

# Group coaching integrated into national school leadership programs for professional development of school leaders: A similar, yet different approach at a Norwegian and Swedish university

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## Abstract

A growing body of research has emphasized coaching as a key approach to the professional development of school leaders. In many countries, coaching in one form or another is integrated into national school leadership programs. This article reports on a study exploring a specific form of coaching, group coaching, integrated into two national school leadership training programs in Norway and Sweden. The study aims to contribute extended knowledge about how group coaching integrated into such programs can support school leaders' professional development by examining how a similar yet different group coaching approach, might impact the challenges school leaders bring forth for coaching and how school leaders experience the significance of group coaching in dealing with the challenges in their daily practices. A qualitative collective case study design was adopted, and data was collected through observations, interviews, and questionnaires. Qualitative reflexive thematic analysis was performed. The study shows differences in the type of challenges the school leaders participating in the Norwegian and the Swedish programs brought forth for group coaching and how they experienced the group coaching process to support them in reflecting, understanding, and acting on the challenges in new ways.

## Keywords

Group coaching, Norway, professional development, school leadership program, Sweden

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## **Introduction**

Over the past few decades, school leaders have experienced increased pressure to manage change to improve students' learning outcomes. Leadership learning programs seem to emphasize the job's generic requirements rather than leaders' capabilities, moral purpose, and the need to take an active role in learning (Barber et al., 2010). As such there seems to be a challenge in finding the balance between system and reform needs and school and individual needs. Aas and Törnsten (2016) point out that performing leadership in Norway and Sweden as long-established democratic societies entails performing leadership within the profile of Nordic leadership that builds upon equal and collaborative relationships between leaders and staff and does this in parallel to meeting system-level accountability demands. This duality implies balancing the democratic idea of involvement and exerting influence with necessary decision-making when dealing with challenging topics and situations (Aas and Törnsten, 2016).

Coaching, in one form or another, has been increasingly reported as the type of school leadership development intervention gaining energy and popularity (Aas, 2020; Forde et al., 2012). In many countries, coaching is a part of national school leadership programs (Lumby et al., 2008; Robertson and Earl, 2014). For example, coaching was introduced as one of the key approaches to school leadership development, which is evident in the National College in England (Bush et al., 2007). The literature has addressed coaching as a component of headship preparation (Earley et al., 2008), school development (Creasy and Patterson, 2005), succession planning (Hanbury, 2009), and the development of leadership across the school, including middle leadership (Simkins et al., 2006) and teacher leadership (Blackman, 2010). These coaching approaches differ from the team coaching approaches used in the business world because students do not have a working relationship (Clutterbuck, 2007).

Whereas most research on coaching for school leadership development in national school leadership programs concerns individual coaching or peer coaching, a growing body of research on group coaching (Aas, 2020) sheds light on the power of group coaching as an integrated part of such programs. However, more is needed to be known about group coaching in professional development of school leaders, when integrated into national school leadership programs.

The purpose of the study reported in this article, is to investigate and gain further insight into how group coaching integrated into national school leadership programs, can support school leaders' professional development. The study employs a collective case study design and is empirically based within National Principal Training Programs (NPT programs) offered by two universities, one in Norway and one in Sweden which use a similar, yet different group coaching approach.

In the study, we adhere to Cockerham's (2011: 1) definition of group coaching as "a facilitated group process that is led by a professional coach and formed with the intention of maximizing the combined energy, experience and wisdom of individuals who chose to join in order to achieve organizational objectives and/or individual goals" Moreover, we build on the assumption that an individual develops a sense of self and learns through interaction with the other participants. Sometimes, the literature distinguishes between group coaching and team coaching (Britton, 2013; Clutterbuck, 2007; O'Connor and Cavanagh, 2017; Tolhurst, 2010). Team coaching relates to groups in which the individuals are working closely together toward a defined common goal (Brown and Grant, 2010; Cockerham, 2011). According to Brown and Grant (2010), group coaching is a broader category than team coaching "that relates to any group of individuals, including but not limited to teams, whether participants are working together towards specific goals or not" (2010: 32).

We start by presenting a literature review of group coaching in leadership education, followed by a description of the NPT programs offered by the Norwegian and Swedish universities and the group coaching approach integrated into the programs. In the method section, we explain the methodological approach and the analytical strategies as an introduction to the findings section. Finally, we discuss the findings and the study's implications and limitations.

