

Leading professional group discussions: A challenge for principals?

Developing collective professional capacity in schools is viewed as important for improving schools. Furthermore, principals are seen as being in a key position to promote the development of collective capacity. Although an array of studies report on what principals can do to support capacity development, such as by facilitating collective professional discussions among their staff, less attention has been drawn to how principals can engage in and lead such discussions. In this article we present and use a conceptual model for leading professional group discussions to examine leadership of professional group discussions performed by principals in a Norwegian National School Leadership Program. The findings show that the principals' focus is on fostering an open process by involving all participants in a way that gives all members a chance to provide their opinions and to have their thoughts heard. The principals pay less attention to the types of actions considered essential to keep discussions on track and carry them forward, including making further plans for actions. Because group discussions can lay the groundwork for building professional capacity and real improvement in schools, more awareness is needed for principals so that they can develop the skills needed for leading professional discussions.

Keywords: School leadership, capacity building, professional group discussion

Introduction

Developing collective professional capacity in schools cannot be accomplished without active support from leaders at all levels (Mulford & Silins, 2003; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Leadership importantly includes the creation of conditions for the growth of teachers' professional knowledge (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2006). Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) emphasised the link between leaders who utilise active participation in professional learning and development with their staff and student success. A critical factor here is to facilitate regular meetings for staff discussions (Louis, 1998). By initiating academic discussions on school subjects, the principal may influence teachers' teaching practices, thereby indirectly affecting the

students' learning (Leithwood et al., 2006). In 'Leadership for 21st century learning', learning leadership is introduced as a core concept (OECD, 2013) and is defined by the following five principles: 1) a focus on learning, 2) creating conditions favourable to learning, 3) dialogue, 4) sharing leadership through structures and procedures supporting participation and 5) a shared sense of accountability (MacBeath, 2013). These principles highlight the different aspects of professional development and underline the importance of the process of developing collective knowledge and professional capacity, which tends to be a main challenge for principals (Aas & Paulsen, 2017).

Even though some research has shown that building collective knowledge and professional capacity is considered essential for school effectiveness and improvement (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005), less research has been conducted on the collective professional discussions established for knowledge and capacity building. Inspired by a framework for group coaching (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016), we developed a conceptual model for leading professional group discussions (the LPGD-model), that can create professional collective capacity building to improve schools. Group discussions are essential entities that can be seen as micro-processes of the ongoing work processes within professional learning communities, where groups both work together toward accomplishing the goal and are result oriented to meet the needs of students, as well as learning oriented to ensure job-embedded learning of the teachers that serve the students (cf. Dufour & Marzano, 2011). This twofold orientation demands that the leaders of group discussions take a dual role by focusing on the results and clear goals, and that they are relentlessly pursuing the school's purposes and professional practices, working collectively with their staff to learn from each other and help resolve

any difficulties and challenges. This means being able to run processes that provide a combination of pressure and support that build capacity (Dufour & Marzano, 2011).

In the current article, we examine the leadership of principals in professional group discussions. Empirically, we study group discussions based on a school case narrative performed and led by principals. The present study is grounded in the context the National School Leadership Program in Norway. Analytical tools found in the LPGD-model are used in the analysis.

The article is organised as follows: After the introduction, we discuss the aspects of professional learning, present the LPGD-model, and address the role of leaders. Next, we present the National School Leadership Program in Norway and the school case narrative. We then describe the methods used, giving a particular emphasis to how the LPGD-model is used in the analysis. In the last part, we present the findings by using video-recorded data of group discussions to exemplify critical moments in the discussion processes and to illuminate how the principal's leadership role played out in situ. Finally, we sum up and discuss the main findings and conclude the article.

The LPGD-model for leading professional group discussions

Professional group discussions are essential to analyse when examining professional learning communities. So far, no universal definition of a professional learning community has been established, but a broad international consensus has developed around the following definition: 'a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way' (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223). To understand the intention of group discussions among professionals, it is useful to consider the five characteristics professional learning communities share: 1) shared values, 2) collective responsibility, 3) reflective professional inquiry, 4) collaboration and 5) group and individual learning

(Stoll & Louis, 2007). In other words, professional learning communities provide opportunities for leaders and teachers to discuss and negotiate the meaning of concepts and experiences and to better understand new theories, thereby building a consensus about the values and goals of new collective practices (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007).

