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To cite this article: Brit Olaug Bolken Ballangrud & Marit Aas (2022) Ethical thinking and decision-making in the leadership of professional learning communities, Educational Research, 64:2, 176-190, DOI: [10.1080/00131881.2022.2044879](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2044879)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2044879>



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Published online: 16 Mar 2022.



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Ethical thinking and decision-making in the leadership of professional learning communities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite widespread interest in the leadership and establishment of professional learning communities (PLCs), the ethical dimension may be overlooked. This article examines, in a Norwegian context, how principals have to deal with different sorts of ethical dilemmas in leading professional learning communities.

Purpose: The study aimed to investigate the leadership strategies and interventions that principals implemented in professional learning communities and the nature of ethical dilemmas that were apparent in establishing a professional collective culture.

Methods: Participants were from two different schools, both of which had challenging environments. Data were collected through observations and interviews with the principals (including follow-up interviews after a year had passed), middle managers, two groups of teachers and two groups of students in the two schools, and also with a district-level representative. In total, 15 interviews were conducted with 41 informants. Data were analysed qualitatively.

Findings: Analysis suggested that establishing a professional learning community, building on an inclusive ethos, pedagogical collaboration and democratic leadership are all important strategies. Leadership practices were anchored in an ethical perspective that emphasised responsibility not only for personal morality but for the enhancement of civic moral education that leads to self-knowledge and community awareness.

Conclusion: This research draws attention to how school leadership, especially in challenging environments, is closely connected to the democratic purpose of the school. Ethical thinking and decision-making can be developed in discussions between leaders at school and district level and between leaders and teachers in the learning communities in the school. To lead such discussions, school leaders should increase their knowledge and understanding of ethical decision making, which can help develop their own ethical leadership practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 April 2021
Accepted 17 February 2022

KEYWORDS

School leadership; ethical decision-making; professional learning community (PLC); school performance; school ethos; school culture

Introduction

International research, including findings from the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP),¹ suggests that school leaders may exert significant influence in developing their schools' learning (Gunnulfsen, Jensen, and Møller 2021; Ylimaki et al. 2021; Day et al. 2009; Harris et al. 2007). However, less is understood about how the

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layering of leadership develops in different contexts, and, in particular, how leaders interact with others within professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools. The importance of understanding more in this regard is underscored when we consider that literature on PLCs suggests that school leaders play a significant role in establishing and developing PLCs in schools (Louis 2015; Louis et al. 2010).

Additionally, research on what makes schools effective indicates that there is a close connection between the school setting high expectations, and students' learning and progression (Brandmo, Tiplic, and Elstad 2014; Reynolds et al. 2014). However, in contexts including the Norwegian one, where leadership is characterised by democratic norms, and distributed approaches are strong (Aas and Törnsten 2016), more needs to be known about how school leaders balance authorities' performance requirements: school culture alone does not fully explain how the demands from the educational governance system communicate the expectations for potential outcomes or how they affect leadership and learning in schools. What is certain, though, is that for leaders in democratic societies, it is challenging to deal confidently and effectively with the many complex, problematic and unavoidable ethical decision-making responsibilities that arise within this role (Branson 2010).

The relationship between students' socioeconomic status and educational attainment is well known (e.g. Leithwood and Louis 2012); international studies show that socioeconomic status explains 60–70% of the variation in student outcomes (Leithwood et al. 2004; Witziers, Bosker, and Krüger 2003). There is also a consensus among scholars and practitioners regarding the significance of parents' socioeconomic status as a decisive set of framing conditions for students' learning, thereby shaping the possibilities for school leaders and teachers to act within their contexts (Witziers, Bosker, and Krüger 2003). This is the case in Norway, although an important complexity to bear in mind is that we also find heterogeneity and variation in school performance in these groups inside schools (Hermansen and Birkelund 2015) and between schools (Andersen 2013; Bakken and Elstad 2012). Case studies from schools operating in challenging environments, however, indicate that school development trajectories can be reversed (Aas, Ballangrud, and Paulsen 2017; Ahlström and Aas 2020; Day, Johansson, and Møller 2011; Johansson and Quing 2012; Møller 2018).

