



A supportive tool for principals in guiding professional group discussions

Kirsten Foshaug Vennebo & Marit Aas

To cite this article: Kirsten Foshaug Vennebo & Marit Aas (2020) A supportive tool for principals in guiding professional group discussions, Educational Research, 62:3, 266-283, DOI: [10.1080/00131881.2020.1796518](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2020.1796518)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2020.1796518>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 30 Jul 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 259



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

A supportive tool for principals in guiding professional group discussions

Kirsten Foshaug Vennebo  and Marit Aas

Department of Primary and Secondary Teacher Education, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

Background: Developing collective professional capacities in schools is important for school improvement, and principals can initiate such developments. That is, by initiating and leading professional group discussions on teaching and learning, principals can influence teaching practices and, thereby, indirectly affect student outcomes and school improvement. However, research indicates that leading such discussions in communities of professionals can be a challenge for principals.

Purpose: The aim of this article is to explore and yield insight into how a conceptual model (the LPGD model) can support principals in guiding professional group discussions on school development and change.

Method: The study adopts a qualitative observational approach. Data were collected through observations of a pilot use of the model by principals who participated in the National School Leadership Programme in Norway. The data analysis was guided by cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT).

Findings: The analysis shows how the conceptual model can help school leaders to guide group discussions, especially when creating a shared understanding of the problems at hand and building collective commitments that are essential to improving teaching and learning practices.

Conclusion: This article highlights the need for school leaders to be supported to develop certain skills to lead professional discussions on school development – in particular, skills to help leaders in building a shared understanding of problems and collective commitments that are essential when improving teaching and learning practices.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 February 2020

Accepted 14 July 2020

KEYWORDS

School leadership; change; professional capacity; professional group discussions; professional development; professional learning communities

Introduction

When theorising school changes and developments in general, differing conceptualisations of change seem evident: whilst one perspective maintains that change is linear, with clear cause-and-effect connections, another suggests that change is non-linear and that it is about interconnections between people and how to capture visible improvements (Gunter 2016; Gunter et al. 2007). In line with the idea of linearity, change may be regarded as something that happens as part of a plan that is initiated and controlled by an established

CONTACT Kirsten Foshaug Vennebo  kirstefo@gmail.com

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

power structure. Change within this conceptualisation is considered rational and is expected to lead to visible results. In contrast, following from the notion of non-linearity, change is perceived as a more complex negotiating process that occurs between the people within a culture and power structure – with more unpredictable results.

Practical action research corresponds to the non-linear approach to change. It builds on collaborative and self-reflective principles, through which practitioners remake and renew their own practices, in disciplined critical and self-critical processes. These stimulate and advise changes in practices and understandings, and conditions of practices through individual and collective self-reflective transformation (Kemmis 2009). In such an approach, it is crucial that school leaders are active and involved in the development processes in their schools, in terms of their own and their staffs' learning and remaking of practices (Aas, Vennebo, and Halvorsen 2019). Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) offers an additional approach that corresponds to this line of research on organisational changes, in which tensions and contradictions are seen as driving forces. The CHAT approach also assumes that it is important that leaders are active and involved in development processes (cf. Vennebo 2015) and highlights the importance of focusing not only on what leaders can do – but also on what they cannot do, and why they do what they do (Thomson, Hall, and Jones 2013). Hence, educational changes depend on leadership that focuses on learning and creating conditions for learning by using dialogues and shared leadership (MacBeath 2013; MacBeath and Dempster 2009). Group discussions can be the bases of building professional capacities and real improvements in schools. However, leading these discussions in communities of professionals seems to be a challenge for principals (Vennebo and Aas 2019), and their access to skills to confront the challenges seems to be insufficient. For this reason, we suggest the importance of supporting principals in obtaining the necessary skills in the development of school leadership (cf. Cruz-Gonzales, Domingo, and Lucena 2019). In previous work (Vennebo and Aas 2019), we presented a four-step conceptual model: the LPGD model. Further, that paper reported the results of a study in which the model was used to investigate how principals who were leading group discussions in professional learning communities (PLCs) initiated and guided discussions. The professional group discussions were performed based on a school case narrative about a fictional school called Blueberry School, and they took place in the context of the Norwegian National School Leadership Programme. The LPGD model built on theoretical work related to group coaching and professional learning, which, in the National School Leadership Programme, involved the development and piloting of a protocol for group coaching. The group coaching protocol was piloted in 10 countries (Aas and Flückiger 2016; Flückiger et al. 2017). A piloting of the LPGD model in January 2019, in groups of principals participating in the National School Leadership Programme, demonstrated that it is not sufficient to describe the model's four steps in general ways, as the participants struggled to frame the discussion topics and keep the discussions on track. Therefore, inspired by CHAT, the LPGD model was improved by including questions that can help principals in promoting increased clarity on the issues of school development and offer them help with regard to keeping the discussions on track, in terms of being learning-oriented as well as result-oriented (Vennebo and Aas 2019). This means being able to run processes that provide a combination of pressure and support and that build capacity (DuFour and Marzano 2011).

Purpose

In this paper, we present this revised LPGD model and report our findings from the study of piloting the revised model in April 2019 with the same group of principals who piloted the model in January 2019. The purpose of the article is to explore and yield insight into how a conceptual model (the LPGD model) can be a supportive tool for principals in guiding professional group discussions on school development and change. In order to fulfil this purpose, we pose the following research question: *How can a conceptual model for leading professional group discussions regarding school development support principals in leading such discussions?* First, we present the context of the study and the school case narrative, Blueberry School. Further, we indicate the links between school leadership learning and school change. Second, we show how CHAT can be applied to further the understanding of school leadership and change, and we present the empirical and theoretical foundations of the revised LPGD model. Third, we present the study's methods, in addition to the findings from piloting the model. Finally, we discuss the findings regarding CHAT and theories about school leadership learning and change, drawing conclusions based on these findings and foregrounding two of the study's implications.

