

## **Sources of principals' leadership practices and areas training should emphasize: Case Finland.**

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### **Abstract**

Quality educational leadership preparation has positive influences on practices of graduates. In the Finnish decentralized education system, little is yet known about the sources of principals' practices. This research explores the sources of principals' self-assessed leadership practices in Central Finland and identifies areas for more emphasis. Respondents were selected by purposive sampling. This multiple case study employed eight semi-structured individual interviews as means of data collection. Inductive content analysis was performed. From the findings, besides personal experiences, knowledge from course, and field work, leadership and networking are also major sources of principals' practices. Training positively enhances the practices of principals as they engage in more collaboration and trust. Notwithstanding, professional development is essential for principals to stay relevant to the contemporary world of today and to be confident to face future challenges. Methods of course delivery, management of human and financial resources, as well as creating and sustaining local and international

collaborations with other training institutions should be prioritized to improve on training.

## **Introduction**

Studies have confirmed the importance of leadership in the functioning of organisations and worldwide, education is a sector that is morally grounded and, based on values, in need of passionate and caring leaders (Hallinger, 2005; Drew, 2009). As a consequence, the expectations for school leaders have significantly changed and leaders are being held accountable for student academic performance (Busch, O'Brien & Spangler, 2005). Previously, the knowledge deemed essential for the training of educational leaders has been focused on managerial roles rather than developing appropriate relationships of caring and commitment or working in collaboration with the environments within schools that foster student learning. Notwithstanding, much has changed over the past few decades as there is now increased awareness among educational providers that children have to achieve at new and higher levels. For this dream to be fully realised, training institutions and programmes should have quality as goal and to produce graduates who can promote the development of good schools in the future. Programmes should address the aspiration of the kinds of schools they would like to see in the future (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). DeVita (2005) has therefore questioned if current principals and aspiring principals are getting the appropriate preparation needed to improve teaching and learning in today's schools and those of the future.

## **Background**

University-level principal education is a relatively recent phenomenon in Finland, and for a long time qualification training was provided in the form of short-term training illustrating competence to perform only the administrative tasks in schools (Ministry of Education, 2007). This was what took place up to 1998. After this time, the 25ECTS principal preparation programme was instituted in Finland which provided eligibility for principalship supported by the Finnish law 'Asetus opetustoimen henkilöstön kelpoisuusvaatimuksista 1998'. This is one way to get the qualification of a principal and

the programme addresses other issues as students are trained in aspects of leadership, educational administration and legislation combined with practical field work.

This notwithstanding, there exists no systematic data or indication on the sources of candidates leadership practices in Finland. This paper addresses this research gap by investigating the influence of leadership preparation programmes on graduates' practices, and suggests how trainings could be improved for current and future principals. Additionally, knowing the sources of principals' leadership practices may narrow the gap between theory and practice, and this will go a long way to promote the knowledge of future positive school transformations by well trained educational leaders (Anast-May, Buckner & Geer, 2011).

### **Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study were to:

- Identify the main sources of school principals' leadership practices.
- Ascertain the areas where additional training or support may be needed.

### **Research questions**

1. From where do the key features of school principals' leadership practices arise?
2. Which areas of training should providers lay more emphasis on for future principals?

## **Literature review**

Aspects such as definition of practice, content of leadership training programmes and features of effective educational leadership training programmes are discussed here.

### **Definition of practice and aspects of sustainability**

Elmore (2008) views practice not as being a personal attribute or characteristic of leaders; he holds that leadership is a collection of patterned actions that is based on particular knowledge, skill, and habits of the mind that are concretely defined, taught, and can be learned. Some authors (Pont, Nusche & Hopkins, 2008) have argued that the idea of practice to enhance system-wide improvement is hinged much on the challenge of

sustainability of the training that the principals undertake as well as school laws and reforms governing this domain. This paper is not based in practice as a whole but in the practices of principals that are influenced by the training they got and how these are sustained. Some means of sustaining professional development are through:

- **Mentoring principals**

According to Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008), mentoring refers to a situation where a more experienced person seeks to assist a less experienced individual in a given domain. The activity has been reported to be very influential in the on-going professional development of principals as many processes are involved such as personal relationships, active guidance, teaching and learning. Moreover, as adult learners respond more to demonstration, modelling and learning by doing, mentoring is quite in place to meet these needs (Mulford, 2003).

