7 Principal Agency

Educational Leadership at the Intersection Between Past Experiences and Present Environments

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Today, the issue of equality in education is one of the most pressing concerns, since increased socio-economic inequality and migration present major challenges for school leaders (Møller, 2017). From the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (NAE, 2016, 2019), we know that in Sweden, differences in performance between schools have been exacerbated and that there is a correlation between socio-economic factors and academic performance. The PISA results further indicate that students in schools with a less favourable student composition are at risk of receiving poorer education. Principals in these schools struggle to a greater extent with problems related to teacher recruitment and teachers' skills and qualifications. A messy classroom climate, truancy and late arrivals also seem to be a greater problem in these schools. Previous research (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018) also indicates that there is a difference in students' access to 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2013) between low- and high-performance classrooms.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) have increasingly been setting the agenda for education, as well as school leadership, in policymaking (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). Recent policy initiatives in the EU have led to streamlined curricula based on performance and standards (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015) and to more standardisation in each country's approach to school leadership (Møller, 2009). For example, frameworks and ideas about introductory programmes and leadership development recommended by the OECD (see, e.g., Pont et al., 2008) have been integrated into national school leadership policies in Sweden, among other countries.

Successful leadership and the discourse of equity are mainly based on data from international student assessments, such as PISA and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Møller, 2017), which further define the type of knowledge that is prioritised as 'powerful' (Young, 2013). Møller (2017) further argues that over the last 20 years, large-scale international research on school leadership, as well as such research cited in OECD reports, has tended to lead to decontextualised lists of best practices, what works and what school leaders should do to be considered successful

(see, e.g., Leithwood et al., 2008; Pont et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2009). This has influenced educational policy discussions about school leadership in Scandinavia as well, with measurements, standards and accountability being central issues, with the important aim of reducing inequality in student outcomes across social groups. School principals struggle with these ‘tensions of managerial demands from the outside and their own standards for acting as professional educational leaders’ (Møller, 2009, p. 176). Through the lens of principal agency, the aim of this study is to challenge the discourse in which the current policy agenda for successful school leadership and equity is embedded beyond the agenda of what works (Møller, 2017). Building on the foundational educational question posed by Biesta (2017), ‘Educational leadership for what?’, the study is guided by educational questions concerning what values, knowledge and skills school leaders should lead towards. Drawing on transactional realism and an analytical framework of agency as temporal, principal agency is explored as context-dependent. The following section presents transactional realism as a theoretical framework and outlines the theme of principal agency. It then presents the analytical and methodological framework and the analytical process of the study. The next section presents the results. The chapter ends with a concluding discussion.

Transactional Realism

The transactional perspective of realism, which guided this study, is based on the theory of pragmatism. Pragmatism refers to action, and therefore to a practical engagement with the world, and allows an understanding of human interaction and communication in thoroughly practical terms (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). According to the transactional realism approach within pragmatism, there is no gap between human beings and the world (Biesta, 2014). As humans, we are participants in an unfinished, constantly evolving universe (Garrison, 1994). From a transactional perspective, “the world” always appears as a function of what we do’ (Biesta, 2014, p. 43), and as humans, we always act as part of both the physical and the social world. John Dewey’s transactional realism cuts across the dichotomy of objectivism and subjectivism. For Dewey, the constitution of subject/object distinctions is treated as an act, not as a given (Rosiek, 2013). As humans, we are always ‘a part of the reality we investigate and our inquiries are transactions across boundaries that have no set definition’ (Rosiek, 2013, p. 695). In Dewey’s view, we constantly engage with reality in our environment through incessantly ongoing transactions. Referred to as a pragmatist relational perspective, transactional realism implies that human activities can never be fully understood in isolation (Raffo & Roth, 2020). Actions involve a movement back and forth between the actor and the environment, whereby the actor both influences and is influenced by it.