Contextual and conceptual background

The Norwegian National School Leadership Programme

The Norwegian authorities, influenced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) project, Improving School Leadership (Pont, Nusche, and Moorman 2008), launched a nationwide education programme in 2009 for newly appointed principals. The goals were to improve the principals' leadership skills and to support national policies. Thus, the National School Leadership Programme was built around five curriculum themes identified by the Norwegian Minister of Education and Research: students' learning, management and administration, cooperation and organisation building, development and change and leadership roles (Caspersen, Federici, and Røsdal 2017; Hybertsen et al. 2014).

According to Timperley (2011), having multiple opportunities to learn and apply information is one of the fundamental principles of professional learning. This argument is supported by Huber (2011), who highlights the importance of linking learning to leaders' practices. Processes of ongoing reflection and discussion that challenge current ways of thinking are valuable in building new practices such as these. Accordingly, in the National School Leadership Programme, case-based instructions and group coaching were used to influence professionals' practices and to strengthen professionals' leadership skills, including developing their ethical considerations (Aas 2017a; Aas and Vavik 2015). The evidence presented in some studies indicates that discussions of cases and their attributes are potentially viable approaches for leaders to increase such knowledge (Avolio et al. 2009; Yukl 2010).

The school case narrative: 'Blueberry School'

As previously mentioned, a school case narrative was constructed about a fictional school called Blueberry School. It 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 (pupil ages 6–10), grades 5–7 (pupil ages 11–13) and grades 8–10 (pupil ages 14–16)). 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 two years, and the school is waiting for new buildings to be constructed, because the classrooms are located on different sites. However, due to weak local government finances, the buildings will not be completed for at least 2 years. 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 teaching and do not want to make changes. In a meeting with the local government educational superintendent, the principal was confronted with the students' performance results in mathematics and literacy, which were lower than expected, especially in grades 8–10. He was also informed that the superintendent had received two phone calls from parents with complaints about bullying and poor well-being among the pupils. In addition, the superintendent pointed out that the employee survey showed that satisfaction among the staff was lower than in the previous 2 years.

Principals in the National Leadership Programme were invited to discuss several leadership challenges related to the Blueberry School case narrative. In this article, we study the discussion related to challenges that occurred when Blueberry School's principal received a letter from the teachers' union with criticism from the school's teachers. The principal had initiated two development projects: one to improve education in mathematics and one to improve teacher leadership. Project groups presented specific plans for work in public meetings, and the work started. In the letter that the principal received, the union stated that motivation for the projects had dropped, as teachers felt that the two projects were moving too quickly and that the development plan needed to be revised. In the National School Leadership Programme, groups of principals were invited to discuss how they, in the position of the Blueberry School principal, would act when faced with these challenges.

School leadership and change

Educational changes progress depending on school leaders' and teachers' individual and collective capacities to promote students' learning (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018). These capacities include motivation, skills, positive learning, organisational conditions, organisational culture and support infrastructure (Stoll et al. 2006). In a meta-study, Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) emphasised the close connection between student success and leaders who apply active participation to professional learning and development with their staff. They argued that there are at least five dimensions of leadership practices and activities linked to student outcomes: promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and curricula; establishing goals and expectations; resourcing strategically; and ensuring orderly and supportive environments. Similarly, MacBeath (2013) used the concept of 'learning leadership' to link leadership and learning in schools. The author argued that learning leadership includes five principles: focusing on learning, creating conditions favourable to learning, establishing dialogues, sharing leadership practices through structures and procedures supporting

participation and sharing a sense of accountability. Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd's (2009) leadership dimensions and MacBeath's (2013) five learning principles can provide insight into what school leaders should focus on to change learning positively and make improvements in schools, but there is still little research on how to do it. Developing PLCs is one of the most promising approaches to building capacities for sustainable school improvement and change (DuFour and Marzano 2011; Fullan 2018; Stoll and Louis 2007). A PLC can be defined as a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Toole and Louis 2002). In this process, which involves establishing shared beliefs and understandings, it is necessary to make changes to leadership and school practices by facilitating regular meetings for staff (Louis 1998). By initiating and participating in academic discussions on school subjects, a principal may influence teachers' education practices, thereby indirectly affecting students' learning (Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach 2006). Developing collective professional capacities in schools, therefore, is viewed as important for improving schools. Further, principals are seen as being in key positions to promote the development of collective capacities. However, developing collective knowledge and professional capacities seems to be a significant challenge for principals (Aas and Paulsen 2017; Stoll 2007), and many leaders are not concerned with their own learning; they do not necessarily have meta-cognitive insights into their own thought processes, which are required to allow them to step back and take control of their own learning (Lucas and Claxton 2010). Moreover, an awareness of one's ability to identify how and why one thinks in specific ways is important in leaders' learning processes and leadership practices (Aas 2017a; Robertson 2013). Adults with well-developed meta-cognitive skills are better problem-solvers, better decision-makers, better critical thinkers, better at regulating their feelings, better at handling complex situations and conflicts and more motivated to learn than adults without well-developed meta-cognitive skills (Dawson 2008). This argument calls attention to the importance of learning and developing reflexive skills, both for school leaders and for their staff (Dempster, Lovett, and Fluckiger 2011), so as to mutually enhance each other's and pupils' learning and to enact positive school developments. Nonetheless, although many studies have reported what principals can do to support capacity developments, such as applying active participation in PLCs and facilitating collective professional discussions among and with staff, little attention has been paid to how principals can engage in and lead such discussions. The aforementioned study by Vennebo and Aas (2019), using the four-step LPGD model as an analytical tool, examined how principals who led group discussions in PLCs initiated and encouraged such discussions. The findings showed that principals focused on fostering open processes by involving all participants in ways that gave all members chances to provide their opinions and to have their thoughts heard. Principals paid less attention to the types of actions considered essential to keeping discussions on track and carrying them forward, including making further plans for actions. Further, Vennebo and Aas (forthcoming) examined how groups of school principals responded to crises in school development work. The findings exemplified how the principal's responses encompassed various viewpoints and arguments through which tensions inherent the context of the change process were provoked and displayed. One implication of the study was that principals who experience problematic change processes at their schools should take time to identify the tensions, discuss how they can be understood and think through their implications for leadership. These two studies are examples