Building a consensus during discussions is complicated. However, according to Louis (2003), the most essential element required for building a consensus is to be engaged in civilised but semi-permeant disagreement. For the leaders of group discussions, this means to articulate a humanist voice that calls for respect and listens to all positions while being able to move forward in the absence of a consensus.

In the National School Leadership Program in Norway, a model of group coaching was developed with a protocol that provides structure for school leaders in how they can clarify problems and issues, share perspectives and experiences and reflect and plan for change and improvement (Aas & Vavik, 2015). The group coaching protocol has been used in continuing professional development programmes for school leaders as part of the international project Professional Learning through Feedback and Reflection (PROFLEC;¹ Flückiger, Aas, Johnson, Lovett, & Nicolaidou, 2017). The group coaching protocol is based on the GROUP model (goal, reality, options, understand others and perform; Brown & Grant, 2010), which draws on the seminal work of Whitmore (2004), who developed the GROW model (goal, reality, options and way forward). A group coach manages the process by using a protocol that ensures time

¹ Professional Learning through Feedback and Reflection (PROFLEC) was led by Professor Doctor Stephan Huber from the University of Teacher Education of Switzerland with funding provided by the European Union.

is allocated adequately and that the process adheres to the agreed format of the following five steps (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016): 1) presentation of the coaching issue, 2) questioning to clarify the issue, 3) reflection and perspectives related to the issue, 4) reflections and responses from the coachee and 5) summing up and decision making on an action plan. The premise for this structure is that the leader is setting the stage for coaching by building trust and collaboration within the group (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016).

The idea behind the PROFLEC protocol is to support school leaders in how to encourage peer-supported reflection on practice issues, supported by trusting relationship and structures, to influence collective capacity building and improve professional practice (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016). For the purpose of the current study, we have developed the four step LPGD-model inspired by the PROFLEC protocol with the following steps: 1) setting the stage, 2) inviting point of views and arguments, 3) advancing the discussion and 4) wrapping up the discussion.

To clarify the role of the coach the PROFLEC protocol distinguish between and use the terms ‘group coach’ and ‘group facilitator’ although the terms in the literature often are used interchangeably (Brown & Grant, 2010). According to Clutterbuck (2007, 2010) the roles of a coach and facilitator are slightly different. The coach plays an active role as a member of the group and focuses on empower the group to manage the conversation themselves and goal achievement. The facilitator plays a more detached role from the group and focuses on the group process with emphasis placed on learning. Thus, group coaches immerse themselves in the content discussed focusing as a reagent on goal achievement whilst the group facilitator focusing as a catalyst on the group process and its opportunities for learning. In leading professional discussions, leaders have to assume both roles: that is, both reagents and catalysts. Thus, the principal’s role in leading professional group discussions – which, to be effective, needs

both being goal and result oriented and learning oriented. In the following, the LPGD-model is presented, but with a special focus on the leader's role.

The first step in LPGD-model is about setting the stage (refers to step 1 and 2 in the PROFLEC protocol). If the group is meeting to discuss a specific issue or to plan something, the discussion topic will already be set. If the topic is unclear, then someone needs to help the group frame and clarify it. The leader – through framing the discussion topic and encouraging ideas from the group – can take on this role. In the framing process, the leader must start by describing her or his point of view and what the view is based on. The next step is to check if her or his description is shared by the group, which is done by inviting others' points of view. In this clarification process, the leader must listen carefully to the group members, appreciate their initiatives, and then decide what to do with the different initiatives. This might lead to a new framing of the discussion topic. In the first step, the idea is to establish a shared understanding of the discussion topic as a starting point for further discussion, a viewpoint which also is underlined by Robinson (2015) in her concept of open-to-learning conversations about an issue between a leader and teacher.

The second step is to invite different point of views and arguments (refers to steps 3 and 4 in the PROFLEC protocol) that are related to the topics the group members have agreed upon. The leader should be aware of the progress of the discussion and should be able to ask questions and provide information, arguments or reflections that stimulate thinking. This step aims to encourage collective inquiry into the critical questions of the discussion topic and the challenges the group faces. The leader's task is to listen carefully to each person's thoughts and ideas. In so doing and by repeating the voices heard for all the group members and following up with questions, the leader can, in recurring cycles of inquiry, demonstrate that he or she

acknowledges and appreciates every contribution and is using them to draw a picture of the situation and topic discussed that everyone can relate to and share. This is fundamental in collective capacity building to create a collaborative learning environment (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981; Dysthe, 2003). If the participants have trouble understanding the situation and topic discussed, it is the leader's task to help the group members clarify and create meaning of the confusing topic. The point is to make sure that everyone understands what an individual or the group actually means and to set a direction for how to proceed or take the discussion to the next step.