### *Literature review of group coaching in leadership education*

Coaching has gained a position as one of the tools used in leadership development programs for school leaders (Bush, 2009). Coaching builds on constructivist theories of learning. According to Cunningham et al. (2019), constructivist theories can lead to transformational learning and foster the development of deep connections among theory, research, and practice. Constructivist learning is active and social by nature, as a learner's interactions with the environment provide a contextualized understanding of how school leadership practices and school leaders' identities can be constructed with help from coaching. Recommendations for novice-principal support in the form of coaching can enculturate new principals into open frames of solving problems and help them develop proficiency in the job's various roles (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). The number of studies on the benefits of coaching for professional development (Klar et al., 2020) and to develop leadership performance (Brinkmann et al., 2021; Goff et al., 2014; Huff et al., 2013) is growing. Tolhurst (2010) suggests that coaching can be beneficial to individuals and the organization as a whole. Benefits for individuals include increased confidence, competence, and personal agency. Organizational benefits of coaching include increased staff capability in responding to new roles or tasks and improvements to the organization and the practice. Robertson (2008) argues for the involvement of an academic tutor and a coach to introduce broader ideas deemed essential to foster a critically reflective approach to practice.

In a study of a program for aspiring principals, Forde et al. (2012) showed that coaching had positive effects on the students' learning. However, it was challenging for the coaches to support students' personal leadership development and evaluate them simultaneously. During the last few years, there has been more focus on professional learning for school leaders, including professional meetings where colleagues can support each other in developing their leadership practice (Cochran et al., 2020).

A review of the specific group coaching approach developed for NPT programs and piloted in the Professional Learning through Feedback and Reflection project (Flückiger et al., 2017) has shown how group coaching support professional learning for school leaders in different ways (Aas, 2017; Aas, 2020; Aas, 2022). The knowledge overview includes 13 studies based on three inclusion criteria: (a) articles and book chapters published in peer-reviewed journals and books, (b) studies published in 2014–2020, and (c) languages are limited to Norwegian, Swedish, and English. This group coaching approach is used by the two universities in this article.

The studies included in the review are conducted in Australia, Sweden, Norway, and Cyprus and show that individual-level learning and professional development can lead to organizational development (Aas, 2022). The group members develop a binding sense of responsibility for each other's learning, and in this way, the group coaching contributes to a more substantial "learning pressure." The school leader develops greater security in the leadership role through personal and contextual feedback from other leaders. Their insight into other leaders' contexts and roles enhances their understanding of how leadership can be exercised. Bringing together school leaders in coaching groups to discuss and give each other feedback on current leadership challenges seems very

important for the participants' understanding of the role and construction of their leadership identity (Aas and Vavik, 2015). Group affiliation seems fundamental for the development of other factors. It includes the experience that people are not alone and isolated with their questions, recognizing that others have similar feelings, thoughts, and problems, and the experience of giving without expecting anything in return. There are many indications that school leaders' development of leader identity primarily occurs in meetings with others through relationship building, which can trigger security and a willingness to make changes (Brandmo et al., 2019).

The participants' preparation for group coaching, such as self-reflection and interviews with stakeholders contributes to the fact that they have already started a thought process that allows coaching to capture core issues much more quickly than if participants come to coaching with "blank sheets" (Aas, 2016; Nicolaidou et al., 2018). Another vital part of preparation is the establishment of a group climate that can promote the participants' trust in each other and their willingness to become involved in the other participants' problems. The entire reflection process depends to a large extent on the group coach's ability to ask questions or ensure that various questions are asked to drive reflection (Flückiger et al., 2017). Here, the group coach has support in the established structure that includes leading the conversation in a structured way, ensuring that all participants are included reasonably, and summarizing and synthesizing the affected topics and actions. In this way, the reflections become more than an informal exchange of experiences and can help develop various types of insight and testing of new strategies and actions (Aas and Fluckiger, 2016).

The arrangement of engaging all the group members as co-coaches has led the participants to say that they learn as much from listening to and participating in colleagues' coaching themes as from being the focus (Aas, 2022). Studies have shown that people not knowing each other is a strength when personal challenges are to be shared in group coaching. Participants feel freer and more secure when they share aspects of their leadership practice with participants they do not work with daily (Aas et al., 2020).

In addition, recent studies show how group coaching can support principals' learning and their leadership in various ways. Brinkman et al. (2021) explore how group coaching can help school leader build self-efficacy during a crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic. Klar et al. (2020) used group coaching as a part of transformative learning to increase capabilities of principals in rural and high poverty districts. Finally, Abrahamsen (2023) investigated how a group coaching practice directed at supporting school leadership groups develops when school leaders engage in reflective conversations, and reflection on coaching practices can be an important element for coaches to develop both individually and in groups (Aas and Vennebo, 2023).