of micro-level research that contributes to enhancing the understanding of the necessary conditions for leading professional discussions in PLCs in schools.

Applying CHAT to understand leadership and change

The questions that were developed for inclusion in the LPGD model regarding analyses of leading professional group discussions among principals were theoretically informed by CHAT. In CHAT, collective development work activities are assumed to take shape and develop through object-oriented, tool-mediated actions performed by subjects (i.e. individuals or groups) (Engeström 1987; Leont'ev 1981). Based on CHAT, Engeström (1987) developed a conceptual triangular model of collective activity (see Engeström 2005). The model shows the components of collective activity and their relationships. Engeström (1999) explained that the process through which work activities manifest themselves in the dialectic relationships of goal-directed, tool-mediated actions and interactions is motivated by the objects of activities in the form of the situation-specific problem spaces that are to be worked on and transformed. According to Engeström's model, the item's *subject*, *object* and *tools* are conceptualised as the production portion of work. If we apply this model to the context of development work at Blueberry School, it is evident that the principal and teachers are the *subjects*, and the projects in mathematics and in class leadership are the *tools*. The *object* worked on is teaching practices in mathematics to facilitate the students' learning. The intended outcome is improved student maths results.

However, it is important to note that, according to CHAT, work activities are not reducible to mediated, goal-directed actions and interactions. Actions cannot be abstracted from their contexts, which, in the model, are articulated in terms of rules, communities and the division of labour. This layer adds a socio-historical aspect to the mediations of situated actions, which may be taken into consideration for understanding collective work regarding CHAT (cf. Edwards 2009; Engeström 1999; Postholm 2015). For example, rules are guidelines, norms and conventions for actions. The community is a group of actors that may have an interest in an activity, but do not necessarily take part in carrying out the activity. The division of labour is how work is distributed horizontally, in terms of the distribution of work areas and tasks, and vertically, in terms of the distribution of different positions and the hierarchy of rights for work participants. Hence, actions and interactions related to work activities are located within the affordances and constraints of the socio-cultural contexts in which they occur. These contexts are the bases, and restrictions, of the subject's goal-directed actions. For example, applying this framework to the school development work at Blueberry School, as discussed by groups of principals in the Leadership Programme, it is evident that the rules are norms and laws for school governance and the union's right to co-determination. The community is the actors, such as the teachers' union and the local governance agency represented by the superintendent. The division of labour is how work areas and tasks are distributed between individual teachers and grade-level teams, and the hierarchy of rights between the principal, the designated leaders and the teachers.

A particular strength of CHAT can be seen in thorough explanations of collective work activities as multi-voiced developments (Engeström 1987, 2005), in which differentiated motives may be involved and may generate tensions and contesting positions (cf. Miettinen 2005; Miettinen and Virkkunen 2005). Such tensions, caused by activities

inherent to their multi-voiced nature, may activate innovative attempts to change the activities or may result in breakdowns. Thus, the tensions are driving forces of development in collective work activities, as they can energise negotiations and facilitate re-orchestrations of objects that are being worked on (Aas 2017b). Thus, tensions that occur in developmental work activities can be seen as manifestations of systemic contradictions and not just as disagreements between participants. However, to date, these kinds of tensions and actions have received only modest attention in empirical research on school leadership and change.

To gain an enhanced understanding of leadership in educational change, leadership dimensions (Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd 2009) can be connected to the triangular model for work activities. For example, according to Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009), *promoting and participating in teacher learning and development* can be seen as an activity. The object of the activity is teaching and learning practices, and the result is student outcomes. School leaders and teachers are the subjects. Additionally, the dimension of *establishing goals and expectations* can be a tool for leadership in regard to developing a shared object that can be worked on by the participants. Accordingly, *planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and curricula* can be rules in the form of regulations that school leaders must consider. Further, *strategic resourcing* relates to the division of labour in that leaders have to mobilise, develop and allocate resources. Finally, *ensuring an orderly and supportive environment* relates to the community, in the sense that school leaders are to create a safe, caring and orderly environment to enable staff to learn and to develop better teaching and learning practices to improve student outcomes. In the next section, we present and explain the steps of the LPGD model, including the questions for leadership that we derived and included, with the help of CHAT. The questions were developed by considering the object of development work and the contextual components of the activity triangle (see Engeström 2005) in order to capture the impacts of systemic affordances and the constraints of socio-cultural contexts on development work and its object. In CHAT, context sensitivity is critical in educational changes, especially for those who lead the change processes.

The four-step LPGD model and questions for leadership

Step 1: setting the stage

The first step is to establish a shared understanding of the discussion topic as a starting point for further discussion. A leader should frame the topic for discussion and clarify the framing for the group discussing the topic. That is, the leader's intention should be to describe the situation in question and then establish a basis for a discussion about it. In relation to CHAT, the first step concerns the construction of an object for the discussion activity (Engeström 1987). In the construction of the object, the leader should encourage the participants to describe how they see the situation in question by formulating different problematic issues that they think have an impact on the situation. When various points of view are put forward, the leader has to support the group in deciding what the most important topic is to discuss, which, in CHAT, relates to narrowing down and clarifying the object (cf. Vennebo 2015). In doing so, a principal can use the following questions: *What is the problematic situation that needs to be discussed? What kinds of*

challenges are related to the problematic situation? What kinds of challenges should we start with?