The third step is to advance the discussion (refers to steps 3 and 4 in The PROFLEC protocol). This task entails stopping the discussion at various points to acknowledge all the points of view and make sure that everyone understands the ideas that have been made or what the two sides of the argument have proposed because constructing a dualism is helpful to see how each side has equal power and importance. This step also can include restating a conclusion the group has reached or clarifying particular reflections or points of view made by individuals by aligning, combining and attuning different viewpoints and reflections posed in the discussion. According to Nardi (2005), a real collaboration will only take place when the involved participants' interest and motives are brought forth and responded to. Aligning means to be sure that the viewpoints are related to the discussion topic, combining refers to summing up viewpoints that are related to each other, and attuning is about summing up and shaping a collective focus. The intention of the third step is to advance the discussion from the individual viewpoints toward a common group point that can open the possibility of moving the discussion from talk to action.

The fourth step is about wrapping up the discussion (refers to step 5 in the PROFLEC protocol). As the discussion ends, the leader should help the group review

the discussion and make plans for action. The leader should also sum up any assignments or tasks that were agreed upon and make sure that every member knows what her or his responsibilities are; then, the leader must review the deadlines for those responsibilities and reiterate them to the group members. Other wrap-up steps include getting feedback on the session – including suggestions for making the discussion process better – pointing out the group’s accomplishments and thanking the group members for their work. In line with these steps, the next section presents the programme and case narrative upon which the group discussions are based.

The National School Leadership Program

Norwegian authorities, influenced by the OECD project ‘Improving School Leadership’, launched a nationwide education programme in 2009 for newly appointed Principals; here, the goal was improving their qualifications as leaders and supporting national policies. The National School Leadership Program was built around five curriculum themes that the Norwegian Minister of Education and Research tendered for, as follows: students’ learning, management and administration, cooperation and organisation building, development and change, and the leadership role (Hybertsen et al., 2014). According to Timperley (2011), one of the fundamental principles of professional learning is having multiple opportunities to learn and apply information. A process of ongoing reflection and discussion that challenges the current way of thinking is valuable in building new practices. In the programme at the University of Oslo, case-based instruction and group coaching have been used to influence practice and build leadership capacity, including developing ethical considerations (Aas, 2017; Aas & Vavik, 2015). Some evidence indicates that the discussion of cases and case attributes provides a potentially viable approach for leaders to build knowledge with (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2009; Yukl, 2010). In the current article, we

draw on data from professional group discussions by using the case narrative of Blueberry School. The principals who performed the group discussions did not know the LPGD-model reported in the present article.

The school case narrative – Blueberry School

Blueberry School is a combined primary and secondary school with 548 students, 57 teachers and 24 assistants. The leadership team consists of the principal and three designated leaders who head the teaching teams (Grades 1–4, Grades 5–7 and Grades 8–10). Three years ago, it was decided that the secondary school should merge with the new primary school. A newly appointed principal has been leading the school for 2 years, and the school is waiting for new buildings to be constructed because the classrooms are located on different sites. Given the poor student performance, change is needed. The principal has stated that the teachers in Grades 5–7 have a willingness to change, while the teachers working in Grades 8–10 are satisfied with their instruction and do not want to make changes. The principals in the National Leadership Program were invited to discuss the three following leadership challenges related to the Blueberry School case narrative: students' test results, criticism from teachers and expectations from the superintendent and politicians.

Students' test results

In a meeting with the superintendent, the principal was confronted with the students' performance results, which were lower than expected, especially in Grades 8–10. In addition, the superintendent received two phone calls from parents with complaints about bullying. The principal was concerned about the situation and had to prepare an action plan for the next meeting with the superintendent. The question the participants discussed is as follows: If you were the principal, what action would you take?

Criticism from teachers

The principal initiated two development projects, one to improve education in mathematics and the other to improve teacher leadership. Project groups presented their specific plans for work in public meetings, and the work then started. The principal now received a letter from the teacher union outlining many of the complaints from the teachers. The union maintains that motivation has dropped, that teachers feel that the two projects are moving too fast and that the development plan must be revised. The question the principals discussed is as follows: If you were the principal, what action would you take?