The current study is a part of a larger Nordic research project on how diverse contexts make schools different and, thus, how they impact school leadership (Møller 2015). The existing educational policies in Norway build on a comprehensive education system, a strong state, loyalty to and acceptance of state governance and the operation of municipalities as relatively independent political institutions (Møller 2009; Paulsen and Høyer 2016; Paulsen et al. 2014). Compared to other countries, Norway has large public sectors, and local municipalities play a strong role in school governance.² The municipality finances the schools, employs the principals and teachers and plays a key role in providing in-service training for teachers and principals.

In the present article, we explore two schools in Norway: School A and School B. The schools are located in areas characterised by high ethnic, linguistic and cultural heterogeneity and low scores on parents' social welfare indicators. Both schools are characterised as low performing, as defined by student achievement on national tests; however, these outcomes have been improving over time. By focusing on leadership and PLCs, we aim to highlight the importance of contextual factors for individuals working as principals,

especially when it comes to ethical decision-making. Our point of departure is to explore how contextual factors may act as opportunities in some cases and as boundaries in others. In describing the two schools as a starting point for the further analysis of leadership, we were inspired by Ball, Maguire, and Braun's (2012) four dimensions: the situated contexts, material contexts, external contexts and characteristics of professional cultures. Furthermore, we discuss how the principals respond to the contextual conditions and the school municipality's expectations for improving student results (Anagnostopoulos 2006) in their leadership of the school's PLC. In carrying out this study, we offer a contribution to the field's knowledge by drawing attention to the importance of different cultural and contextual factors, highlighting the need for school leaders to understand how these factors interrelate and supporting informed ethical decision-making. However, before reporting our study in further detail, we contextualise our work with reference to the relevant literature and theory.

Background

School leadership and PLCs

For more than 20 years, it has been argued that schools in complex knowledge societies should become learning organisations (Leithwood, Leonard, and Sharratt 1998; Mitchell and Sackney 2000; Senge 2000). As learning organisations, schools can develop innovative structures and processes that enable them to build a professional capacity that is able to respond quickly and flexibly when unexpected changes occur (Giles and Hargreaves 2006; Harris and Jones 2019). Through PLCs, which are developed via shared visions and collective commitments, a collective power is created, opening up productive sharing cultures; this is seen as a key to change and success (Bolam et al. 2005; Harris and Jones 2013). By linking these ideas to Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice, school researchers have recommended that effective schools should operate as a strong PLC. Over the past few decades, there has been increasing research interest in PLCs (Stoll et al. 2006); references to PLCs are apparent, for example, in documents from the OECD (2013) and in Norwegian White Papers (Meld. St. 28 [2015–2016]) and the Norwegian curriculum (Ministry of Education 2017).

PLCs are characterised by shared values and visions, collective responsibility and effective research processes of practice to develop and share knowledge and strong leadership (Hord 2004; Stoll et al. 2006). The literature suggests that well-developed, robust PLCs can change the teacher culture and have a positive influence on teachers' and students' learning (DuFour and Eaker 1998; DuFour and Marzano 2011). However, the concept of PLCs also faces criticism (Giles and Hargreaves 2006). To achieve a systemic approach to school development, a PLC at a school must be connected to networks with other schools and actors; for example, those in a municipality (Fullan 2018). The literature on organisational learning and learning communities has been criticised for placing too much emphasis on formal cognitive processes for problem-solving, systems thinking and collective discussion, at the expense of informal relationships and social networks based on the emotional aspects of a professional community (Mulford and Silins 2003). In other words, school leaders' leadership initiatives are not only influenced by the school context

in which they operate but also by the types of leaders they represent, which is explained as the personal side of leadership, including the ethical perspective herein (Katzenbach and Khan 2010).

Ethical leadership and decision making in education

To be a school leader means to have power and a mission to exercise this power for the benefit of children and young people (Söderström 2017). We considered Branson (2010) to be a particularly helpful conceptualisation, as it discusses how decisions that are connected to this power should be viewed from a number of different ethical perspectives, and how these perspectives are linked to the development of personal moral integrity.