Step 2: inviting points of view and arguments

The aim of step two is to provide different arguments related to the topic of discussion. The leader's task is to ensure that everyone understands what an individual or the group actually means and to set the direction for how to proceed, so as to take the discussion to the next step. The purpose of this step is to examine, or investigate, the object (Engeström 1987). By inviting participants to frame their viewpoints using the challenging issue that they have agreed to discuss, a multi-perspective picture of the situation will appear, including any tensions between the participants and their viewpoints. In order to ensure context sensitivity in investigating the object, questions that refer to the contextual components of the activity triangle – namely, rules, the community and the division of labour (Engeström 1987) – may be helpful. The suggested questions are as follows: *How can we understand the problems at hand, and why do you think we should understand them in this way? Are we facing any challenges related to the school's rules and norms? Are we facing any challenges related to actors in the school community who may influence the problematic situation? Are we facing any challenges related to the distribution of work tasks and responsibilities?*

Step 3: advancing the discussion

Step three aims to advance the discussion from individual viewpoints to a common group viewpoint, which can provide the possibility of moving on the discussion from talking to acting. 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 to each other, by shaping a collective focus. This step involves interpreting the discussion topic or the reconstruction of the object (Engeström 1987). This means trying to detect and analyse the most problematic issues that must be handled by the principal. Next, the leader should bring together different points of view and synthesise them to reduce the viewpoints into more general concepts. Finally, during this negotiation process, which can be regarded as informed analysis, there is a need to see connections between difficult issues and to link the issues to contextual components in order to see how each of the components – or how the components together – can shed light on and contribute to enhanced understandings of the issues. The following questions can be used as a guide for the interpreting process: *What are the most problematic issues? How can we understand and handle the most problematic issues? Can we reveal connections between the different issues?*

Step 4: wrapping up the discussion

In this step, the leader should help the group to review its discussion and plan how to move forward. Other steps for wrapping up include gathering feedback on the session, including suggestions for making the discussions better; pointing out the group's accomplishments; and thanking the group members for their work. The intention of this step is to consider and achieve what CHAT refers to as the outcome (Engeström 1987). To consider means looking at the most difficult questions that emerged in step 3, discussing which actions can be implemented and deciding which actions will lead to so much

resistance that they should not be implemented. In this final step, a plan for progress and responsibility must be agreed upon. As in all group sessions, feedback on the process and feedback on the results of the discussion are important to the participants. The questions that can assist a leader in this step are as follows: *What kinds of actions can we take to solve the problematic issues? What actions should we start with, and when? Who should be involved in the actions, and why? What do you think about participating in this discussion?*

Method

The context of the discussions, participants and data collection

The present study is part of a larger qualitative observational study, which includes several sub-studies on leading group discussions among groups of principals participating in the National Leadership Programme (Aas, Helstad, and Vennebo 2016; Vennebo and Aas 2019, *forthcoming*). For the study, we built on data obtained by piloting the LPGD model in April 2019, with a group of principals participating in the National Leadership Programme. The student group of principals consisted of 60 participants, who were divided into three groups of 20. For each group, one participant was selected to lead a discussion related to the criticism from the teachers in the case narrative. Three participants each led a discussion with five members, while the remaining 15 members in each group observed the discussion. A teacher/researcher observed each of the discussions and took log notes. Each group discussed the problem for 45 minutes. After the discussions were completed, the teacher/researcher led meta-discussions with the other 15 members of each group who had observed the discussions and also the five members of each group who had participated in the discussion. One participant from each group of 20 was asked to take log notes on the meta-discussions. The focus of each meta-discussion was on how the LPGD model could support the principals in leading the discussions and how the helpful questions could be used. Before this activity began, all the participants received a brief introduction to CHAT and how the questions were derived from the activity triangle (see Table 1).

Ethical considerations

The study complies with the ethical principles required by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (NESH 2014) and the guidelines given by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). All the participants gave their consent to participate, after being given oral information about the purpose of the study and their roles. They were assured anonymity and confidentiality and informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without explaining their reasons for this. When reporting the data, names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Data analysis

Our analysis is based on the log notes with data from the three group discussions. For the analysis, which was guided by CHAT and conducted using three steps (Richards 2014), we revealed all the statements by the principals who were leading the discussions and all the

Table 1. The steps of the LPGD model, with the leadership actions and helpful questions.

Steps	Leadership actions	Questions for leadership
Step 1 Describing Constructing the object (CHAT)	Setting the stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Frame the discussion topic ● Summarise and clarify the topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is the problematic situation that needs to be discussed? ● What kinds of challenges are related to the problematic situation? ● What kinds of challenges should we start with?
Step 2 Examining Investigating the object (CHAT)	Inviting points of view and arguments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ask questions ● Provide information ● Provide arguments ● Keep the group on track ● Summarise the discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How can we understand the problems at hand, and why do you think we should understand them in this way? ● Are we facing any challenges related to the school's rules and norms? ● Are we facing any challenges related to actors in the school community who may influence the problematic situation? ● Are we facing any challenges related to the distribution of work tasks and responsibilities?
Step 3 Interpreting Reconstructing the object (CHAT)	Advancing the discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clarify particular viewpoints ● Align viewpoints ● Combine different viewpoints ● Summarise the discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the most problematic issues? ● How can we understand and handle the most problematic issues? ● Can we reveal connections between the different issues?
Step 4 Considering and doing Outcome of the process (CHAT)	Wrapping up the discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Summarise the agreed-upon actions ● Make plans for actions, responsibilities and deadlines ● Obtain feedback on the sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What kinds of actions can we take to solve the problematic issues? ● What actions should we start with, and when? ● Who should be involved in the actions, and why? ● What do you think about participating in this discussion?