Expectations from the superintendent and politicians

After 6 months, politicians at the municipality level became fascinated by a TV programme with a 'super' teacher. They engaged this teacher to support the principals in all schools in the municipality in their development projects. The principal of Blueberry School thought this was a very good idea because it would assist him in leading the change process if he could be part of a joint project at the district level. He had already indicated that he would participate. Furthermore, he wanted to participate in another development programme. The questions that the participants discussed are as follows: If you were the principal, what actions would you have taken? How do you see the future of this school?

Methods

The analyses build on video data from group discussions in eight groups, which were composed of five principals representing different school levels, school sizes and

geographical locations in Norway. All the group members were principals participating in the National Leadership Program who had developed positive and trusting relationships (see Aas & Vavik, 2015). Each group discussed (60–90 minutes in length) students' test results, criticism from teachers and expectations from the superintendent and politicians. In each of the eight groups, one of the principals was asked to lead the group discussion on one of the three topics. In sum, this means that the data include statements from 24 principals in their roles as leaders of professional group discussions. The selected material builds on about 500 minutes of video recordings that were recorded from 2011 to 2012. We used Videograph, a software programme, for analysis of the video data. First, based on the video data, we examined how each of the principals who was leading the group discussion initiated and took the discussion forward by using the four steps of the LPGD-model as the main analytical categories. These main categories are 1) setting the stage, 2) inviting point of views and arguments, 3) advancing the discussion and 4) wrapping up the discussion. Next, the video data were transcribed verbatim for further analysis, which was conducted in three steps (Richards, 2014). We started by revealing all the statements proposed by the principals who were leading the discussions of each of the eight groups and each discussion topic. Next, we organised their statements according to the four main analytical categories across all eight groups and for each discussion topic. Further, we did a close-up analysis of the principals' statements within each of the four main analytical categories as referred to above.

In the analysis, we developed a codebook to organise the principals' statements according to the four main analytical categories. In the category, *setting the stage*, we used the following subcategories: asking questions, defining the problem and encouraging ideas from the group. In the second category, *inviting point of views and*

arguments, the following subcategories were used: asking questions, providing information and providing arguments and keeping the group on track. The subcategories used in the third category, *advancing the discussion*, were restating conclusions made, clarifying particular reflections and aligning, combining, attuning different viewpoints. In the fourth category, *wrapping up*, six subcategories were used: reviewing the discussion, summing up tasks or assignments agreed to, making plans for actions, making sure that responsibilities and deadlines are understood and feedback on the sessions. We organised the statements of each principal according to the topic discussed, the analytical categories and the subcategories. This gave us an overview of how frequent the subcategories manifested in the data and how the steps in the LPGD-model were reflected in each of the principals' ways of leading the discussion.

One limitation of the current study must be noted; the methodology represents a cognitive approach to leadership, not actual leadership activity (Mumford, Peterson, Robledo, & Hester, 2012). The principals in the study were asked to lead a discussion outside their own schools. In a more realistic setting, they would probably prepare the discussion based on the challenges in their own schools. However, leading professional discussions are central to their daily work, so they should be familiar with the topic to be discussed and with the challenges related to reach a consensus for action within a set time frame.

Findings

The findings are organised by the four main analytical categories as outlined above, and are exemplified by the use of relevant excerpts from the data. The principals are anonymised, and the excerpts refer to the group number (from 1–8), the topic discussed (from 1–3) and the principal (from A–W; 24 principals in total). For example (G2, T2, PE) means: Group 2, Topic 2 and principal E.

Setting the stage

The idea in the first step of the LPGD-model is to establish a shared understanding of the discussion topic as a starting point for further discussion. The task for the leader is to frame the topic of the discussion and further clarify her or his framing in the group. According to the LPGD-model, only one of the 24 principals started the discussion by setting the stage, which included framing and clarifying the discussion topic. Most of the principals (16) started the discussion without defining the discussion topic or explaining the reason for the discussion. Instead, they let the participants in the group speak freely, exemplified by two principals: ‘What do you think?’ (G2, T2, PE). ‘Does anyone have any input?’ (G8, T1, PV). Another starting point is to confirm the way the discussion will be run, which falls under the facilitator role. All the principals seemed to acknowledge the idea of inviting all group members to contribute to the discussion, which is exemplified in an excerpt from Principal X: ‘Then, I think we should discuss what you would have done if you were the principal’ (G8, T3, PX).