Bergh and Wahlström (2018) argue that the later works of Mead and Dewey within pragmatism, with a philosophy of action as a philosophy of time and nature, have changed our understanding of intentionality. For a

pragmatist, action is not the outcome of predetermined ends, as theories of rational action hold. Setting goals for action ‘can only be done in an actual context and as a result of reflection on the emerging constraints in the practical world that always precede action’ (Bergh & Wahlström, 2018, p. 137). Dewey’s transactional realism can further be described as an experimental transaction, as ‘a continuous reconstruction carried out to solve our problems’ (Garrison, 1994, p. 8). The pragmatist theory of action analyses ‘conditions of possibility’ (Joas, 1993, p. 250) ‘for the evaluative, experimental, and constructive dimensions of perception and action, within the contexts of social experience’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 968). The choice of action from many possibilities is then what gives an action its creativity.

Because human actions are not bound by predetermined ends, they are radically open, but they are also responsible (Säfström, 2012). Drawing on Joas (1993), Bergh and Wahlström (2018) emphasise that for both Dewey and Mead, action is not about making intelligence practical but about making praxis intelligent. According to Dewey (1993), intelligence is ‘a method of adjustment of capacities and conditions within specific situations’ (p. 73) and another name for the exercise of equality and justice. Intelligence is not a faculty or property of which we have more or less in our minds but inherently bound to public responsibility and directly connected ‘with equality and justice as it is exercised in actual social contexts, which, in turn, has consequences for the democratic society and for real men and women in a social environment’ (Säfström, 2012, p. 419). Every action of intelligence is thus grounded in the capacity to read the future in present ongoing, prospective and creative in its core, with an emphasis on what projects are good for (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Principal Agency through the Lens of Transactional Realism

From the perspective of transactional realism, agency is not something that people have; it is something that people do (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). A transactional notion of the individual –for instance, a school leader – as part of a dynamic environment means that the individual’s actions are not static or given and, hence, are always open to creative possibilities for transacted moments that point to change and transformation. Educational moments can be regarded here as aspects of events ‘in which relational transactions jointly create the possibilities of joint new experience’ (Raffo & Roth, 2020, p. 457). In the context of school leadership, every leadership moment is a unique event characterised by the school leader and the environment. From a transactional perspective, school leaders are simultaneously affected by and affect every leadership act. From this perspective, they ‘are not self-authoring per se and as agents are affected not only by external conditions but also by their own actions while these are unfolding’ (Raffo & Roth, 2020, p. 458). The transactions are further not predetermined, ‘as the unpredictability of the unfolding event of schooling as a social field of transactions is a product of its interconnectedness to other social fields and transactions that

individuals experience and bring with them' (Raffo & Roth, 2020, p. 458). Principal agency may thus result in similar transactions (but not the same, as transactions can never be identical to previous ones).

School leaders are always socially and historically situated in contexts in which 'every present experience has a forward direction, toward the future, at the same time that it is permeated by past experiences' (Bergh & Wahlström, 2018, p. 137). Distinguishing between different dimensions of agency, like temporal aspects of past, present and future experiences, as proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), makes it possible to 'account for variability and change in actors' capacities for imaginative and critical intervention in the diverse contexts within which they act' (p. 970). Thus, drawing on temporality in transactional realism offers a broader and deeper understanding of the factors and phenomena that shape the conditions for and influence school leadership actions (Sundström Sjödin & Wahlström, 2017).