participants in the three groups. Next, we used the four steps of the LPGD model as analytical categories and assigned the statements to the categories. Further, we conducted a close-up analysis of the principals' statements and the participants' responses to assign each of them to one of the four main analytical categories, and we used the helpful questions for each of the steps as sub-categories (see Table 1). This gave us an overview of how frequently the sub-categories manifested themselves in the data and how the steps and the helpful questions of the LPGD model were reflected in each of the principals' ways of leading the discussions.

Findings

The findings from the analysis of the piloting of the LPGD model in groups of principals participating in the Norwegian National School Leadership Programme are presented below. In the presentation, which is organised according to the steps in the LPGD model, we use excerpts from the discussions, including statements from the different participants and the observers. The excerpts are anonymised and the three participants who led discussions have been given the pseudonyms Christine, Victoria and Mary. A focus is placed on how the helpful questions supported the leadership of the discussions.

Analysis of step 1: setting the stage

For step one, two different ways of establishing discussions were identified: using the questions to frame the topic of discussion and using the questions to invite the group to

describe the topic of discussion without the leader framing it. An example of the first approach, by Victoria, first stated that the principal had received a letter from the teachers' union, outlining many complaints from the teachers, and continued with the following:

The union argued that motivation for the projects to improve student outcomes had dropped, as the teachers felt the two projects were moving too quickly and the development plan needed to be revised. How can we understand the problematic situation for this principal? Is this OK?

Victoria described the problematic situation and then defined the difficult issues to be discussed. In this framing process, she described and explained what her view was based on, and then she invited the participants to respond to her framing. In contrast, an example of the second approach was led by Mary:

The principal has received a letter from the union outlining many complaints from the teachers. How can we understand the problematic issues? What kinds of challenges are related to the problematic situation? What kinds of challenges do we start with?

Unlike Victoria, Mary had a more open attitude and invited the participants to frame the discussion collectively.

During the meta-discussions, several participants underlined the importance of starting the discussions by establishing a shared understanding of the topic to be discussed – that is, the object of the activity. However, in the meta-discussions, the participants also recognised that framing the topic collectively, as Mary chose to do, takes considerable time. They were concerned about whether it was necessary for all the participants to express their individual viewpoints when setting the stage, or whether the leader should bring more clarity to the topic to be discussed by framing it and voicing it clearly to the group. The lessons learned from the piloting were that the questions in step one of the LPGD model can mainly help the leader prepare and clarify his or her framing of the discussion topic.

Analysis of step 2: inviting points of view and arguments

As already mentioned, in step two, through inviting viewpoints and arguments, the intention of the helpful questions was to ensure context sensitivity in investigating the object and to reveal how the contextual components of collective development activity as shown in the activity triangle–rules, the community and the division of labour (Engeström 1987) – could influence the object. In all the groups, the principal started by inviting the participants to respond to the first general question: 'How can we understand the problems at hand, and why do you think we should understand them this way?' In their efforts to comprehend the problems and explain the way they should or could be understood, the participants drew on their knowledge of school cultures, teacher traditions, norms and rules. One questioned the use of cultural norms and rules: 'What sort of school culture do we have when a union thinks it is allowed to make decisions?' Those using teacher traditions were often concerned about issues related to ways of working, as noted by one of the participants: 'I believe the teachers do not see that these projects will help them in developing their education [practices]'. Another questioned: 'Maybe some of the teachers experienced an increased workload when they actually started the project?'

In the meta-discussions, several participants commented that this multi-voiced process was challenging for the principals leading the discussions. Despite this, both the observers and the participants argued that the helpful questions clarified how the challenges were related to the school's rules and norms, to the actors in the school community and, especially, to the distribution of work tasks and responsibilities. Both the participants and the leaders of the group discussions also observed that there was a need to summarise all the viewpoints in step two, and that the contextual categories assisted them in doing so. This is exemplified by Christine, who started by saying that she, so far, had heard two of the participants be critical of the union's understanding of the rules that define the relationships between the principal and the teachers, before continuing with the following:

This seems to be a challenge. Further, several of you have argued that there are some actors in the school community who are positive towards the two school projects, and that we might need to investigate the complaints from the union in order to understand the extent of the resistance. Finally, three of you have talked about the teachers' work tasks and the possibilities for adjusting the projects.

Analysis of step 3: advancing the discussion

As mentioned above, in step three, the aim of the helpful questions was to advance the discussion. Christine, who had already summarised the different viewpoints in step two, along with the contextual components (the rules, the community and the division of labour), used the helpful questions for each component to advance the discussion. She adjusted and asked her questions to relate them to each component in concrete ways, which resulted in viewpoints that could easily be aligned to the different components. For example, she inquired, 'What are the most problematic issues related to the relationships between the principal and the teachers?' and 'How can we understand and handle different interpretations of the rules?' By leading the discussion in a systematic way, she managed to bring different viewpoints together and help the participants see how the tensions were related to each of the contextual components and to each other. Using concrete language helped her reduce the different statements by the participants to align them to some overall categories.