These ethics are summarised as follows (Branson 2010, 2). (1) *The ethic of justice* relates to how rights, laws and policies are concerned about fairness, equality and individual freedom. This vein of ethics involves asking the following question: what laws, rights or policy govern within this area? (2) *The ethic of critique* concerns categories such as privilege, power, culture, language, class and, in particular, social justice. This vein of ethics involves asking the following questions: who benefits from these laws, rules or policies? Who has power? (3) *The ethic of care* seeks to challenge the dominant and/or patriarchal ethics of justice in our society. This vein of ethics focuses on the consequences of leaders' decisions and actions, as reflected in the following questions: who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my actions? (4) *The ethic of the profession* place the student at the centre of the decision-making process. This vein of ethics involves asking the following questions: what is in the best interests of the student? What is the most appropriate way for a professional to act in this situation based on the standards of the profession? (5) *The ethic of personal moral integrity* illustrates that the different ethical perspectives provide a multiplicity of alternative actions for an ethical dilemma.

However, the leader must still make a choice out of all the alternative options provided by each of the ethical perspectives. In doing so, the leader is more informed but not necessarily more able to make the appropriate ethical decision. Moreover, if this is to be an ethically correct choice, the leader also must act with moral integrity, or instinctively do what is right for the good of others, where the interests of others – rather than self-interests – are the spontaneous motivation. Branson (2010) reminds us that all ethical decisions are based on the interplay between our rational, objective knowledge and our interpretive, subjective knowledge. Here, we must acknowledge the integral role of both subjective and objective thinking in the ethical decision-making process. The following questions can increase awareness of making ethical decisions in a personal, moral way: How am I affected by the knowledge provided by each of the ethical perspectives? What is my motivation? What are my feelings, beliefs and biases? What benefits do I gain? Will I benefit the most?

Purpose

By using the framework of ethical decision-making to explore leadership in PLCs, we can identify ethical dilemmas that can contribute to our knowledge about principals' leadership strategies and leadership interventions. PLCs in schools are grounded in the idea of collaborative systemic learning processes. Within these, tensions or dilemmas may evolve

between the principal and the teachers, and amongst the teachers (Aas 2017; Vennebo 2019). These tensions reflect ethical concepts, such as fairness and equality (ethics of justice), power and social justice (ethics of critique), interests of others rather than self-interests (ethics of care) and student interests (ethics of profession). The following research questions drove the present study's analysis: (1) *How do situated, material and external contexts in two underperforming Norwegian schools function as enabling and constraining factors for principals in leading PLCs?* and (2) *What sort of ethical dilemmas appear when establishing a professional collective culture in the two schools?*

Methods

Ethical considerations

In this study, the criteria and commitments set out by The Norwegian Centre of Research Data AS (NSD) were followed.³ Participants received written and oral information about the research aims and procedures before the interviews. They also received information about the voluntary nature and anonymity of their participation, and every participant gave informed consent. The anonymity principles were followed in the processing and presentation.

The two case study schools and their contexts

Our two case study schools, School A and School B, were located in a municipality where 30% of the population had a minority background. The schools were situated in areas characterised by low socioeconomic status in terms of parents' income, level of education, labour market integration and welfare indicators. The authorities have high expectations of the schools in the municipality: they have a common vision to create Norway's best school and a goal that the results of the national tests should be above the national average. The district-level representative (hereafter, superintendent) had regular results meetings with the individual principals, stating the high expectations. Guidelines had been laid out for the schools to organise leadership groups with department heads with personal responsibilities and to uphold development measures – for example, improving reading skills and developing positive behaviour and classroom management based on a standardised pedagogy for building professional capacity.

Our study was part of a Norwegian–Swedish research collaboration, aiming to understand how schools and local authorities interact in Norwegian schools located in challenging environments (Ahlström and Aas 2020; Møller 2018). The project was linked to the International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP), which has developed an extensive body of research about successful principals in over 20 countries. The project team differentiated between low- and high-performing schools (measured by national test and examination results) in areas characterised by poor prerequisites and low- and high-performing schools in areas with good prerequisites. A school may achieve relatively high scores on tests over several years but still perform lower than expected. The municipality in the present study conducts strict performance management, and the schools were selected based on their results from national tests in reading and mathematics, as well as grade statistics. The selection criteria were that the schools' results were

poor in recent years but improving over the last 3 years and that they had the same principal in those years. The selection was made in collaboration between the school department and researchers (Ballangrud and Paulsen 2018; Møller 2018).