Temporal Dimensions of Principal Agency

Dewey argued 'that reality itself should be understood in temporal terms' (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 52). To understand agency in different contexts and times, we can capture agency in its full complexity only within the flow of time (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Ecclestone, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceptualise agency in both an empirical and an analytical sense 'as a temporally constructed engagement, based on the habits, imagination and judgements of what seems best to do at the present with respect to what has been and what one wants to achieve' (Alvunger et al., 2017, p. 2). According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), principal agency can be regarded as 'a historically variable phenomenon, embedded in changing theoretical and practical conceptions of time and action' (pp. 972–973). They locate agency primarily in the actors' orientations, suggesting that the way in which we understand our relationships with the past, future and present makes a difference to our actions. Likewise, the ways in which school leaders understand their own relationships with the past, future and present make a difference to their actions. This, in turn, means that their '*sense* of agency, and possibly the way in which they (are able to) talk about their orientations towards the past, future and present – the narration of their orientations' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 12) is an important factor in their actual agency as well.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that agency should be regarded as an analytical category in its own right, 'with distinctive theoretical dimensions and temporally variable social manifestations' (p. 963). In line with pragmatist transactional realism, they theoretically developed the concept of agency as analytically situated within the flow of time, considering it a temporally embedded process of social engagement, and made an analytical distinction between three constitutive elements: *iteration*, *projectivity* and *practical evaluation*. Since these aspects correspond to the different

temporal orientations of agency, they make it possible to examine different kinds of actions and to determine whether they are more oriented towards the past, the future or the present. *The iterational element of agency* 'is manifested in the actors' ability to recall, select and apply more or less tacit and taken-for-granted schemas of action that they have developed through past interactions' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 13). This dimension further refers to 'the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). *The practical-evaluative dimension of agency* can be understood 'as the way in which actors bring their past experiences and future orientations to bear on the present situation' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 15). In this dimension of agency, the contextualisation of social experience is in focus. As a concept, practical evaluation can be associated with different forms of activity and 'entails further the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). As a central aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension, judgement is related not only to strategic decision-making (i.e. finding the most effective and efficient means to achieve specific, predetermined ends) but also to decisions about the desirability of likely ends (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Finally, *the projective element of agency* 'encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). Located at the critical mediating juncture between the iterational and practical-evaluative aspects of agency, the projective aspect of agency focuses on the hypothesising of experience, 'generating alternative possible responses to the problematic situations' (p. 984). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) stress that the temporal aspects of agency, in varying degrees, can always be found 'within any concrete empirical instance of action' as 'a chordal triad of agency' (p. 972). Although it is possible to make an analytical distinction between the three dimensions of agency, they are still intertwined and dependent on each other. In the iterational dimension, for example, the future and present emerge as secondary tones in the chordal triad of agency – the future through expectation and the present through manoeuvre. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) further argue that

while the temporal-relational contexts of action influence and shape agency and are (re)shaped by it in turn, the former is never so deeply intertwined with every aspect of the latter that these different analytical elements cannot be examined independently of one another.

(p. 1004)

Table 7.1 Schools and principals

<i>School</i>	<i>Principals</i>
Birch Tree School	Eli and Elliot
Larch Tree School	Nico
Oak Tree School	Wallis
Pine Tree School	Sam

Data and Method

This study was based on an analysis of empirical data collected through interviews. Five principals from four schools in Sweden representing low- and high-performance schools were interviewed. A semi-structured interview guide consisting of questions about teaching policies at the respective schools was used. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The schools and principals have been given fictitious names (Table 7.1).

The data analysis was interpretative. First, the transcribed interviews were read several times to find commonalities, variations and themes. To understand differences between individuals in similar contexts (e.g. principals in Swedish comprehensive schools), it was important to include both the contextual and temporal dimensions in the analysis. Therefore, the analytical framework of principal agency as ‘a chordal triad’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) was used as an analytical tool in the subsequent in-depth and structured text analysis. The analysis model was based on the transactional realist understanding of agency outlined above, and in the manifestations of the iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions in the principals’ narratives of school leadership and curriculum.

Principal Agency and the Standards-Based Curriculum

This section presents the principals’ narratives about school leadership and curriculum. First, focus is on the iterational dimension of the three temporal phases, as the principals reflect on past personal and professional experiences. Second, focusing on the present, the principals describe their experiences of dealing with problems, dilemmas and challenges in present situations. Finally, focusing on the projective dimension of principal agency, the principals’ future goals and visions are outlined.