Victoria and Mary used a different method of leading the discussion in step three. They invited the participants to identify the most problematic issues by asking 'What are the most problematic issues?'. The participants' responses varied widely and were a mixture of viewpoints and examples of possible solutions. One participant focused on conflict and stated: 'We have to find a solution to the conflict between the union and the principal', whereas another one suggested that the idea of running two development projects simultaneously had to be reconsidered. Other participants drew attention to different aspects of the teachers' situation. For example, one commented: 'We have to do something about the teachers' motivation', and another observed: 'We should examine the teachers' work tasks to find out if it is true that the work tasks have increased'. This was followed by another participant, who questioned the validity of the union's information: 'I find it difficult to accept that all the teachers are negative about the school development projects. How does the union know?'

For the principals leading the discussions, determining when to synthesise the viewpoints and align them became a challenging task. They first had to decide if and how they could separate the different types of statements, such as those that were investigative-oriented and those that were solution-oriented. In the meta-discussions, most of the participants argued that the leaders should have summarised analyses of the problematic issues first and then aligned the statements with each other. Finally, they should have condensed the suggested solutions.

Analysis of step 4: wrapping up the discussion

As was noted previously, for step four (summarising), the intention of the helpful questions was to assist the leaders in linking talk and action. In all three discussion groups, the principals leading the discussions used the three contextual components of activity as guides. For example, Victoria summarised actions regarding the union by referring to different interpretations of rules:

You have been critical of the union's demands to revise the development plan. I suggest that I arrange a meeting with the union about the interpretations of the rules that regulate the relationships between the actors in the school. Is that OK?

In this way, she tried to connect opposing views, which represented tensions among the participants, in terms of handling the demands of the union.

When Christine summarised actions connected to the community, she referred to a suggestion to conduct a closer analysis of the resistance from the teachers: 'How can we further the suggestion to do an analysis of the union's claim that there is resistance among the teachers about participating in the development projects? Can each of you talk to the teachers in your department?' This example shows that Christine listened to the participants' suggested solutions and made everyone accountable for further actions. Finally, a summary of the third component, the division of labour, was exemplified by Mary trying to bring about an end to the discussion. She first stated that they had talked about how they could adjust the school development project, before she went on to say the following:

It seems to me that we agree on continuing the work. However, we have to decide if we are going to focus on only one project this year, or if we are going to finish the entire project in time. What do you think is best?

As can be seen from the above quotation, Mary tried to involve the participants in the construction of an action plan. It suggests how commitment can be engendered by involving all participants.

Discussion

In this section, we use the concepts of CHAT to describe and discuss the findings obtained by piloting the LPGD model. The piloting showed that framing a discussion topic is a leadership task that includes describing the context of a problem and the challenges related to it, noting the different actors who are involved and clarifying the most important challenges. In other words, the first step is a process of constructing a shared

object. According to CHAT, in such processes, a subject can act on an object by using tools that are historically and culturally laden. As such, situated actions cannot be abstracted from the cultural and historical contexts within which they are performed (Engeström 2001). That is why it is important to be context-sensitive in development work that is initiated to bring about change, in that leaders should consider potential affordances and the constraints of contexts (Edwards 2009; Engeström 1999; Postholm 2015) that might influence development work.

During step two, the overall leadership task is to invite viewpoints from participants in order to examine the problem at hand. When investigating the object (Engeström 1987), the leader should use questions to provide information and arguments and to reveal possible tensions (Engeström 2001). All the participants and observers involved in the piloting of the LPGD model experienced how the helpful questions which are related to the contextual components of collective work activities can help the leaders to keep the group discussions on track, especially in summarising different viewpoints. As part of an analytical process, these components contribute to a systemic understanding of a particular situated problematic situation.

To advance discussions (step three), the leader's task is to clarify perspectives, align the viewpoints and combine different views that are necessary for interpreting the challenges that evolve with the examination of the topic at hand. This interpretation can be defined as a reconstruction of an object or tools that influence the object (Engeström 1987). During the piloting, the participants, for example, discussed the possible reconstruction of tools by reducing the development project from two projects to one or adjusting the project timetables. Such considerations influence the work on the object and could lead to reconstructions of the activity's object. We can see that when challenges are linked to possible solutions, there is a need to see how these possible solutions may affect objects and outcomes.

The final step, four (consider and do), refers to the outcomes of the discussions. Through a process of defining, examining and interpreting, there is a need to conclude that some actions need to be taken. The leadership task is to involve participants in making action plans and agreeing on responsibilities and deadlines. A lesson that was learned from the piloting was that, in order to find solutions for problematic situations, it is necessary to conduct a critical investigation of the shared object. Such an investigation often introduces tension into the discussion and leads to collective efforts oriented towards reconstructions and enhanced understandings of the object. The following statement by one participant during the piloting process reflected the feelings of others: 'It was confusing to be without solutions when the discussion started. However, at the end of the discussion, I could see that the investigation of the problem led to better solutions.' Thus, this study's conceptual model can be seen as an example of how school leaders can build capacities for sustainable improvements in PLCs (DuFour and Marzano 2011; Stoll and Louis 2007). The model combines the importance of the idea that school leaders and staff learn and develop reflexive skills (Dempster, Lovett, and Fluckiger 2011) with the necessity for a context-sensitive focus on leadership dimensions (Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd 2009) and the necessity for learning principles that focus on learning and that create conditions for learning (MacBeath 2013; MacBeath and Dempster 2009). In sum, the model is in line with the viewpoint that change is a complex struggle based on competing interests and negotiations, wherein a central leadership task is recognising and handling the tensions that occur (Gunter 2016; Gunter et al. 2007).