Data collection

The researchers spent 5 days at each of the two schools. In each school, observations and interviews were conducted with the school principal, middle managers and two teacher groups and two student groups in each school. Additionally, we conducted an interview with the superintendent who led the municipalities' education administration on behalf of the school board. In total, 15 interviews were conducted with 41 participants. Interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Standardised ISSPP interview protocols were adapted and used in conducting all the interviews (Day, Johansson, and Møller 2011). The semi-structured interview guides were translated and customised for the Norwegian context and contained themes such as the schools' different contexts, organisation, expectations from the environment, teacher recruitment, school climate, school development, learning results and capacity building. According to the protocol, two interviews with each principal were conducted, the second of which was a follow-up interview, after a year had passed, to expand the responses of the first interview. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes. The research teams followed 8th–10th grade students (ages 13–16), teachers and leaders at each school. Two days were spent at each school observing classroom instruction, staff meetings and interactions during breaks and lunchtime. The field notes from the observations helped to contextualise the interview data, together with the municipality's strategic education plan and the statistical data from the education administration. The interviews were transcribed.

Data analyses

Analyses of the collected data were then carried out by the research team, in collaboration, to identify the themes, characteristics, strategies and ethical leadership in the schools. To determine how different contexts affect and distinguish schools (Aas, Ballangrud, and Paulsen 2017) (i.e. to address research question one), we used Ball et al.'s (2012) four categories of analysis: situated context, material context, external context and professional culture. Three subcategories drove the analysis of Ball, Maguire, and Braun's (2012) main categories. These were as follows: (1) the schools and their history, with the following subcategories: the local environment, educational profile, reputation and student results; (2) the school leadership and organisation with the following subcategories: the expectations of the municipality, organisational structure and the principal's leadership strategies; and (3) the development of PLCs with the following subcategories: individual vs. collective teacher culture, values, care and relationships in the communities.

Next, to investigate the second research question (i.e. concerning what sort of ethical dilemmas appeared when establishing professional learning communities in the two schools), we decided to take a closer look at one analytical category – professional culture (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Specifically, we examined the leadership strategies and interventions that were used in organising collective teams and groups and the dilemmas

that appeared between the expectations of the district level and the professionals in the school. Subcategories in this analytical step were derived from the theoretical characteristics of PLCs: shared values and visions, collective responsibility and effective research processes of practice to develop and share knowledge and strong leadership (Hord 2004; Stoll et al. 2006). The participants were not familiar with the PLC concept, which means that the concept was only used by the researchers in the analyses. Furthermore, we discussed what sort of ethical dilemmas appeared in establishing a professional collective culture in the two schools, in light of the five ethical perspectives of Branson (2010): i.e. ethic of justice, ethic of critic, ethic of care, ethic of profession and ethic of personal moral integrity.

Findings

Below, we present our findings through a comparison of the schools. All participants have been anonymised. Any included quotations from the data have been translated into English from Norwegian for the purposes of this article. We begin by describing the schools' histories and the external contextual conditions. Furthermore, we present the internal contextual conditions through the principals' work to develop a systemic, integrative organisation to establish and develop the PLC.

The history of the schools and external conditions

School A and School B have different stories. School A was built in the late 1970s, and the school has had little maintenance since then. The school had approximately 300 students (8th–10th grade students between 13 and 16 years of age) and around 30 teachers. There was stability among the staff, a spread of staff ages and a balance of gender. In this school, almost three-quarters of the students were from a minority background and were second-generation immigrants. Additionally, around two-thirds of the students had individual resources and adapted teaching because of special needs. The school had had a negative reputation for over a decade. A new principal was hired a few years ago, after the school had experienced a turbulent period. The new principal initiated procedures to change the situation and stated that the atmosphere at the school has changed. Although the student results demonstrated considerable progress in this time, the school was still struggling with a negative reputation. The school was located in an area where the parent group was characterised by relatively low levels of education, social living conditions and integration into working life.