In sum, the review of literature has pointed to how and why coaching and group coaching have an impact on school leaders' professional learning when integrated into NPT programs. The main difference between individual coaching and group coaching is that *understanding others* is the key factor in successful group coaching (Brown and Grant, 2010). The group coaching approach might be one way of supporting the constructivism approach in the preparation of educational leaders (Cunningham et al., 2019).

## Study context

In the following we present the NPT programs offered in Norway and Sweden, and the group coaching approach, which is integrated in the programs offered by one Norwegian university and one Swedish university, which are similar, yet different.

## *NPT programs in Norway and Sweden*

In 2009, Norwegian authorities introduced a nationwide education program for newly appointed principals, which is now available to principals and middle leaders in primary and secondary education (Utdanningsdirektoratet, n.d.). The program is optional. The Swedish authorities have since 1976 offered a nationwide education program for school leaders. In 2009, they launched a new version of the nationwide education program which is mandatory for principals from preschool to adult education (SFS, 2011: 183). If there are available study places, other personnel with a corresponding function as principals can also attend. In both Norway and Sweden, the programs are at the master's level and are worth 30 credits. The main objective of the educational programs in both countries is to equip participants with the qualifications necessary to ensure that children and pupils receive an equal and legally secure education, create conditions for goal fulfillment at both individual and organizational levels, and develop their organizations. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training and the Swedish Agency for Education assign the NPT program to educational institutions in their respective countries on behalf of the governments. Currently, seven universities in both countries offer the program, and participants are often in the early stages of their leadership careers.

Some Norwegian and Swedish universities offering the NPT program have included group coaching as a learning activity. This aims to encourage reflection on personal agency, including the development of role clarity, self-efficacy, and ethical considerations (Aas, 2016; Aas and Vavik, 2015; Leo, 2020). These aspects can lead to changes in leadership practices.

### *The group coaching approach*

This section provides an overview of the group coaching approach under examination, used in the two NPT programs offered by the Norwegian and Swedish universities. One common goal of group coaching in both universities' NPT programs is to enhance and solidify learning by enabling school leaders to reflect on their practices, explore novel approaches for acting through practical application in their schools, and receive feedback. The foundation of group coaching is to establish a climate of trust, respect, and inclusiveness within the groups. It involves a relationship-building experience in which individuals are not isolated with their questions (Brandmo et al., 2019). In both the Norwegian and Swedish NTP programs, each coaching group has a dedicated coach, an educator associated with the program, who supports the group throughout the program. The coaching groups typically consist of five to seven students. The approach highlights one student in the group (the coachee) as the focal point of the coaching process, while the other students take on the role of co-coaches. The students take turns acting as the coachee. In the Norwegian NTP program, 3 full days of the 21 program days are dedicated to coaching, which means the program includes three coaching sessions, and all the students in each coaching group take on the role of coachee in every coaching session. In the Swedish NTP program, four half days are devoted to coaching throughout the 3 years. In this case, the groups select three cases in each session, and all the students in each coaching group have the opportunity to be the coachee at least once during the four sessions.

A specific protocol consisting of five steps has been developed to guide the coaching process, similar to the protocol piloted in the Professional Learning through Feedback and Reflection project (Aas, 2016; Flückiger et al., 2017). The protocol is inspired by the GROUP Coaching model (Brown and Grant, 2010: 39), which includes the steps "goal, reality, options, understanding

others, and perform,” recognizing that understanding others is a key factor in successful group coaching. The coach leading the group coaching process uses the protocol to ensure that time is allocated appropriately and that the process follows the agreed format and structure (Aas and Flückiger, 2016). The five steps in the protocol are:

1. Presentation of a prepared coaching topic
2. Questioning to clarify the topic.
3. Reflection and perspectives related to the topic.
4. Reflections and responses from the coachee.
5. Summing up on how to handle the challenge in the future.

The session in both the universities’ NTP programs begins with a short introduction, during which the coachee addresses their leadership topic, which often reflects a leadership challenge they are facing. Next, the coach and other group members can ask clarifying questions. During this phase, the presented topic may be reframed and clarified, with the coachee shaping the coaching topic with the coach’s assistance (Aas and Flückiger, 2016).