In the United States and Britain, mentoring is a standard element in principal preparation programmes. Some graduates who were mentored in the course of formal development rated mentoring as the most important part of the programme (Hobson, 2003; Pont et al., 2008). It is highly essential for principals in training to have the opportunity to shadow principals in practice. This relationship enables them to learn what the challenges of the core are and how the practising principals address them (O'Neill, Fry, Gary, Walker & Bottoms, 2007; Mulford, 2003).

- **In-service training**

School leaders understand that changes in schools are imminent and try to master how to drive the change process effectively. In-service trainings therefore keep them abreast with the changes in the school system (O'Neill & Bottoms, 2001). From the inception of the 1972 school reform in Finland, teachers opted to have three days of compulsory in-service training reserved for them each year, and, additionally, two days of in-service training for every teacher with less than three years teaching experience. This means the new teachers have five days in total every year for professional development (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg, 2006).

### ***Content of leadership training programmes***

Leadership preparation programmes generally address issues such as management of human and financial resources, leadership orientations, school laws, curriculum development and planning, problem-solving skills, decision making, ethical reasoning, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), school-family partnership, learning and programme evaluations (Beyer, 2009). In Finland, school leadership programmes are divided into five different categories: Principal preparation or qualification programmes, Specialist qualification in management programmes, Professional development (PD) programmes, advanced studies in universities, and other courses and studies (Värri & Alava, 2005).

These programmes differ in content of the curriculum, duration of training, recruitment and selection of candidates as well as course fees (Värri & Alava, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2007). In general, irrespective of the country or the training provider, great emphasis should be laid on providing principals in training with basic knowledge including skills to develop and guide educational programmes geared to serve the specific needs of students in a given community (Beyer, 2009).

### **Features of effective educational leadership training programmes**

Cheney and Davis (2011) propose that policies should be implemented that set high standards which emphasize quality for school leadership accreditation. They also suggest that formal partnerships are essential between school communities and preparation programmes. Further, refocusing principal preparation programmes that ensure constant evaluation of capabilities of aspiring principals to improve student learning is important. Review of research, Orr and Orphanos (2011); Bottoms, O'Neill, Fry and Hill (2003) have identified a number of features of exemplary leadership training programmes as indicated below:

A successful training programme should have well-defined leadership theory for school that brings together a set of values, beliefs, and knowledge. A coherent curriculum that incorporates effective pedagogy, school improvement, change management, etc is equally

needed. Programmes should utilise an active learning strategy that merges theory, practice and encourages reflection.

Rigorous internships to provide quality field opportunities to practice the theories of leadership learned and skills acquired under the guiding eyes of a veteran practitioner (mentor). Programmes should provide both social and professional support. Criteria and strategies should be implemented to choose high quality candidates and people with adequate knowledge of curriculum and instruction with passion to improve student learning. Studies have investigated the relationship between quality programme features and initial graduate outcomes; what graduates learn, their beliefs about leadership and their actual career advancement (Orr, 2010).

For example, Orr and Barber (2006) report that some supportive programme structures, complete and standardized curriculum, and more rigorous internships highly influence different types of outcomes. Beyer (2009) holds that it is imperative for leadership preparation programmes to be instrumental—to act as practical tools in integrating courses and content that combine topical issues in the educational and business world.

### **Theoretical framework**

Keith (2008) posits that it is difficult to define and evaluate leadership. However, one definition holds that leadership is being able to work in collaboration with others in a team, create common goals for the organization, and build a strategy to implement while motivating others to join in working towards achieving these goals (Hallinger & Snidvongs, 2008). Another definition sees “leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2010).

Educational leadership, on the other hand, is a very broad concept. In this study, the concept is limited to who an effective educational leader is and what he/she does to promote student learning. In the views of O’Neill and Bottoms (2001), an exemplary educational leader is one who has a good mastery of the school and classroom situations and contributes enormously to student learning. He/she has figured out how to work

effectively with teachers and also provides the needed support for staff to function properly.

Another study (Hogan et al., 2007) on educational leadership lays emphasis on the need for school leaders to pay greater attention on the quality of learning as well as the range of distinctive human characteristics. Southworth (2004) therefore advocates for learner-centred leadership. According to him, successful learning-centred leaders keep up to date with curricular developments and assessment needs, are in pace with pedagogical change, focus tirelessly on student learning, support teaching, build and maintain productive professional relationships, and aim to build trust, teamwork and collaboration in schools.