Referring to the Past: Iterational Experiences

The principals describe different past experiences of school leadership. Working as principals at high-performing schools, Nico and Sam refer to experiences of stability in terms of both staff and students, which in turn seems to facilitate and create good conditions for curriculum alignment and student outcomes. Teachers who have worked at the same school for a long

time know each other well and cooperate better. Since Pine Tree School was established more than twenty years ago, it has had a special pedagogic profile focusing on aesthetic learning processes and working across subjects. As a result, the teachers have worked together on the curriculum extremely intensively throughout the school's history, according to Sam. Larch Tree School and Pine Tree School have been high-performing schools for several years. According to both Nico and Sam, student stability creates good conditions and produces good results, as it offers the possibility of shaping the students from Grades 1 to 9.

At the two low-performing schools, the principals refer to past experiences of struggling to recruit qualified teachers and low expectations on the students. Although Wallis claims that the school has succeeded in recruitment and in improving teacher competence over time, there are still some teachers who are not qualified. Eli and Elliot mention that many staff members were replaced a while ago. Nevertheless, the teachers have recently started to get to know each other, collaborate more and work more across subjects and have created a more open atmosphere. At Oak Tree School, the success rate of qualification for upper secondary school in Grade 9 increased to 52%, from 31% the previous year. Thus, 'we have come a long way,' says Wallis, who also claims to have stubbornly held on to the belief that everything in school should be done to benefit students' learning progress:

I've basically been doing this since I started. For a year, my mantra was to ask in every single meeting in every forum, "Does this benefit students' learning and knowledge development?" It takes a lot to hold on, even if you sometimes feel that you can no longer do it. I have to be strong and hold on.

(Wallis)

Both Elliot and Wallis refer to past experiences with a lack of trust among students' parents in their schools, and how over the years the number of school inspection reports has increased. Elliot feels that the school no longer seems to play a particularly important role:

From a broader perspective, I think I see a big difference in the importance of the school – it can certainly depend on its location, but education is not perceived as the most important thing here, even though it is located in a place with an entrepreneurial spirit.

To summarise, when reflecting on the past, the principals report quite different experiences. While Nico and Sam refer to staff and student stability that creates favourable conditions for their schools' high performance, the Birch Tree School and Oak Tree School principals experience considerable difficulty in recruiting qualified teachers and struggle with a lack of trust in the school and low expectations on the students.

Dealing with the Present: Practical-Evaluative Experiences

This section focuses on the principals' leadership activities in present situations. Reflecting on the curriculum, the principals place slightly different emphasis on the various parts of their daily work as school leaders. According to Nico, the overall values and objectives form the basis for the entire school's work. These are used in the school's policies and action plans, 'so everything is woven together through "the school's wallpaper."' For Wallis at Oak Tree School, the syllabus must always come first 'because there is a risk that if you only think about creating security, you lose the learning perspective.' Wallis feels that this may happen especially in schools with difficulties such as those that Oak Tree School faces. At Birch Tree School, the principals see the various parts of the curriculum as intertwined. 'The overall values and objectives are the basis for the school – and my mission,' says Elliot, 'and these values and goals should reflect the interaction with the students; they are the glue, the moral compass.' The syllabus is more of something that you look at and 'check off to ensure that you have included everything in planning different teaching areas,' Elliot continues. At Pine Tree School, the curriculum as a whole forms the basis for the school's 'pedagogical platform' – that is, a shared idea about what teaching should be about.