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the methodology represents a cognitive approach to leadership, not an actual leadership activity (Mumford et al. 2012). The principals in the study were asked to participate in group discussions outside their own schools, which focussed on a fictional case scenario. In a more realistic setting, they would probably prepare and conduct the discussions based on the actual problematic issues in developmental work in their own schools. However, conducting these types of discussions is central to the principals' leadership in school development work, so they should have already been familiar with the challenges that they faced in their own schools. Clearly, generalisation is not the intention from our pilot study, which was based on a small sample of groups of principals participating in a school development programme. However, we follow Stake's (1995) call for the use of naturalistic generalisations; in addition, through our in-depth analysis of the pilot application of the LPGD model, we offer insights that may be of use to those involved in supporting educational leadership development in other settings internationally.

Conclusions

In this article, we presented the conceptual LPGD model for leading discussions among PLCs in schools. By piloting the model, we demonstrated how its four steps and supporting questions, derived from CHAT, can help school leaders guide professional discussions. In particular, the steps and questions can help leaders in building a shared understanding of problems and collective commitments that are essential when improving teaching and learning practices. Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) argue that these are significant leadership dimensions that affect student outcomes. Using CHAT for this study's analysis demonstrated that school leaders need to be aware of how different situated actions are closely affected by the contexts in which they take place, and how contextual components become related to and influence each other, and the object worked on, to bring about change.

With regard to professional practice, our study indicates that leaders need to develop skills related to leading professional discussions, especially the knowledge and skills necessary to be aware of the contextual components of school development, the relationship between them and their implications for the leadership of development and educational change. Regarding future research, we recommend additional micro-level studies that further elaborate on our findings. These studies could contribute valuable insights into how to nurture and support principals in leading discussions on school development and changes in practice in communities of professionals: aspects of the educational process that, ultimately, have the capacity to affect student outcomes and school improvement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Kirsten Foshaug Vennebo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8118-2317>

References

- Aas, M., and J. M. Paulsen. 2017. "Å Lede I Fremtidens Skole." [Leading in Future Schools]. In M. Aas and J. M. Paulsen, edited by. *Ledelse I Fremtidens Skole [Leadership in Schools of the Future]*. Oslo: Fagbokforlaget; p. 13–30.
- Aas, M. 2017a. "Leaders as Learners: Developing New Leadership Practices". *Professional Development in Education*. 43(3):439–453.
- Aas, M. 2017b. "Understanding Leadership and Change in Schools: Expansive Learning and Tensions". *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. 20(3):278–296.
- Aas, M., and B. Fluckiger. 2016. "The Role of a Group Coach in the Professional Learning of School Leaders". *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*. 9(1):38–52.
- Aas, M., K. Helstad, and K. F. Vennebo. 2016. "Når Rektor Stilles Til Ansvar: Krise Eller Gyllen Mulighet? Om Resultatstyring I Rektorutdanningen." [When the Principal Is Held Accountable: Crisis or Golden Opportunity? Governance in Leadership Programs]. *Acta Didactica Norge*. 10(4):146–165.
- Aas, M., K. F. Vennebo, and K. A. Halvorsen. 2019. "Benchlearning – An Action Research Program for Transforming Leadership and School Practices". *Educational Action Research*. 28(2):210–226.
- Aas, M., and M. Vavik. 2015. "Group Coaching: A New Way of Constructing Leadership Identity?". *School Leadership & Management: Formerly School Organisation*. 35(3):251–265.
- Avolio, B. J., R. J. Reichard, S. T. Hannah, F. O. Walumbwa, and A. Chan. 2009. "A Meta-Analytic Review of Leadership Impact Research: Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Studies". *The Leadership Quarterly*. 20(5):764–784.
- Caspersen, J., R. A. Federici, and T. Røsdal. 2017. "Evaluering Av Den Nasjonale Rektorutdanningen 2015–2019. Delrapport 1". [Evaluating the National School Leadership Programme 2015–2019. Report 1]. NIFU/NTNU. <https://www.udir.no/tall-og-forskning/finn-forskning/rapporter/skolele-dere-er-svart-fornyde-med-rektorutdanningen/>
- Cruz-Gonzales, C., J. Domingo, and C. Lucena. 2019. "School Principals and Leadership Identity: A Thematic Exploration of the Literature". *Educational Research*. 61(3):319–336.
- Dawson, T. L. 2008. *Metacognition and Learning in Adulthood*. Re: Tasks from ODNI/CHCO/IC Leadership Development Office. Retrieved from: <https://dts.lectica.org/PDF/Metacognition.pdf>.
- Dempster, N., S. Lovett, and B. Fluckiger. 2011. *Literature Review: Strategies to Develop School Leadership*. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).
- DuFour, R., and R. J. Marzano. 2011. *Leaders of Learning: How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement*. Bloomington: Solution Tree Press.
- Edwards, A. 2009. "From the Systemic to the Relational: Relational Agency and Activity Theory". In A. Sannino, H. Daniels, and K. D. Gutiérrez, edited by. *Learning and Expanding with Activity Theory*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press; p. 197–211.
- Engeström, Y. 1987. *Learning by Expanding: An Activity-Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit Oy.
- Engeström, Y. 2005. *Developmental Work Research: Expanding Activity Theory in Practice*. Berlin: Lehmanns Media.
- Engeström, Y. 1999. "Activity Theory and Individual and Social Transformation". In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, and R.L. Punamäki, edited by. *Perspektives on Activity Theory*, MA: Cambridge University Press; p. 19–39.
- Engeström, Y. 2001. "Making Expansive Decisions: An Activity-Theoretical Study of Practitioners Building Collaborative Medical Care for Children". In C. M. Allwood and M. Selart, edited by. *Decision Making: Social and Creative Dimensions*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic; p. 281–301.
- Flückiger, B., M. Aas, G. Johnson, S. Lovett, and M. Nicolaidou. 2017. "The Potential of Group Coaching for Leadership Learning". *Professional Development in Education*. 43(4):612–629.
- Fullan, M. 2001. *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fullan, M. 2018. *Surreal Change: The Real Life of Transforming Public Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Gunter, H., S. Rayner, G. Butt, A. Fielding, A. Lance, and H. Thomas. 2007. "Transforming the School Workforce: Perspectives on School Reform in England". *Educational Change*. 8(1):25–39.