### **Practices of effective leaders**

Significant research was conducted and reviewed to isolate the effects of leadership practices on school effectiveness and performance and to identify those practices that are most efficacious (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Such research analyses have yielded similar conclusions: that principal leadership practices contribute significantly to school effectiveness and performance. Most of the research has been based on leadership practices and vision, organizational conditions and how principals develop the capacity of teachers in teaching and fostering student learning (Orr, 2010).

While conducting research that spans more than twenty years on leadership practices and skills common to effective leaders of different professions, Kouzes and Posner (2007) claim that leadership is an assemblage of behaviours and practices and not a position. Through this landmark study, they identified five practices and 10 corresponding commitments of effective leaders. Effective principals create an enabling environment, recognize the needs of their teachers and strengthen them to share in the dreams for the school (Kelley, Thornton & Daugherty, 2005).

### ***Leadership roles and tasks of the principal***

The roles of principals, which are many, have great contributions to create more highly achieving schools (Gamage, Adams & McCormack, 2009). Some of the roles include guiding the attainment of the goals of the organization (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008, p. 532). *Pedagogical leadership* is one of the main functions of the principal in a school. This function requires the principal to be intelligent, dynamic, competent and open-minded, and to have a high sense of team spirit (Alava, Halttunen & Risku, 2012). Principals are aware that improved teacher performance takes place only when there are materials for instruction.

*Administrative function* combine activities such as school laws, economic planning, student administration, decision making and arranging work hours for the teachers. *The financial function* is equally important. Principals must learn to manage limited resources wisely (Mbua, 2003). To do this, great financial skills such as planning, budgeting, basic accounting and control are required. *Social functions or network management* is equally important. The principal is expected to understand the social context in which his/her school is located. He/she should be able to stay in touch with entities of the society such as businesses, the civil administration, parents and other partners. In Finland, the roles of the school principal changed dramatically in the 1990s. They are not only the financial managers, personnel managers or managers of the results but are also expected to be educational leaders of their schools (Aho et al., 2006).

## **Method**

### **Research paradigm, study population and sampling techniques**

We chose the qualitative research approach for this study as it is exploratory and flexible (Hartley, 2004). This enabled us to obtain adequate information on the subject under investigation. Precisely, the multiple case study research design was used with semi-structured interviews as means of data collection. The reason for this choice was reinforced because when talking about an experience or influence as is the case here, it is better to keep the questions semi-structured or open to let participants air their views (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003).

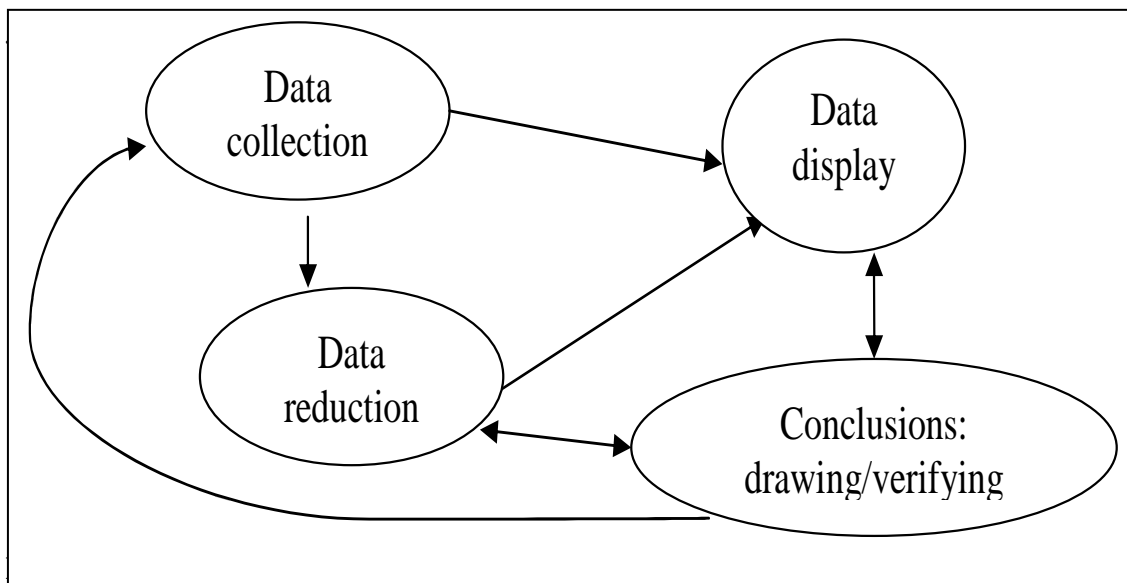
The study population consists of those who had taken the advanced training program and were principals in Finland. From this population, potential participants were sent letters of invitation. Out of 12 principals that were invited in May 2011 by postal mail and re-contacted in September 2011 via email, eight (66.7%) accepted to participate in the study. As the research topic had to do with principals who had acquired formal training, the samples were chosen in a deliberate manner. This purposive sampling technique was used with the aim of selecting mostly participants through whom relevant and plentiful data would be generated considering the topic under investigation (Yin, 2011).