In contrast, School B was built 10 years ago, and the school still had a new feel. The school had over 500 students (1st–10th grade) and around 60 teachers. In the study, we followed the students in 8th–10th grade (students between 13 and 16 years of age). In this school, almost 40% of the students were multilingual, around one-tenth received special Norwegian teaching, and fewer than 5% of the students had special needs education. The current principal was hired a few years ago and was previously a teacher and middle manager at the school. When the school was built, a principal was hired who especially emphasised the school's values in recruiting leaders and teachers; therefore, the teachers and leaders shared a common set of values. The school had many teachers in their forties and fifties. Although School B had performed poorly on national tests over the years, in

the last few years, the school had shown progress from the 8th to the 10th grade. This school was also located in an environment where parents had relatively low levels of education, social living conditions and integration into working life. In contrast with School A, though, School B had a positive reputation, and the principal, teachers and students reiterated this. In both schools, the teachers and leaders alike considered that it was a good working environment.

The organisational and situational context at the schools

At School A, the leadership group consisted of three middle leaders who were responsible for the staff development and budget. The principal referred to them as ‘mini-principals’ who were expected to be close to the students. The teachers were organised in teams with other teachers, and the meetings were used for coordination, the exchange of experiences and problem-solving. The teachers undertook as many lessons as possible in their own classes. In the basic subjects, the students were offered different courses based on their skills and class level. This school had supported its students towards the largest academic improvement from the 8th to the 10th grade in the municipality.

At School B, the principal had created a hierarchical organisation, in which the principal was the leader of the middle managers. The middle leaders had teaching duties to connect them more closely to the classroom and increase their opportunities to follow-up with the teachers and students. The principal had meetings with the middle leaders to encourage the exchange of information and the coordination of, and discussion about, the initiatives from the local municipality, among other things, prior to matters being taken further by the middle leaders. The meetings between the principal and the middle leaders were a model for the middle leaders of their grades. The teachers for common subjects were taught at several levels, and the teachers were organised in both teacher teams and subject groups.

Because of the municipality’s expectations, it was the principal’s responsibility to build a bridge between the municipal initiatives and what was carried out at the individual school, through facilitation in different professional communities. The principal at School B had clear expectations, from the superintendent at the local municipality, regarding improvement of students’ results. The expectations were dealt with in the leadership group and delegated to the middle leaders. Thus, the principal ensured broad collective processes, with the principal’s role as working out the strategies and facilitating the processes.

Leadership and professional cultures

School A had a collective culture in which the professional community was characterised by trusting relationships between independent teachers who emphasised having caring relationships with their students and colleagues. The principal considered that the school had many skilled teachers who upheld a common obligation for each other and for the students’ development. Because the school had a large number of child welfare cases and psychosocial challenges, the culture provided opportunities to address personal challenges and receive support. Both emotions and close relationships are expressed. The principal was portrayed as a warm, inclusive and listening person. The collective culture

was also affected by the school's reputation, which unites the teachers, school leaders and parents. Because the students had limited knowledge of Norwegian society, the principal spent time discussing values in the school and self-described as a person with a vision. Several teachers commented that they were concerned with 'making a difference in students' lives' and felt that the school should mean something to the individual.

The principal at School B had also emphasised the school's values, which were characterised by a positive view of people and the belief that a basic positive attitude is of great importance, particularly in contexts where the students' parents have had limited educational backgrounds. The middle managers were recruited based on a democratic and ethical view of student learning. The middle managers and teachers confirmed alike that the school emphasised their 'human vision' and the development of positive relationships. They spent time discussing how to operationalise it in practical situations. For example, the principal explained, 'In our situated area with many students who need a lot of care, who may have mentally ill parents, poor home conditions, little food in the fridge, then you need a teacher who actually makes you come to school instead of staying at home, and has a good relationship'. The principals of both schools emphasised the importance of working with the school's values and developing a collective culture with the hallmarks of openness, security, trust and care.

Both schools employed a number of development measures characterised by the standards-based pedagogy – for example, classroom management – that were initiated by the municipality. At School B, the development measures were discussed in the leadership group and reviewed at the teacher team meetings, when the middle leader and teachers talked about how to improve classroom instruction. Afterwards, the middle leader would follow up by having conversations with individual teachers and taking the topic back to the leadership group. The principal and the 'mini-principals' at School A recorded information and measures focused to a greater extent on the collective enterprise of all leaders and teachers before the measures reached the classroom teachers.