Following this during the next phase, the group members and coach engage in a reflective conversation about what they have heard, their understanding of the leadership topic presented, and their own reflections (Abrahamsen, 2023; Aas and Vennebo, 2023). The group members are encouraged to offer ideas, motivate, and support the coachees’ reflections. In the final part of the reflection phase, the coachees sit with their back to the group, focusing on active listening without preparing answers. Finally, the coachees face the group, comment on the reflections, potential suggestions from the group members, and elaborate on how they might handle the challenge in the future (Flückiger et al., 2017).

Although the group coaching integrated in the two universities’ NPT programs uses the same approach and protocol, there are two main differences: one regarding step 1, the preparation of the group coaching and one regarding step 5, summing up on how to handle the challenge in the future.

Regarding the step 1, the preparation of the group coaching the students participating in the Norwegian program, start by conducting a 360-degree interview to identify a leadership topic to focus on and prepare for the coaching session (Aas, 2016). Each student interviews various people in their organization to understand their colleagues’ expectations for their leadership role. Based on the insights from the interviews, the students write a report summarizing the expectations and prepare one to two leadership challenges to address when in the spotlight for coaching. In the Swedish program, the students identify a leadership challenge they are facing in their leadership role and communicate it to the group coach in advance.

Regarding step 5, summing up on how to handle the challenge in the future in the Norwegian program there is a strong emphasis on action planning (Hunzicker, 2011) Action planning involves planning new actions to try out in practice that may help the school leaders handle challenges and develop their leadership practices (Aas et al., 2020). During this stage, the coaches help the participants to formulate concrete leadership actions to try out in their own schools. The school leaders participating in the Swedish program take the reflections and potential suggestions for the way forward to digest later when alone.

In summary, the approach employed for group coaching in the two universities’ NPT programs are similar, yet different regarding the students’ *preparation for the group coaching*, and *the action planning as a part of the way forward* on how to handle the challenges.

## Purpose

Against this backdrop, the study aims to contribute extended knowledge about how group coaching integrated into such programs can support school leaders' professional development by examining how a similar yet different group coaching approach, might impact the challenges school leaders bring forth for coaching and how school leaders experience the significance of group coaching in dealing with the challenges in their daily practices. To pursue the aim of the study, we have formulated the main research question: *How can group coaching integrated into NPT programs in Norway and Sweden support the professional development of school leaders?* In addition, we have developed two sub-research questions: (a) *What leadership challenges did the school leaders brought forth for group coaching?* (b) *How do school leaders perceive group coaching as a means of addressing these challenges and improving their leadership practices?*

## Methods

The study uses a qualitative collective case study design inspired by Stake (2005) and is framed within a constructivist research paradigm, where knowledge is constructed at the intersection of researchers and participants (Crotty, 1998). The design allowed for a thorough exploration and contributed to our ability to compare and examine the group coaching approach in the NPT programs provided at a Norwegian and a Swedish university. Each university's programs were defined as a precisely defined system (Stake, 2005), with integrated similar group coaching approach, yet different.

The NPT program in Norway and Sweden, including group coaching, was purposefully selected (Silverman, 2006) based on the model utilized for coaching in the programs employing the same approach and protocol helping structuring the coaching sessions, but with differences in the preparation of and the end of the group coaching. Furthermore, the coaching groups were selected by convenience based on easy access as we, as researchers, were in charge of the NPT programs at the two Universities.

## Ethical considerations

The Norwegian and Swedish ethical guidelines for social science-based research, provided by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Norway (NESH, 2021) and Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) were adhered to throughout the research. All participants consented in writing to participate. They were informed about the study, were assured confidentiality and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without explaining their reasoning.

## Data collection

The Norwegian study sample consisted of two coaching groups with six students, in sum twelve students. The groups were in their second three semesters of in-service training in the NPT program. All students worked in compulsory or upper secondary schools in various parts of Norway. They were principals or heads of departments with 4 to 21 years of experience in leadership positions. All the students raised a coaching topic framed as a leadership challenge based on their preparatory work from a 360-degree interview in their schools. Data were collected through

observation of the coaching of all 12 students, which lasted 45 minutes for each and focused on the coaching topic the students brought forth for coaching. A month after the observations, data were collected from a questionnaire sent to all 12 students. Nine of the students answered and returned their answers and reflections. The questionnaire comprised background questions followed by open questions about what happened after the group coaching, whether and how the group coaching was helpful regarding action planning, and what they would do to develop their leadership practice further.