### **Pilot testing and data collection**

We formulated a list of questions to answer the research questions. With the set of questions, the lead researcher conducted a pilot interview as proposed by Yin (2003). The pilot interview helped to refine the content, structure and the procedures to be followed while in the field. The main data collection technique was in-depth interviews (semi-structured). Interviews were tape recorded and some notes taken along side.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis as defined by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) is a step-by-step process aimed to discover and identify patterns, to search for themes and categories, and to make sense from collected data sets. After word-for-word transcription of interviews that were done shortly after data collection, data was then organised and interpreted by the concurrent flow of activity as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994); data reduction, display, conclusion drawing and verification as illustrated in **Figure 1** below. Preliminary analysis was done first by tallying the responses of the eight principals to both research questions. After this step, similarities and differences in the responses were identified. This was followed by reduction of data into categories to avoid redundancy.



The analysis was approached in the light of our research questions and based on the themes that emerged following data reduction. An inductive approach was employed where categories and themes emerge from the data instead of being dictated prior to data collection. All the themes which emerged were included in the analysis so that no useful data was left out or lost. These themes were later coined into two broad groups, each of which answered one of the two research questions.

### *Findings and Discussions*

In this section, we present and discuss the findings obtained following data analysis and categorization. The two main themes resulting from this investigation are:

- Key sources of school principals' leadership practices and the need for future training.
- Areas where training institutions should lay more emphasis in principal preparation.

These will be discussed in turns.

#### ***Key sources of school principals' leadership practices***

The principals reported to the first research question that besides personal experiences, knowledge gained from theory, practice, leadership and networking constitute major sources of their leadership practices.

### ***Theory***

Theory emerged as one of the main areas from where a greater majority of principals derive their leadership practices. To this group of principals, 'theory' constitutes the courses offered to them during the training. In agreement, Gamage et al. (2009) mentioned that in response to the changing roles of principals, training and on-going professional development are crucial to enhance effective leadership practices. Murphy (2005) claims that although adequate theories would make the educational world a better place, as well as the leadership training programmes, theory without practice is like a "bridge to nowhere" (p. 6).

### ***Practice***

This was considered by interviewees as the field work that should be included in principal training programmes. Five principals mentioned that practice is equally of paramount importance to candidates in principal training institutions. Citing the exact words of one respondent, "theory and practice are important as one actually learns to be a successful principal only through practice". Simieou et al. (2010) pointed out that a lack of practical training may result in graduates leading by trial and error through the early years of their career.

To address this concern, authors have proposed that training programmes could adopt field-based experiences as a central focus and high priority area in the training of principals (Bottoms et al., 2003). The types of practices that principals could be offered during training as indicated by principals in this study are mentoring, coaching, practicum and internships. Many studies have revealed the benefits these forms of practice have to principals in training (Hobson, 2003; Davis et al., 2005).

Mentoring and practicum have the potential for continuous learning because they offer ongoing support and feedback to the novice as well as help the mentor to challenge his/her own potential and to confront resistance to change that usually comes with practice over time (Hobson, 2003). During leadership training in Finland, apart from the teachings on aspects of leadership, educational administration and legislation, etc.

practical field work sessions are also organized, thus exposing students to real life realities (Ministry of Education, 2007).

### *Networking*

Interviewees expressed the need for principals in training to create and maintain professional relationships to enable them keep in touch with other practitioners of the core. In the same vein, Busch et al. (2005) point out in their study that the period of mentoring, peer learning, and group discussions that principals in training engage in marks the best time for them to create networks that could be of positive use in the future. They mention that through networking, they keep in constant touch with one another, render advice to anyone in need and also share leadership blogs through the twitter social media platform. These findings reflect that in principle, school leadership education in Finland is divided into preparatory and continuing professional education (Ministry of Education, 2007; Värri & Alava, 2005).