The meeting and group structures at School A can be understood as a collegial and process-oriented model, while School B's model can be understood as a more hierarchical, delegated and integrated model. In this way, the organisation of the professional communities helped to shape the learning environment at both School A and School B.

Discussion

Leading the professional learning community in an ethical way

Based on the descriptions of the two schools, we discuss the enabling and constraining factors for principals in leading the PLCs and explore what kinds of ethical dilemmas were evident in establishing a professional collective culture in the two schools. We organise the discussion according to the five forms of ethics referred to earlier: ethic of justice, ethic of critique, ethic of care, ethic of profession and ethic of personal moral integrity (Branson 2010).

The first ethical dilemma that the principals faced relates to the ethic of justice, which herein refer to what policy governs the students' achievement results. As indicated in the case contextualisation for both schools, there were clear external expectations of improved student attainment. More broadly, the present focus on student performance in basic skills has resulted in a strong push to reduce education to measurable outcomes

(Biesta 2016, 15–27), which is often described as an outcome-based discourse characterised by competition and privatisation (Moos 2017). This outcome-based discourse is contrasted with a discourse focusing on the purposes of schooling and democratic participation (Moos, Johansson, and Skedsmo 2013; Møller 2018). It seems that the pathway from a very low performance to an improved status regarding school results is intimately linked to leadership intervention. For example, the principal at School A began by supporting teachers and allowing mutual trust to develop over time. Next, the principal worked to improve the school's reputation before focusing on students' achievement results. At School B, where the reputation was already good, the principal started by focusing on an outcome-based approach alongside implementing a systemic approach with professional communities of teachers at different grades.

The second ethical dilemma evolved from a critical perspective, focusing on who benefits from the outcome-based discourse policy in education. Working in schools situated in challenging environments seemed to create a common commitment to improving the lives and futures of the students, especially at School A, which was characterised as a multicultural school. This commitment requires trustworthy relationships in which the teachers trust their principal and colleagues, which is important in relation to school effectiveness and school improvement (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis 2017; Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran 2011). Moral and ethical commitments seem to be stronger for the principals and teachers as their first priority, compared with the expectations of the local municipality, when it comes to increasing the students' performance. These findings reflect the literature, indicating that instructional leadership is broadly interpreted as the principal's orientation towards primary processes in school and highlighting the principal acting intentionally and from an overall perspective, thereby considering the school context (Bossert et al. 1982).

The third ethical dilemma arises from the ethic of care, which focuses on how the consequences of the principals' decisions reflected questions such as loyalty, trust and empowerment. A moral decision is made from the perspective of the person making the decision. However, the person making the decision is also aware that the outcome of the decision will be morally judged from the perspective of those observing the outcome. In other words, as Branson (2010) reminds us, all ethical decisions are based on the interplay between our rational objective knowledge and our interpretive subjective knowledge. We must acknowledge the integral role of both subjective and objective thinking in the ethical decision-making process. The findings from the case study aptly illustrate how schools' views of education's purpose are expanded in the interplay between the external and internal contexts, from an instrumental outcome-based orientation to a schooling and democratic participation orientation (Moos 2017). For example, both the principal and teachers at School A expressed the belief that they would be able to make a difference to the lives of their students, which means that they acknowledge their loyalty to the students' needs and help develop their personal empowerment. Furthermore, the principal had worked with the parents to transform the school's reputation, which teachers, students and parents regarded as unfair. In doing so, the principal built trust between the school and society. At School B, principles of care were already defined when the school was established to meet the challenges of the high-need population. The principal demonstrates a strong loyalty to the perspective of care in the establishment of PLCs among the teachers and in the expressed vision of education for all, including students with special needs.

The fourth ethical dilemma relates to the ethics of the profession, which means putting the students' learning in the forefront. According to the literature, well-developed PLCs can change the teacher and school culture, thereby positively influencing teachers' and students' learning (DuFour and Eaker 1998; DuFour and Marzano 2011). Furthermore, the nature of the teachers' motivation in relation to their own work plays an important part in understanding organisational development. Teachers who share the leader's goals and values, as well as the greater goals of the organisation, feel satisfaction and a sense of reward by performing well at their jobs (Hord and Sommers 2008; Liebermann and Miller 2008).