The Swedish study sample consisted of observations of group coaching in three groups of 5 students and one group of 6, for a total of 21 students. The groups were in their second or third and final year of their in-service training in the NPT program. All students were principals or assistant principals with less than 3 years in the position. They were working in preschool, compulsory school, and upper secondary schools. Each coaching session lasted four hours, and during the time available, three students raised a coaching topic framed as a leadership challenge connected to their respective leadership roles. However, all five members shared the 4-hour coaching session in one group. Subsequently, in the second phase, 4 to 5 weeks after the initial observation, fourteen principals underwent interviews. The interview questions were strategically designed to elicit information regarding their experiences during the coaching sessions and what happened after the coaching session.

Unfortunately, we were unable to conduct interviews with students participating in the NPT program in Norway due to unforeseen circumstances even though we had already done so in the Swedish NPT program. Instead, data were collected from a questionnaire as mentioned above, and to address this disparity in data collection, we added a section for “other comments” at the end of the questionnaire, inviting the students to provide additional information about their experiences.

## Data analysis

We conducted the data analysis based on Braun and Clarke’s (2019) approach to reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in a sequential six-phase process. We chose this approach because it is theoretically flexible, and suits questions related to people’s experiences, views, and perceptions. Moreover, in RTA, we, as researchers, have an active role in the knowledge production process through reflexive engagement with theory, data, and interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2019; 2020). In what follows, we will elaborate on the analytical process by explaining the work in the various phases. Although we use the phases as our point of departure for informing, it is important to mention that the analysis has been a recursive process, with movements back and forth among the phases. In what follows, we will elaborate on how we have proceeded in the analysis work, where we have used a collective analysis strategy, and where the first and second authors have conducted the analysis together, considering that it will help create the necessary distance from the data and validate the research (Tjora, 2017).

In the first phase, we read the transcripts of the data collected because we considered it important to familiarize ourselves with the entire dataset before coding responses and looking for patterns. At this stage, we made notes, which we discussed in relation to the two sub-research questions: *What leadership challenges did school leaders brought forth for group coaching, and how do school leaders experience group coaching, supporting them in dealing with the challenges and developing their leadership practices?* In phase two, we carried out a systematic data coding by selecting all text sequences relevant to the first part of the research question based on the researchers’



observation logs and the second part based on the questionnaire and interviews. Then we (inductively) started formulating data-driven codes relevant to each part of the research question. At this stage, we color-coded as many potential codes as possible. After encoding all the data, we identified similar and different codes. In phase three, we examined and sorted the codes using mind maps to identify broader patterns and possible themes of coaching topics, challenges, and perceptions of support. At the end of this phase, we had a collection of preliminary formulated themes for each part of the research question. In phase four, we examined the themes to determine whether they answered the research question. In this phase, we merged several themes together and deleted some. The aim was to improve and strengthen the themes. In the fifth phase, we examined each theme to assess whether the themes contained sub-themes. In other words, we defined and named themes in this penultimate phase. We concluded that we had three common themes in the Norwegian and Swedish observational data answering the first sub-research question (what leadership challenges school leaders brought forth for group coaching), which we gave the following names: (a) *challenges in leading individuals*, (b) *challenges in relation to leaders in the same leadership team*, and (c) *challenges in relation to him- or herself as a leader*.

Further, we identified four common themes in the Norwegian data from the questionnaire and the Swedish interview data, answering the second sub-research question (how the school leaders experience group coaching supporting them): (a) *clarifying and understanding challenges*, (b) *sorting out and distinguishing challenges*, (c) *clarifying and understanding the leadership role*, and (d) *trying out new ways of acting*. In the sixth and final phase, we worked to substantiate each theme by extracting and using quotations from the data and contextualizing the analysis in relation to theories about group coaching and literature we found relevant.

Great care should be taken when drawing conclusions from a limited sample of programs and participating school leaders within a specific context.

The validity and credibility of the study is achieved through the robust method with triangulation through observations, interviews and surveys analyzed in collaboration between the researchers with different national contexts (cf. Stake, 2005).

## Findings

We organize the presentation of the findings by addressing the two sub-research questions and the identified themes for each question, by first presenting the findings from the Norwegian case, followed by the Swedish case for each of the themes.