### *Leadership*

In this research, studies on different aspects of leadership were considered key sources of four principals' leadership practices in their schools. They exemplified this by saying that leadership courses offered during training have made them become good listeners as they now practice increased team work and collaboration, and are able to manage human resources better. Hargreaves, Halász and Pont (2007) are in support of collaboration and team work-- these authors challenged school leaders to develop and raise high level students' performance by working with, learning from, and influencing the behaviours of others in and out of their schools. See **table 1** of results below:

**Table 1:** Key sources of principals' leadership practices in Finland.

Sources	Explanation
<i>Theory</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More theories to lead a school</li> <li>• Creates a connection between training to practical problems</li> <li>• More theories of Nordic origin</li> </ul>
<i>Practice</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practicum for longer periods</li> <li>• Guide where to look for solutions to problems</li> <li>• Mentoring and tutoring</li> </ul>
<i>Networking</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International cooperation with other universities.</li> </ul>
<i>Leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train principals to be good listeners</li> <li>• Train to lead different kinds of people</li> <li>• Train on team work</li> <li>• Learning something about the 'self'</li> <li>• Shared leadership built on trust</li> <li>• To respond to individual needs of teachers</li> <li>• Managing human resources</li> </ul>

### **Need for further training by principals**

All respondents shared the opinion that the society is changing fast and they face challenges to stay abreast of these changes. They acknowledged that training in certain domains to improve their skills or practices is needed. **Table 2** highlights the reasons behind their need for further training.

### ***Keeping pace with current trends***

The field of education is changing due to advances in technology, changing societal expectations, and the forces of globalization. Hence, the expectations of what schools should achieve continually change and new forms of leadership to meet these educational challenges are required (Pont et al., 2008; Gamage, 2003). Although the main goal of the

university-level principal preparation programmes in Finland is to meet the current challenges facing educational leadership (Alava, 2007), all the principals interviewed expressed the desire for future training to enhance skills to remain current with contemporary changes in education. Gamage (2006) reports that the major challenge principals face today is to appreciate the changing contexts of educational leadership. One study participant mentioned “I am not perfect,” while another described himself as “a lifelong learner,” both highlighting their need for ongoing knowledge.

### ***Modern teaching methods***

The need for intensive information and communication technologies (ICTs) as well as computer literacy courses for principals in training was expressed by two participants, including the use of multi media in teaching. Nicholson (2007) supports the claim that children are more comfortable using these ICTs, calling on all teachers and school leaders to get involved and develop their knowledge, capabilities and working skills of ICTs.

### ***Professional development***

All the principals in this study expressed their desire for more professional development courses which will remind them of their training. This confirms the thoughts of Orr and Orphanos (2011). They advocated for professional development courses as these provide quality field opportunities to practice theories of leadership learned and skills acquired under the guiding eyes of a mentor. One respondent indicated that principals are being offered many updating days, which, apart from dealing with issues of school rules and regulations, also constitute a forum where all principals share their problems and difficulties. This ties well with the Cheney and Davis (2011) proposition that tracking and administering of any necessary on-the-job training to graduate principals is necessary.

**Table 2:** The necessity to pursue further leadership training by principals.

<b>Reason for training</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<i>Keep to pace with current trends</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to follow the times</li> <li>• Stay on top of the rapid changes in education today</li> <li>• The society is changing</li> <li>• Challenges to stay abreast with current changes</li> <li>• More knowledge to appreciate global trends</li> <li>• Modern theories or aspects of leading an organisation</li> </ul>
<i>Modern teaching methods</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To learn to implement more interactive teaching methods</li> <li>• The influences and use of social media on teaching</li> <li>• On ICTs and computer literacy for teachers and students</li> </ul>
<i>Managing future challenges</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertainty about the future</li> <li>• To make life more meaningful</li> </ul>
<i>Professional development</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for more short courses or mentoring</li> <li>• Sharing problems and solutions</li> </ul>

### **Areas training should emphasize**

#### ***Management of resources***

Participants emphasized that management of human and financial resources be improved by training programmes. A respondent further indicated that principals should be trained to include teachers more and to trust them. Mbua (2003) asserted that proper management of human resources and limited financial resources is essential in the school organization and principals therefore need adequate training in these domains.