When it comes to framing the discussion, we found examples of framing from three of the eight principals in the first two discussions regarding students’ test results and criticism from teachers. In the last discussion about expectations from the superintendent and politicians, only two of the eight principals framed the discussion. The framing process varied from those who gave their own description of the case to those who focused on the discussion process. Some of the principals, for example, Principal A, started by reminding the group members about what the result of the first discussion was – students’ test results; then, he gave his own understanding of the central points in the case. From this description, he asked the participants to start the discussion on the topic that he thought was the most important:

We have to submit a proposal for a concrete development plan. It can be related to the three points that the councillor has pointed out (reading from the case). The school has shown poor improvement in reading at the primary level, but no improvement at the secondary level. Is it ok to start the discussion on this matter?
(G1, T1, PA)

Principal M framed it in another way. When reading the case, he gave a picture of the overall problem to be discussed – the poor test results – and concluded that they had to act and make a plan. Then, he invited the participants to come up with suggestions on what to do. Unlike Principal A, who talked *about* the principal of Blueberry school, Principal M talked, as he *was* the principal of Blueberry school:

The councillor is not happy with our work. We scored poorly on the tests and the exam. There is a low level of employee satisfaction, or, at least, it is on its way down, according to the employee survey. And there are some complaints from parents about bullying. In sum, we do a poor job in delivery. We have to plan for how to handle these challenges and improve on them. Does anyone have any immediate suggestions? (G5, T1, PM)

The focus on action was also the case in Principal K's framing in the second discussion about criticism from teachers. His description of the situation at Blueberry School centred on how the principal had the most important role and something had to be done, and he asked for suggestions from the participants:

The principal has received a request from the teacher union, which is not completely satisfied with the progress. It seems the progress is moving forward too fast. At the same time, the principal has experiences this as well. People are tired. What is he going to do? What are you thinking? (G4, T2, PK)

Another example of how a principal's own understanding of a situation influenced how the principal structured the discussion can be illustrated by an excerpt from Principal U. To start the last discussion about expectations from the superintendent and politicians,

Principal U interpreted the situation and had some suggestions of what the principal at Blueberry School should do to handle the new situation:

This is obviously a principal who wants a lot, and there are many balls in the air at the same time. And the question is whether he or she and the teachers can handle all these balls at the same time and how well they will be able to implement all these projects. First, I think it's important to make some assessments about what is the most important in our school and what we should focus on. (G7, T3, PU)

Another example of framing is focusing on sharing feelings with the principal to encourage the sharing of the participants' own experiences as school leaders. This is illustrated by quotes from Principal S in the first discussion and Principal B in the second discussion:

Here, we meet a principal who feels strongly pressured, and we can imagine that if we had been in his position, we would have felt like him. Does it make sense? Does anybody have something to say? (G7, T1, PS)

This principal does not feel good right now (looking at the case). Yes, he feels pressure from all sides. He has come into conflict with the councillor and teachers, who probably have been against the change the whole time. Yes, how can he get out of this because he must do something here? What do you think? (G1, T2, PB)

Only one of the principals reframed the situation using a clarifying process. Principal M defined and described the situation from his point of view, and then, he suggested a structure for the discussion, which topic should be discussed, and in which order. He asked the group if they could accept his suggestion for the procedure. However, some of the participants made comments and other suggestions, and he had to reframe his own procedure. The excerpt demonstrates that it was difficult for him to establish a shared understanding when some of the participants disagreed with him:

You will get your way, and we will discuss the bullying first, but I must say that it is not easy to lead a group where everyone acts like the leader. For now, I have taken on the task, and I will do it. But I accept that this discussion is very important to you, so we will start with this issue. Peter, you probably have a suggestion because you were burning to talk about it. (G5, T1, PM)

Invite point of views and arguments

The aim of this step is to provide different arguments related to the topic of discussion. The leader's task is to make sure that everyone understands what an individual or the group actually means and to set the direction for how to proceed or take the discussion to the next step. There were a few examples of principals who played an active role in inviting the participants to provide their views and arguments. Most principals (16) opened up the discussion for comments and arguments without relating these views to the topic of discussion, and they let the participants present their views without giving any responses. Here, the principals generally behaved like one of the group members, which is shown by them presenting their own arguments. After presenting their own arguments, four of the principals asked for responses to their own points of view, thereby stimulating the group to think further. Their initiatives often were built on their own experiences as principals. This variation in inviting viewpoints to participate is demonstrated in excerpts from three of the principals:

The construction process certainly also takes energy from the principal. I do not understand if the councillor expects the principal to be both a pedagogical and administrative leader at the same time because the principal is involved in the building process. Have you understood something different? (G2, T1, PD)

Can you get the secondary school teachers to collaborate and support changes instead of offer resistance to changes? (G8, T2, PW)

I think if I was faced with this challenge, I would go back to my deputy heads first and ask for advice. 'Now that I've have to address challenge, what are you thinking now?' I think that is the first thing I would do. (G3, T1, PG)

Another way of playing a leading role at this stage of the discussion is to be sure that the arguments are related to the discussion topic, which can be done by reminding the participants about the information in the Blueberry case, as Principal PJ did in two examples: ‘This is a principal who is not familiar with his staff. The teachers are new to him’ (reading from the case) (G4, T1, PJ). ‘So, the report to the councillor is based on 3 years of work’ (G4, T1, PJ).

Three cases exemplify how the principals listened to the participants and built on their arguments when they responded. Principal H said the following:

But at the same time, I think that I agree with you, but I also think it is important that you might look at how the tempo is set in the plan (referring to case) because it means the teachers think there is too much to do and that they have to slow down the process. (G3, T2, PH)

Advancing the discussion

The third step aims to advance the discussion from individual viewpoints to a common group point, which can open up the possibility of moving the discussion from talk to action. The leader’s tasks are to align the participants’ viewpoints with the discussion topic, combine viewpoints that are related to each other and attune the participants by shaping a collective focus. Also, in this step, a main pattern is that the principals play the facilitator role by encouraging ideas and viewpoints from group members.

Nonetheless, the data include examples of principals who tried to align the viewpoints from the participants to the topic of discussion. Two ways of managing the alignment process can be seen in the excerpts from Principal D and Principal J: ‘I think there have been many good arguments here, but one thing I wonder about before we go into this subject and concretise it a little more is how long should we think about this?’ (G2, T1, PD).

I think that to relate to the councillor's task then, we must first understand the situation. And we have cleared up what this situation is all about, so maybe we have to describe it a bit before giving any premises. (G4, T1, PJ)

A few principals tried to combine similar viewpoints. One example is Principal D, who summed up the presented arguments in an overall description:

But then it seems that there is a third-party challenge here. It is both about how to deal with bullying problems for social challenges, because employee surveys do not produce good results, and there are academic educational challenges as well. (G2, T1, PD)

Finally, some of the principals tried to attune their groups to the issue at hand by shaping a collective focus. Excerpts from two of the principals demonstrate that this aligning process can look quite different. First, Principal B used his own experiences to shape a collective focus: 'What I would like to do as the principal in this case is focus more on the teacher union and identify what can actually be done' (G1, T2, PB).

Meanwhile, Principal C summed up the agreement and disagreement points as a step toward advancing the discussion:

So, we disagree. Some of us see that there may be potential development opportunities, while others agree that the principal must strengthen his own legitimacy with the staff, showing that they are on the same side. We must clarify this disagreement before moving on and finding a way forward. (G1, T3, PC)

Wrapping up the discussion

In this step, the leader should help the group review the discussion and plan how to move forward. Other wrap-up steps include getting feedback on the session – including suggestions for making the discussion better – pointing out the group's accomplishments and thanking the group members for their work. In the data, we found that only three principals tried to wrap up the discussion and establish a plan of action,

which actually was the goal of the three discussion topics. Examples of how the three principals started the wrapping-up process can be seen in the following quotes: “But now, we will put forward proposals for a concrete plan. If I am going to lead the discussion, I would be happy if someone else could write down the points we make” (G4, T1, PJ). ‘Should we say we have plans for dealing with the bullying issue?’ (G5, T1, PM). ‘Should we try to start by concluding, perhaps, with what we would like to be the first priority? Several of us have mentioned that the most important thing is to make a development plan’ (G2, T1, PD).

Discussion and implications

The findings show that the principals’ focus was on fostering an open process by involving all participants in a way that gave the participants a chance to provide their opinions, agree or disagree with others, and have their thoughts heard. However, the principals focused less on helping the group with framing, clarifying the topics of discussion and performing the types of actions considered essential to keeping the discussions on track and producing more tangible results, including making further plans for action. Based on the findings, we discuss three challenges that are related to the leadership role in professional group discussions: setting the stage, moving the process from individual viewpoints to a common group viewpoint and balancing between a goal-oriented leader’s role and a facilitator’s role.