### *Leadership challenges brought forth and the experienced support of group coaching*

*Challenges in leading individuals.* In the Norwegian case, this theme included three challenges linked with individual teachers the school leaders considered problematic, especially regarding school development work. The challenges the three school leaders brought forth for coaching seem based on assumptions that learning new ways of acting could help them cope with the challenges. For example, the first of the school leaders asked, "How can I work more actively with the teachers who always are pessimistic about change, so the work becomes more constructive for all?" The leader said that two or three teachers always raised objections in the introduction to development tasks. One leader said, "I am so prepared for their reactions that I can sometimes be short and quite sharp towards them." The second one asked, "How can I be more patient in my conversations with the teachers?" The leader said the need for coaching was related to avoiding responding to teachers

too quickly in communicating with them and learning to answer, “I have to think about this,” or, “I cannot answer this now.” The third question was, “How can I free up more time to conduct development work?” This leader stated that when teachers asked her for help to manage various sorts of problems, she used a lot of time because she took over their challenges and work tasks related to those problems.

The analysis clearly shows that the school leaders dealing with challenges in leading individuals found the group coaching supportive in ways that we sorted under the themes of *clarifying and understanding challenges, sorting out and distinguishing challenges, and trying out new ways of acting*. For example, one leader stated, “The group coaching helped me to see, try out, and reflect on other possible ways to approach and act on challenges.” Another said, “I gained new perspectives for sorting out challenges. The action planning helped me to try out new ways to behave and act more strategically.” The third said, “It was helpful in a way that clarified my challenges. After the coaching, I have practiced setting boundaries and not taking over tasks for the teachers.”

In the Swedish case, this theme included 5 of the 14 challenges brought up for coaching and thus became the most comprehensive theme. The challenges were linked with teachers whose colleagues, or the principal considered problems. Most starting questions were similar and based on the assumption that the problem lies at an individual level and that learning new ways of acting could help them cope with the challenges, such as “How do I get a teacher to stop spreading negative energy in the team?” and “How can I work with a teacher who is perceived as a work environment problem for many colleagues in the school?” Other questions were more focused on a wish to help a coworker develop certain skills, such as, “How can I support a class teacher’s professional development in terms of students’ needs and help her become open to this as part of her assignment without her feeling that it will be too much?”

As in the Norwegian cases, the analysis shows that the Swedish school leaders dealing with challenges in leading individuals found the group coaching supportive in ways that we sorted under the themes of *clarifying and understanding challenges, sorting out and distinguishing between challenges, and trying out new ways of acting*. For example, understanding and handling the challenges only as individual problems were often not sufficient. A common insight and understanding for the school leaders became that challenges emanating from an individual level often were reflected at the group or organizational level and thus needed to be worked on at a collective level, for example, in working groups. In cases where the challenges were linked to individuals, the principals expressed that the group coaching supports them in thinking and acting in new ways by stating, “It is better to go straight to the individual and not to listen too much to complaints from the group of teachers” and “But it’s also that I dare to say things, that communication is a big part, so I can humbly talk to the person about what is not working.” They also expressed that after the coaching, they saw the importance of giving individuals concrete assignments and follow-up regarding the processes and that they had started to use coaching as a part of their leadership practices.

**Challenges regarding leaders in the same leadership team.** In the Norwegian case, two school leaders brought forth challenges in this theme for coaching regarding the principal and other members of the school’s leadership team. One challenge-related question was, “How can I spend less of myself but get to say what I want without being overzealous and taking over tasks from the principal or others in the leadership team?” This school leader said it was very frustrating to encounter situations in the leadership team in which “no one makes decisions,” and they stated, “We cannot have sensitive leaders who are unclear, do not take responsibility and make decisions – not talking about being strict or angry but with care and attention.” The other challenge-related question that we

sorted under this theme was, “How do I handle my double role as a member of the school leadership group and being a mother?” The leader explained that being a mother in a class asking questions about how the contact teacher performs daily work was a complicated topic: “I have discussed this with my principal, who has had a couple of conversations with the teacher.”

The analysis shows that the school leaders who brought forth challenges regarding leaders in their leadership team found the group coaching supportive in ways that we sorted under the theme of *clarifying and understanding the leadership role*. This can be illustrated by the fact that the school leaders stated that the group coaching helped them become “more aware of their leadership role” and “[develop] role clarity and be more aware of and understanding their professional role as a leader.”

In the Swedish case, three principals brought up challenges regarding leaders in the same leadership team. One challenge-related question was, “How can I show solidarity with a decision made in our school leadership group that negatively affects the staff I am responsible for? The challenges emanated from a decision made by the leadership group that no teacher longer could be granted leave that was not regulated by labor law, and the principal’s concern was that this regulation would impact the staff’s willingness to resolve short-term absences as they are now. The second challenge-related question was asked by a principal, “How do you lead the assistant principals who do not take responsibility, so the principal does not need to work 70 hours a week?” New assistant principals were recruited, and according to the principal, they do not work as he would like, and consequently, the staff, the two assistant principals, are responsible for turning to him. In the third challenge brought up for coaching, an assistant principal started by asking a question that involved the principal and their conflicting views on school improvement and what quality teaching might be. During the coaching session, the challenge was expanded to a question of staying or leaving the school because the conflict was deep.