### *Programme quality and teaching methods*

A principal in this study pointed out that although the advanced leadership training programme enjoys great quality, more is still desired as some traditional teaching methods could be replaced by modern ones to enhance more practical interactions. As evident from the results of this study, the traditional theory-based nature of leadership training programmes has also been heavily criticized by literature (Hale & Moorman, 2003; Levine, 2005). Bottoms et al. (2003) recommend re-designing the content of training programmes to lay more emphasis on aspects of high-achieving schools.

### *Networking*

Networking is an essential tool used to support principals and teachers at all stages of their professional career, and members involved in professional networks stand to benefit greatly (Strachan, 2003). As described above, although networking with other practitioners of the core shapes principals' leadership practices, they expressed the need that programmes should also create and maintain more international cooperation with other universities, and added that tutor principals could stay in touch with the principals in training even after the tutoring periods.

This is a pertinent issue as it has been reported that very little or no networking exists between the different leadership training providers in Finland, although the Institute of Educational Leadership works in collaboration with several countries (Ministry of Education, 2007). Both home-based and international collaborations between the training institutions would make a difference in encouraging networking. In this light, principal training institutions in Finland are currently expanding their international collaboration with other institutions worldwide (Alava, 2007). However, more is still to be done nationally. Creation of professional learning networks is necessary in order for members to benefit from the newest and latest ideas of leading. **Table 3** below shows the findings.

**Table 3:** Aspects of educational leadership training programme that needs to be emphasized.

<b>Aspects of training</b>	<b>What needs to be done</b>
<i>Management of resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management of human resources are to be emphasised</li> <li>• Financial issues of the school</li> <li>• Train principals to include teachers more</li> </ul>
<i>Programme quality and teaching method</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of training programme should be improved</li> <li>• Reduced lecture and more of modern ways of teaching</li> <li>• More practical interactions</li> </ul>
<i>Networking</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of professional learning network</li> </ul>

### **Conclusions**

The findings from this study have a direct impact on the future training of school leaders. Findings identify the areas of school leadership training that would have profound influence on leadership practice of graduates. They also provide new knowledge and enrich existing literature on theories and principles of school leadership training. The data would assist the training institutions to plan, organize, and execute quality leadership training for current and future school leaders. Additionally, findings would enable graduates to break away from traditional practices by incorporating contemporary approaches into their practices.

Evidence shows that school principals acquire their leadership practices from four main sources of their training: theory, practice, leadership, and networking. Over time, leadership practices are also gained from personal experiences. Principals in Finland are highly qualified professionals; nevertheless, they need additional training in order to lead their schools more effectively and further training will sharpen their skills to better appreciate the changing contexts of educational leadership and to be able to manage of future challenges. Because career development is a continuous process, principals will

benefit from additional training that focuses on working comfortably with new technologies and implementing them in teaching and learning in their schools. Upgrading programme quality and aspects of human and financial resource management are also areas for improvement. In addition, creation of more sustainable local and international collaborations with other training institutions will encourage participation in professional learning networks was also deemed important.

### ***Recommendations***

Even though the results of Finnish schools are very good as reflected in the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA), much is still to be done by training providers in preparing current and future school leaders for desired results to be sustained or improved. Based on the findings, some recommendations and implications for further research are presented below:

Most training programmes need to re-design their structure and curriculum to incorporate more interactive teaching methods and curriculum which would better prepare principals to tackle present and future school leadership challenges. Likewise, networking and collaborations between the different training providers in Finland should be taken more seriously, providing harmony in content, duration of training, course fees, and entry requirements of the different training programmes that currently exist in Finland. During the course of training, candidates' suggestions could be sampled and information gathered could assist programmes to implement timely adjustments to improve the learning process of trainees. Policies should be implemented to ensure regular provision of leadership training as well as professional development courses for Finnish principals.

### ***Further research***

The issues presented in this paper have provided answers to both research questions under consideration. However, not all aspects of this topic have been covered here. Further research could be conducted with a larger sample size of practicing principals to assess the effectiveness of educational leadership training programmes not only in

Finland but in other countries. Equally, features of quality of training may be identified and promoted.

### **Study Limitation**

This study was conducted in Central Finland with only eight principals who have all undergone one particular type of principal training (the advanced leadership training in the University of Jyväskylä) in the course of their formation. It is obvious that considering a wider sample size, different number of training programmes and participants from different countries could make for better insight considering aspects from where principals derive their leadership practices.

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