The curriculum affects the areas and activities that the principals prioritise in their daily school leadership work in different ways. An example is new legislation to be implemented, such as digitalisation. Other examples are school inspection reports and national tests. A great deal of time is spent on national tests, 'actually controlling the year and a lot of planning,' according to Eli. Sam argues that the curriculum and the school law are so comprehensive that it is impossible to focus on all those things at once and further refers to having a strategy to sort everything into three basic things to work on: quality work, equal treatment and student health. However, Sam notes that there are other things to do as well, above all as a municipal official. This part tends to swell, according to Sam, 'because I have to do it, because someone says I have to.' No one controls the work on student health, equal treatment and quality work as much as the leadership assignments from the municipality, according to Sam. Wallis notes that principals need to have courage when prioritising what to focus on in their daily work:

I know the laws, and I know where to look if I have forgotten something or if I am unsure about something. But I feel safe in it. And I know that, yes, now I know I missed this thing, but it was because I did this and this, and it was much more important to do right now.

Nico believes that it is hard to tell in what way the curriculum affects what is prioritised in the management of the school. By delegating responsibility for teaching and grading mainly to the subject teachers, Nico mainly focuses on the curriculum's overall goals and values. Achieving the right character and attitude is of utmost importance.

The principals further reflect on different ways to approach and manage the curriculum as school leaders. At Pine Tree School, there is a course template that functions as ‘a simplified checklist for all parts of the curriculum,’ which the teachers can use when working across subjects to ensure that they include all parts of the curriculum. ‘We created it ourselves because it is beneficial for us, not because someone says you need to document,’ says Sam. This way of working places high demands on teachers and their cooperation. At Larch Tree School, a specific ‘value concept’ is used, including – among other things – teaching materials, posters and songs. It is ‘like a copy of the curriculum,’ says Nico, ‘ensuring that the overall values and objectives are fulfilled.’ Nico further describes rules, follow-ups and routines that ensure that the concept is worked on in the entire school. When it comes to the syllabus, there are specially appointed subject teachers who are responsible for it. The teachers are organised in academic teams, in which they share the same planning, work materials, books, tests and assignments. The subject teachers are coordinated by an academic coordinator. In the end, it is the principal who controls the academic coordinator. ‘So, we usually joke about having a system where the checkers check but a checker checks the checkers,’ says Nico. Thus, there are several layers of control that ensure that everybody is doing what they are expected to do, and ‘in this way we have all parts of the curriculum covered,’ Nico continues.

Wallis, Eli and Elliot advocate trust in the professionals:

We have to listen to the profession. It’s so important. I have to assume that my teachers know what they are doing. And that they are professionals. And that they carry out their assignments in the best way for our students to achieve the goals.

(Wallis)

Even though some teachers are not qualified, the Birch Tree School and Oak Tree School principals still believe that they do an excellent job. Eli and Elliot express their happiness at having ‘such good teaching staff in a place as small as this.’ In the subject teams, the Oak Tree School teachers are expected to engage in a constant dialogue about how they can develop teaching according to the students’ prerequisites and results. Trying to take in the outside world so that the school does not become an isolated phenomenon is also important, according to Wallis. For Wallis, the most important message as a pedagogical leader of the teachers is that everyone can have and always has high expectations of the students:

For me, it is very important. Everyone can. But there are different ways to get there. We should always offer new chances. We will work to really try different ways [...] All students want to succeed.

In a similar manner, Eli and Elliot assert that their message as pedagogical leaders is that nothing is impossible. Moreover, they stress the importance of engaging the students. Eli believes that the reason for poor student results is that students find school and teaching boring. The principals want the teachers 'to think outside the box,' work across disciplines and do unexpected things. Eli and Elliot further argue that teachers need to incorporate the outside world and current events into their teaching.

The practical-evaluative dimensions of principal agency presented in this section illustrate the differences in the emphasis that the principals place on the various parts of the curriculum. Nico manages the curriculum through a refined control system, while Sam manages it by a coordination of shared values. The principals at the two low-performing schools do not describe a clear strategy for managing the curriculum. They rather advocate trust in the professionals, which to them means trusting that the teachers provide the best teaching to the students.