Our analysis highlighted that the two schools in our study had different organisational structures. This demonstrates how a principal's routine behaviours can create links between the characteristics of the school organisation and instructional climate, in turn affecting student achievement (Witziers, Bosker, and Krüger 2003). School A maintained a collegial and process-oriented model, in which the professional community is characterised by trusting relationships between independent teachers who emphasise cultivating caring relationships with their students and colleagues. In contrast, School B can be understood as having a more hierarchical, delegated and integrated model, with a strong link evident between the leadership group and the levels of teachers. The principals from both schools were aware of their required accountability to the municipality. The superintendent is aware of the need to ensure equal access to quality education for all students within the jurisdiction, and the requirement for all schools to comply with the curricular principles and assessment practices set by the government. The ethical dilemma of the profession arises, too, when the two principals establish PLCs to support student learning. In their collective work, they try to find a balance between the accountability discourse based on standards and competition and the discourse of schooling that fosters democratic citizens, which is based on an inclusive learning perspective.

The fifth ethical dilemma, personal moral integrity, involves the principal trying to find a balance between various ethical aspects. According to the PLC literature, principals should have high expectations of teachers and student achievement, supervise teachers, coordinate the curriculum, emphasise basic skills and monitor student progress (Stoll and Louis 2007). The findings from our analysis indicate that the principals made attempts to balance top-down leadership with self-governance and delegation of responsibility, attempts that were shaped by the contextual factors (Ballangrud and Paulsen 2018; Møller 2018). This likely fits within the acceptable range of being a democratic school leader in the Norwegian context. Furthermore, when it comes to the policy of schooling and democratic participation, the policy of an outcome-based discourse represents a dilemma. This creates several ethical leadership decisions, such as a stronger commitment to a high-need population compared with the outcome-based approach policy, stronger loyalty to the students' needs in comparison with the outcome-based education policy and a stronger focus on schooling that fosters democratic citizens compared with a standards-based education and competition.

Limitations

This in-depth, small-scale qualitative case study involved two Norwegian schools located in challenging environments in a municipality. Our data, collected in this context, is discussed alongside relevant research literature. The study is founded on self-reporting and the

limitations inherent in this, and the analysis of a small-scale data collection is recognised; statistical generalisation is not intended. Our case study findings may, however, give rise to analytical generalisation. That is, patterns, concepts or theories that generate understanding and meaning in the context of this study can be applied to similar contexts after the similarities and differences between the situations have been analysed (Yin 2003, 31–33).

Conclusions

In this study, we examined how two principals in challenging environments have developed their professional communities. Fostering their collective professionalism became their strategic choice for addressing the external academic pressure to improve outcomes imposed by the school district level and the internal cultural context at the schools. Both principals established communities, analysed as PLCs, among the schools' leaders and teachers, building on the core culture of inclusive ethos for all students. This sits alongside pedagogical collaboration and democratic leadership, upholding this as important for taking student diversity into account. However, the principals identified different ways to develop professional communities based on what characterises the school situation.

Through our analysis of data, we identified how the principals attempted to balance top-down leadership with self-governance and the delegation of responsibility to the teachers, the process shaped by contextual factors (e.g. expectations from the municipality, students' living conditions and school reputation). Their interventions and communications also seem to fit within the acceptable range of being democratic school leaders in the Norwegian context. From an ethical perspective, this means a stronger commitment to a high-needs population, stronger loyalty to the students' needs and a stronger focus on schooling that fosters democratic citizens.

Our study has implications for the educational community and for professional development. First, it draws attention to a need for policymakers to be aware of the importance of designing schools that support the development of democratic citizens. Furthermore, to enable schools to best support students' development, questions about the democratic purpose of the school should be on the regular agenda in discussions between the school and district levels. It also underscores the importance of school leaders establishing professional learning communities that can develop ethical thinking and decision-making among teachers and leaders. Finally, it highlights the importance of school leaders being supported to increase their knowledge and understanding of ethical decision-making, as this can support the development of their own leadership practice.

Notes

1. <https://www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp>
2. The 429 municipalities in Norway are responsible for compulsory education at the primary and lower secondary school levels. The municipalities vary in size, as well as in level of welfare.
3. See The Norwegian Center of Research Data AS: <https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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