The analysis shows that the school leaders who brought forth challenges regarding leaders in their leadership team found the group coaching supportive in ways that we sorted under the theme of *clarifying and understanding challenges and sorting out and distinguishing challenges*. This can be illustrated by the fact that the principal dealing with the leadership group’s decision expressed that the challenge was “to accept the decision and not trying to have it changed, but rather focusing on the staff on how to maintain their trust.” The principal, who experienced a workload that was unacceptable because of the assistant principals, realized that a major challenge was his behavior, that he had to establish boundaries for communication, not answering his phone on weekends and evenings. He had to stop trying to put out fires all the time and be even clearer with the assistant principals regarding the expectations of their leadership. The third principal had decided to look for new positions and quit. In this theme, the coaching helped clarify challenges and, to some degree, sort out and distinguish challenges. However, there are no clear signs of clarifying and understanding the leadership role, and none of the principals took clear actions after the coaching except trying to cope with their situations.

**Challenges regarding oneself as a leader.** In the Norwegian case, this theme included professional and personal challenges three school leaders brought forth. The first one asked, “How can I systematize both my workday and my person in a flurry of tasks and expectations that never ends, and further added, “How can I improve my delegating skills?” The leader stated that the road to a 50- to 60-hour week was sometimes short, focusing on dealing with these challenges to avoid burnout. This theme included two other leadership challenges. One was how to become a more visible leader and involved in the department’s pedagogical work. This leader explained that the main

challenge was “to find time to take part in core activities related to teaching and pupils learning.” The other one was how a leader can develop their leadership skills and become a confident and effective leader. This leader stated that being “confident in the leadership role and a good leader is decisive for gaining a voice in the leadership team, the staff’s trust, and success in development work.” The analysis clearly shows that the school leaders dealing with challenges regarding themselves as a leader found the group coaching supportive in ways we sorted under the themes of *clarifying and understanding and trying out new ways of acting*. For example, one of them stated, “The group coaching helped me to develop a better understanding of the challenges,” and another one stated, “The group coaching helped to clarify challenges by being openly, honestly, and directly discussed by several people in similar situations and positions and to try out new ways to act because in given situations, I could listen to my group members’ advice as an ‘inner voice’ and thus to a greater extent be able to make good choices.” The third stated that the group coaching helped “to map out [their] own strengths and challenges,” and “at the same time ... it gave thoughts for the way forward [to develop] skills by trying out new courses of action in practice.”

In the Swedish case, one principal wanted coaching regarding his thoughts on inclusion versus exclusion regarding a student with very special needs. He stated that the coaching helped him clarify and understand various perspectives of inclusion and exclusion and sort out challenges deriving from the students’, parents’, teachers’, and his point of view. He refers to his role as a leader: “The problem that was solved is about finding a pedagogical plan based on the student’s conditions. It is a problem that we can absolutely solve based on a collective competence.”

## Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to contribute extended knowledge about how group coaching integrated into NPT programs can support school leaders’ professional development by examining how a similar yet different group coaching approach, might impact the challenges school leaders bring forth for coaching and how school leaders experience the significance of group coaching in dealing with the challenges in their daily practices.

In sum, the findings show that the school leaders commonly brought forth challenges for group coaching related to three themes: *challenges in leading individuals, challenges regarding leaders in the same leadership team, and challenges regarding themselves as a leader*. Further, the school leaders found the group coaching helpful for understanding and acting on the challenges in four ways: *clarifying and understanding challenges, sorting out and distinguishing challenges, clarifying and understanding the leadership role, and trying out new ways of acting*. The research findings back up Darling-Hammond et al. (2010), who found that providing coaching support could assist principals in solving problems. Additionally, Mavrogordato and Cannon (2009) demonstrated that putting challenging issues into perspective appeared to be crucial for school leaders to enhance their effectiveness and innovation. During the group coaching, the leaders experienced insight into other leaders’ contexts. They thereby increased their understanding of how leadership can be performed, which was a help in clarifying, understanding, and distinguishing their leadership challenges and how to act on them in new ways (Aas and Vavik, 2015). A shared insight and understanding were that challenges emanating from an individual level needed to be worked on at a collective level (Brandmo et al., 2019).