The fact that most of the principals started the discussion without framing and clarifying the topic of discussion means that there was no shared understanding among the participants in terms of the goal of and direction for the discussion (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016). Consequently, the participants presented a variety of ideas and arguments, including comments on the case descriptions, solutions to the problem presented in the

case and suggestions for how the discussion should proceed. In the absence of a decision on what to do with these contrasting ideas, it was difficult to agree on how to continue. Therefore, the discussions can be characterised as open oriented more than goal oriented. The need to set the stage for the discussion and obtain an end result seemed to be closely connected. The three principals who wrapped up the discussions and made further plans for action were among those who tried to set up the discussion as well. We therefore argue that framing and clarifying the topic to be discussed is a critical step in establishing a shared understanding for a goal-oriented discussion that create results and further action.

A shared understanding is necessary for establishing a consensus about a new practice. Consequently, the main idea of a professional group discussion is to improve the discussion by moving from the individual viewpoints to a common group viewpoint. As Nardi (2005) noted, real collaboration only takes place when the involved participants' interests and motives are exploited and responded to. This can be done by listening carefully to the participants' voices, using their voices to further the dialogue and, in this way, acknowledge the participants distinct voices (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981; Dysthe, 2003). In the analysis, a few examples of principal leadership were observed in which the participants' initiatives were used to shape the collective viewpoint. The main leadership pattern was to let everybody talk about their concerns without giving any responses to the participants' arguments. From a diversity of voices that contained individual viewpoints about 'everything', it seems difficult to align, combine and attune individual points of view to advance the discussion. When the principals, as leaders of the discussions, did not set the stage or respond to the individual viewpoints in a way that contributed to a shared collective focus, it was difficult to advance the discussion.

The third critical aspect for leading professional discussions is to find a balance between goal orientation and facilitating the discussions (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016; Clutterbuck, 2010). The analysis shows that most principals saw their role as facilitators falling mainly into a moderator role. This is an important part of facilitation, but, it is not sufficient for taking care of the goal-oriented part of the discussion. The facilitator role should include setting the stage, inviting varying viewpoints and arguments, advancing the discussion and wrapping up the discussion. Because of these empirical findings, we argue that in a professional group discussion setting, there should be a more active facilitator role, one where leaders support the goal-oriented role and use individual viewpoints in the construction of a collective group point of view. This type of leadership role will contribute to the development of a learning community composed of people who share and critically examine their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented and growth-promoting way (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223).

The current empirical research does not tell us anything about why the principals was leading the discussions as the findings show. One reason might be related to the idea that coming to a consensus implies that everyone in a group must be of the same opinion. According to Louis (2003), a critical leadership skill is to listen to all participants and, when necessary, move the discussion forward in the absence of a consensus. In our study, most of the principals focused on giving all participants a place and time for presenting their ideas and arguments, but they did not move the discussion forward in one direction or another. If this were to be done, would this type of leadership, one that moves the discussion forward to a plan of action, lead to developing shared values, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration and group and individual learning (Stoll & Louis, 2007)? Another explanation for why

the principals did not move the discussions forward might centre on their capabilities as capacity builders who can run processes with a pressure support combination (Dufour & Marzano, 2011) that provide opportunities to discuss and negotiate problems of practices, thereby building a consensus about plans for actions (Timperley et al., 2007).

From the current study, we find two implications. First, principals need more training in facilitation skills when it comes to leading professional group discussions. The steps in the LPGD-model presented in the current study can be helpful for leaders when they must combine a goal- and results-oriented approach with a learning approach. Second, there is a need for more research on professional discussions and their role as a part of building professional learning communities, along with the role that leaders have in these processes. For further research, we will use the LPGD-model reported in the current study for investigating principals who are leading professional discussions in their schools.

Conclusions

Because group discussions can lay the groundwork for building professional capacity and real improvements in schools, more awareness on leading professional discussions should be fostered when it comes to research and school leadership development. The current research indicates the need for more studies that can enhance the understanding about leading professional group discussions, especially in terms of the critical steps addressed in this study. For future research, the LPGD-model reported in the present article might be a useful tool for investigating how school leaders engage in and lead such discussions. The current study also shows that principals' facilitation skills in terms of leading professional group discussions as part of building professional learning communities should be emphasised in school leadership programmes.

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