- Gunter, H. M. 2016. *An Intellectual History of School Leadership Practice and Research*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Hargreaves, A., and M. T. O'Connor. 2018. *Collaborative Professionalism. When Teaching Together Means Learning for All*. Boston: Emerald Publishing.
- Huber, S. G. 2011. "Leadership for Learning—Learning for Leadership: The Impact of Professional Development". In *Springer International Handbook of Leadership for Learning*, T. Townsend and J. MacBeath, edited by, (p. 635–652Vol. 25). Dordrecht: Springer International Handbooks of Education
- Hybertsen, I., D. B. Stensaker, R. A. Federici, M. S. Olsen, A. Solem, and P. O. Aamodt. 2014. "Evalueringen Av Den Nasjonale Rektorutdanningen". [The evaluation of the National School Leadership Programme in Norway]. NTNU/NIFU. <https://www.udir.no/tall-og-forskning/finnforskning/rapporter/Rektorutdanningen-oker-kvaliteten-i-opplaringen/>
- Kemmis, S. 2009. "Action Research as a Practice-Based Practice". *Educational Action Research*. 17 (3):463–474.
- Kolb, D. A. 1984. *Experiential Learning Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Leithwood, K., D. Jantzi, and R. Steinbach. 2006. *Changing Leadership for Changing Times*. Maidenhead, Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Leont'ev, A. N. 1981. "The Problem of Activity in Psychology". In J. V. Wertsch, edited by. *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe; p. 37–71.
- Louis, K. S. 1998. "Reconnecting Knowledge Utilization and School Improvement: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back". In *International Handbook of Educational Change*, A. Hargreaves, edited by. (p. 1074–1097, Vol. 5). Dordrecht: Kluwer
- Louis, K. S. 2015. "Linking Leadership to Learning: State, District and Local Effects". *Nordic Journal of Study in Educational Policy*. 1:1–11.
- Lucas, B., and G. Claxton. 2010. *New Kinds of Smart: How the Science of Learnable Intelligence Is Changing Education*. London: Open University Press.
- MacBeath, J. 2013. "Leading Learning in a World of Change". In OECD, edited by. *Leadership for 21st Century Learning, Educational Research and Innovation*, Paris: OECD Publishing; p. 83–106.
- MacBeath, J., and N. Dempster. 2009. *Connecting Leadership and Learning: Principles for Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Miettinen, R. 2005. "Object of Activity and Individual Motivation". *Mind, Culture, and Activity*. 12 (1):52–69.
- Miettinen, R., and J. Virkkunen. 2005. "Epistemic Objects, Artefacts and Organizational Change". *Organization*. 12(3):437–456.
- Mumford, M. D., Peterson, D., Robledo, I., and Hester, K. 2012. "Cases in Leadership Education. Implication of human cognitions". In S. Snook, N. Nohria, and R. Khuranda, edited by. *The Handbook of Teaching Leadership. Knowing, Doing and Being*, Harvard, MA: Sage publications; p. 21–33
- NESH. 2014. "Forskningsetiske Retningslinjer for Samfunnsvitenskap, Humaniora, Juss Og Teknologi". [Research Ethical Guidelines for Social Science, the Humanities, Law and Technology]. Oslo: Norwegian National Committees for Research Ethics.
- Nonaka, I., and H. Takeuchi. 1995. *The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pont, B., D. Nusche, and H. Moorman 2008. *Improving School Leadership*. Paris: OECD. <http://www.oecd.org/publications>. ERIC ED 504 577
- Postholm, M. B. 2015. "Methodologies in Cultural–Historical Activity Theory: The Example of School-Based Development". *Educational Research*. 57(1):43–58.
- Richards, L. 2014. *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Robertson, J. 2013. "Learning Leadership". *Leading and Managing*. 19(2):54–69.
- Robinson, V. M. J., M. Hohepa, and C. Lloyd. 2009. *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why; Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

- Stake, R. E. 1995. *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Stoll, L. 2007. "Professional Learning Communities: Elaborating New Approaches". In L. Stoll and K. S. Louis, edited by. *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth and Dilemmas*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press; p. 1–14.
- Stoll, L., and K. S. Louis. 2007. *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth and Dilemmas*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.
- Stoll, L., R. Bolam, A. McMahon, M. Wallace, and S. Thomas. 2006. "Professional Learning Communities: A Review of the Literature". *Journal of Educational Change*. 7(4):221–258.
- Thomson, P., C. Hall, and K. Jones. 2013. "Towards Educational Change Leadership as a Discursive Practice—or Should All School Leaders Read Foucault?". *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*. 16(2):155–172.
- Timperley, H. 2011. *Realizing the Power of Professional Learning*. Milton Keynes: Maidenhead Open University Press.
- Toole, J. C., and K. S. Louis. 2002. "The Role of Professional Learning Communities in International Education". In K. Leithwood and P. Hallinger, edited by. *Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration*. Dordrecht: Kluwer; p. 245–279.
- Vennebo, K. F. 2015. "School Leadership and Innovative Work. Places and Spaces." PhD diss., University of Oslo
- Vennebo, K. F., and M. Aas. 2019. "Leading Professional Group Discussions: A Challenge for Principals?." *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. doi:10.1080/13603124.2018.1562099.
- Vennebo, K. F., and Aas, M. forthcoming. "School Leadership and Change: Tensions as productive driving forces".
- Yukl, G. 2010. *Leadership in Organizations*. 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.