *Mitä rehtorit todella tekevät? Etnografinen tapaustutkimus johtamisesta ja rehtorin tehtävistä peruskoulussa* [What principals really do. An ethnographic case study on leadership and on principal's task in comprehensive school]. University of Jyväskylä.
- Paukkuri, E. (2015). *How is the phenomenon of shared leadership understood in the theory and practice of school leadership? A case study conducted in four European schools*. University of Tampere.
- Pennanen, A. (2006). *Peruskoulun johtaminen. Modernista kohti transmodernia johtamista* [From modern towards transmodern leading in basic education]. University of Oulu.
- Pesonen, J. (2009). *Peruskoulun johtaminen – aikansa ilmiö*. [Comprehensive school leadership – Phenomenon of its time]. University of Joensuu.
- Pulkkinen, S. (2011). *Valmentajataustan merkitys rehtorin työssä* [The significance of coaching background in principal's work]. University of Jyväskylä.

- Raasumaa, V. 2010. *Perusopetuksen rehtori opettajien osaamisen johtajana* [Knowledge management functions of a principal in basic education]. University of Jyväskylä.
- Sandén, T. (2007). *Lust att leda i lust och leda: om rektorers arbete under en tid av förändring* [Desire and disillusion in school leadership. Head teachers and their work at a time of change]. University of Åbo Akademi.
- Taipale, A. (2000). *Peer-assisted Leadership -menetelmä rehtorikoulutuksessa. Erään koulutusprosessin taustakontekstin kuvaus, teoreettiset perusteet sekä toteutuksen ja vaikuttavuuden arviointi* [Peer-assisted Leadership – A method for the training of principals]. University of Helsinki.
- Vuohijoki, T. (2006). *Pitää vain selviytyä. Tutkimus rehtorin työstä ja työssä jaksamisesta sukupuolen ja virka-aseman suhteen tarkasteltuna* [You just have to cope: the work and professional well-being of principals researched in relation to their sex and official position of authority]. University of Turku.

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