Envisioning the Future: Projective Experiences

This section presents the principals' visions for the future. Using the metaphor 'Mind the gap,' Nico's message to the teachers is to always prepare the students for the next step of their education. Nico is convinced that the Larch Tree School staff can always do a little better every year and go one step further by refining routines and working proactively to prepare the students for the future. Of all the things that the students will take with them when they leave Larch Tree School, the most important are high grades and good knowledge of different subjects because these are 'keys that can open doors later in life.' However, they are temporary keys, according to Nico. They open the door to upper secondary school 'and you need it as a basis for further studies, because you still have to move on.' Sam envisions students being proud not only of the knowledge they have gained upon finishing school but also of the knowledge that is available to them in the future so that they 'can choose which door they want.' Whereas Nico's and Sam's goal is to prepare the students, 'making sure that they go as far as possible,' for Wallis, the most important thing is that the Oak Tree School students can enter upper secondary school 'because we know that if the students enter upper secondary school, the probability that they succeed and secure a place in our society is much higher. We know that this is a success factor.' Therefore, Wallis emphasises the importance of always having high expectations of the students.

All principals emphasise that more than knowledge and grades are important for the future. They envision their students becoming useful members of society from both a socio-economic and a democratic perspective. Wallis, for example, wants to prepare the students for the future because it is them 'who in ten years' time will be the ones who vote and have influence.' An important thing that Nico wants to convey to the students is that hard work

will prepare them for the next step, both academically and socially, and that a good character and attitude opens ‘doors to life.’

Because you leave school with completely useless grades but find a job if you have a good character, believe in yourself, know how to take someone by the hand and have eye contact and create dialogue, keep a promise, arrive on time, be happy. If you have a good character and a good attitude towards yourself and others, you can succeed at anything, even if you do not have the grades.

(Nico)

In the future, students should be able to contribute to society. ‘We should prepare them for that so that they understand its meaning – understand how they should handle their responsibilities as citizens later in life,’ Nico argues. Both Elliot and Nico emphasise the importance of investing time and energy in school to get where you want. According to Eli, social skills are important for the future. However, students must also be prepared for further studies. To the question of what the Birch Tree School principals think the students should take with them when they finish school, Eli answers:

Knowledge of being a good citizen, knowledge of being able to take out a loan for your first home, but basic knowledge as well. These are also about upbringing to some extent. Knowing how to write a CV and read documents. Of course, also how to relate to others, to behave to others, rights and obligations, what is right and wrong, what is expected of you. Knowing your boundaries but also feeling freedom and self-confidence.

Elliot further emphasises the importance of critical thinking and of not being swayed by the massive flow of information. Elliot’s vision is one of strong adults – of each student becoming ‘an individual who stands by their opinion, who can express themselves in words, who can argue, who can use the language.’ As a pedagogical leader, Sam has a vision of every student being proud of themselves, as well as their relationships with others.

In summary, using the key metaphor, the principals of the two high-performing schools express visions of offering students the keys that will open any door they want. Nico emphasises the importance of having the right character and attitude to become a good future citizen, especially in socio-economic terms. Sam highlights the importance not only of having good relationships but also of being proud of oneself, in the same way as Wallis, the Oak Tree School principal. For Wallis, however, the primary goal is to prepare students for admission to upper secondary school as a prerequisite for future life opportunities. The Birch Tree School principals convey visions of equipping students with social and practical skills for their future lives as adults, as well as for becoming critically thinking individuals. At the intersection between the iterational and practical-evaluative aspects of principal agency – namely, the projective dimension – the findings of this study indicate

differences in the principals' visions for the future. The answer to the question of 'educational leadership for what?' – that is, what values, knowledge and skills principals should lead towards – is thus different for each principal.