The two NPT Programs utilized a similar approach, however with a difference in the preparation of the coaching topic *before* the group coaching session *began* and the action planning at the *end* of the coaching session. These differences might influence the coaching process in two ways: (a) what

challenges the leaders brought with them to the group coaching and (b) the development of their leadership role and identity. The significance of doing preparation work is supported by Nicolaidou et al. (2018) and Aas et al. (2020), who have shown how self-assessment and feedback ahead of group coaching is an effective start to the coaching process.

Interestingly, Norwegian school leaders mostly put forth challenges regarding themselves as leaders, while Swedish school leaders were foremost concerned with challenges related to leading individual teachers. The analysis shows that only one of the 14 Swedish school leaders brought forth a challenge in leading themselves. This difference in challenges for coaching may be because the 360-degree interviews in the Norwegian NPT program helped the school leaders see themselves and their leadership in relation to the challenges they dealt with in their school contexts. In the Swedish NPT program, there is no specific preparation for group coaching as in the Norwegian NPT program; beyond that, the school leaders must bring forth an experienced leadership challenge from their school contexts. Conducting self-reflection before the group coaching, as in 360-degree interviews, is a way to shed light on oneself as a *leader in context*, bringing forth and reflecting on the individual's strengths and weaknesses in the group coaching sessions. In this sense, group coaching, as part of educational leadership programs, building on a coaching approach including one or another form of self-reflection inherent in the school leaders' preparations before the coaching sessions, is conducive to developing knowledge and skills needed to build leadership identity and understand their leadership role (cf. Aas and Vavik, 2015; Fullan, 2018; Huber, 2011).

The second difference in the coaching approach between the countries was the Norwegian action planning at the end of the session. The coaching in Sweden allowed the principals to state their intended actions. Two coaching perspectives emerged. The Norwegian approach involves more action-oriented planning created during coaching sessions, with a follow-up and reflection in the next session. On the other hand, the Swedish approach does not require an action plan. Although the group coaching approach used in the two NPT programs is similar, the coaching approach in Norway is more action-learning-oriented, influenced by Aas and Fluckiger (2016), compared to Sweden, which is more cognitive-learning-oriented, inspired by Lauvås et al. (2016). Fostering cognitive learning appears to be an essential aspect of the group coaching process. However, for school leaders to enhance their leadership practice, including their role and identity, their thinking and reflections must be followed by actions in their challenging school practices (Abrahamsen, 2023).

How can group coaching support professional development of school leaders in NPT programs?

In summary, this study indicates that school leaders participating in NPT programs in Norway and Sweden struggle to balance democratic leadership, which builds on equal and collaborative relationships between leaders and staff, and necessary decision-making. In practice, this reflects how performing school leadership within the profile of Nordic leadership (Aas et al., 2022; Aas and Törnsten, 2016) involved challenging issues and situations that the school leaders, through the coaching process, gained insight into and supported them in finding new ways of acting for dealing with the challenges in their daily practices. The group coaching approach reported on in this study was built on the same protocol, but the preparation for the coaching and the action orientation after the coaching differed. The differences characterized as a cognitive oriented approach versus an action-oriented approach seemed to enhance various aspects of professional development. Regardless of differences in the coaching approach we suggest that group coaching seem to be one way of supporting school leaders in NPT programs in their professional development.

### Limitations, future research, and implications for practice

It's important to note some limitations of this study that future research can address. First, we only looked at the group coaching approach in NPT programs in two different universities, one in Sweden and one in Norway, within a Nordic context. Second, our study had a small number of participants, so more research with larger samples from different universities is needed. Third, our focus was on school leaders' challenges and how group coaching can help them deal with these challenges and develop professionally. Our analysis was based on observational data from the group coaching sessions and data from interviews and surveys about the experiences of the participating school leaders. Future research could include observations within schools and interviews with teachers to better understand how school leaders were influenced by coaching. To inform policymakers, research on group coaching should examine its impact on leadership and further explore how it can influence school leadership. Finally, more research and analysis are needed to understand how school and municipal contexts affect coaching outcomes.

The growing number of problems and challenges faced by principals highlight an increasing need for a thoughtful design of leadership training programs (Tintoré et al., 2022). Group coaching as a part of professional development has the potential to connect academic and professional knowledge with the personal agency needed to develop a strong leadership identity and readiness for action.

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