Concluding Discussion

Addressing Biesta's (2017) question, 'Educational leadership for what?,' this study explored principals' temporal experiences of the Swedish curriculum based on a pragmatic transactional realism framework. Incorporating notions of temporality, this perspective of school leadership as context-dependent contributes to a broader and deeper understanding of principal agency. By analysing how experiences of the past and the present influence the principals' visions for the future, it became clear that principal agency in relation to the standards-based curriculum is different for each principal. This is in line with Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who consider the formation of future projects 'an interactive, culturally embedded process by which social actors negotiate their paths toward the future, receiving their driving impetus from the conflicts and challenges of social life' (p. 984).

When implementing the curriculum, principals make different choices, which must be viewed in the context of wider normative and ideological questions about what it is that shapes the outcomes of education (Hammersley-Fletcher & Strain, 2011; Levin, 2008). The type of knowledge prioritised today as 'powerful' draws on a normative policy discourse based on data from international student assessments, such as PISA and TIMSS, and the question of what school leadership's direction should be is often answered in the 'language of targets, outcomes, and Key Performance Indicators' (Biesta, 2017, p. 15). The Larch Tree School principal emphasises the importance of a standardised pedagogical structure and control systems that ensure equal teaching for all students in terms of both what and how to teach. These structures also aim to provide effective teaching to prepare students to achieve good academic results, as well as 'the right' character and attitude. The Larch Tree School principal's agency indicates neoliberal assumptions about and experiences of education based on the idea that it is possible for all students to choose their own individual futures. These visions of students' futures are further based on assumptions about their future contributions to society, primarily in socio-economic terms.

Principals' priorities and actions in their daily work are heavily influenced by wider political agendas. While principals may feel authorised to make decisions according to their own visions, desires and needs, 'their agency is in reality constrained by the less visible structures and rules constructed within wider agendas which, in their turn, influence the cultural norms and practices of society and the institutions within which they operate' (Hammersley-Fletcher & Strain, 2011, p. 876). The principals of both Larch Tree School and Pine Tree School emphasise the importance of equipping their students with the values, knowledge and skills that will enable them to go as far as possible as individuals. However, the Pine Tree School principal

emphasises a holistic view and a democratic way of implementing the curriculum. While the curriculum is managed top-down by the Larch Tree School principal, the Pine Tree School leadership is characterised more by a coordination of the curriculum based on shared pedagogical values from a bottom-up perspective. The principal, however, describes how expectations to document and school inspection reports – among other things – constitute external pressure affecting principal agency. Academic skills are important for the Pine Tree School principal, but equally important is a sense of pride of one's relationships. The Pine Tree School principal's agency indicates visions of socially educating students to become citizens in a democratic society. Unlike Larch Tree School and Pine Tree School, the two low-performing schools lack a clear strategy for implementing the curriculum. Curriculum implementation is not part of the respective principals' agency. The principals at these schools emphasise the importance of trust in the teachers and confidence that they know what they are doing and always fulfil their duties in the best way for the students.

In terms of equity, successful school leadership draws on ideals of a standards-based curriculum that reduces variations and improves performance and outcomes. However, the findings of this study suggest that, on the contrary, principals' agency contributes to reinforcing inequalities between schools in students' access to 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2013). Furthermore, there is a risk that standards-based political agendas, with their emphasis on outputs and a performance-oriented culture, neglect 'the development of the child as a whole human being' (Forrester, 2005, p. 284). For principals, therefore, tensions can emerge between external demands for improved performance and the daily needs of the students, as well as social and democratic endeavours.

Through principal agency, school leaders have the capacity to promote reflection on potential changes and alternative opportunities and guide their future visions of what values, knowledge and skills to lead towards, based on the intention to create a future that is different from the present and the past. Returning to intelligent action as an expression of principal agency, the framework of agency proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) further delineates an 'analytical space within which reflective and morally responsible action might be said to unfold' (p. 1012). This opens up opportunities for alternative considerations of what versions of curriculum and 'powerful knowledge' students should be offered – beyond the language of performance, outcomes and standards.

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