Principals' Priorities and Values – Twenty-five Years of Compulsory School Principalship in Iceland

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of compulsory school principals conducted in 2017. It focuses on principals' values, both ethical and management related, and their actual and desirable prioritization of important tasks. Data was gathered with a questionnaire which was sent to all Icelandic school principals, 162 individuals in total. The response rate was 69%. The findings show that 94% of the principals say they highly emphasize the ethical values *care, equality, democracy, autonomy, tolerance* and *justice*. These ethical values, however, do not seem to impact task prioritization. This indicates that the principals may not have a clear picture of their own value base in the way that scholars have advocated for. The emphasis the principals place on management related values is more variable. It is therefore uncertain to what extent values guide them in their everyday practice.

Keywords: *school principals, leadership, values, tasks*

Introduction

The performance of schools and their ability to fulfil the role set by society has received increasing interest in recent decades. One manifestation of this interest is a growing body of research that focuses on the influence of principals on school work, particularly their role regarding teaching and its impact on student competencies and performance (Hansen & Lárusdóttir, 2014; Hallinger, 2009; Kaplan & Owings, 2015; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Robinson 2011).

A number of modern theories on school leadership focus on how principals view their role in the school and in relation to school staff. In other words, whether principals

are progressive and maintain active cooperation with staff in developing school prac-
tices and teaching methods (Harris, 2008; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Kaplan & Owings, 2015;
Robinson, 2011; Sergiovanni, 2009). The research project *Teaching and Learning in Ice-
landic Schools* highlights that principals have differing views on what their role entails
regarding teaching and learning in schools (Hansen & Lárusdóttir, 2014).

Studies conducted in Iceland in 1991, 2001 and 2006 offer insights into the ways in
which principals spend their time and how they wish to spend it (Hansen, Jóhannsson
& Lárusdóttir, 1994, 2004, 2008). In each of the years examined, the principals claimed
that most of their time was devoted to *school management/administration*. When asked
about how they wished to spend their time, the principals all noted *curriculum work* as
their topmost priority. The findings suggest that curriculum work is not prioritized
to the degree that school principals find most desirable. The study presented in this
paper, conducted in 2017 by Hansen and Lárusdóttir, offers additional insights into the
work of principals in Iceland.

Values and Leadership

Values are part of every individual's personal character. Most individuals who are
aware of their own values take them seriously and are prepared to fight for them
through words and actions. Values form the basis of opinions, beliefs and goals
that individuals deem most significant in their lives (Gold, 2004; Aðalbjarnardót-
tir, 2006). Begley (2003) argues that leaders both consciously and unconsciously
follow a set of values when they evaluate situations and deliberate on consequent
reactions.

Values are transferred socially from one generation to the next. The individual
begins to adopt values from a young age through personal experience and commu-
nication with family and friends (Begley, 2004; Branson, 2005; Finnbogason, 2004).
The meaning placed into particular experiences and their interpretation then deter-
mine which values individuals adopt. Most individuals are unaware of their own values
(Branson, 2005) and often draw a blank when asked to describe them.

There are often considerable differences and inconsistencies between espoused
values and actual values as manifested in individuals' actions (Branson, 2005; Bussey,
2006). For example, a leader who has repeatedly declared commitment to coopera-
tion and tolerance in the workplace can at the same time be judged as insensitive and
domineering by his staff. The discrepancy between espoused values and actual values
can prove burdensome for both the leader and the staff (Begley, 2004; Tuana, 2007),
which among other things can result in loss of credibility.

In recent decades, ethics has increasingly been identified as the core and basis of
fruitful leadership skills (Hodgkinson, 1991; Sigurður Kristinsson, 2014). Leaders are
encouraged to reflect and understand their own values, bringing about self-knowledge
and work practices characterized by authenticity (Begley, 2003; Crippen, 2012; Duig-
nan, 2003). Such value-based leadership is defined as ethical, or moral, leadership.
Reflection of this type is important because despite the fact that values are a relatively

stable constituent of personality, life-experience is no less a determining factor of the values and opinions that individuals hold (Gold, 2004).

Growing emphasis was placed on authentic leadership in the wake of the 2008 international financial crisis, namely, that words and actions went hand in hand. In this context, Branson and Gross (2014) point out that the "financial crisis shifted the focus toward ethical leadership worldwide" (p.1). Values, authenticity and ethics became key concepts in the discourse and theory surrounding leadership, both in politics and business, and it was often pointed out that actions were not solely justified based on their legal status; they should also be ethically sound (Begley, 2010; Branson, 2009; Branson & Gross, 2014; Bredeson, 2005; Crippen, 2012). Many institutional and business leaders may accordingly require guidance in becoming aware of their values.

Branson (2007) conducted a study where he helped participants reach awareness of their underlying ethical framework. He interviewed six compulsory school principals in Brisbane, Australia. Participants were asked to reflect on the *self*, which Branson divides into self-image, self-respect, motivation, beliefs and values. These aspects are shaped by life experiences at various points over the course of the individuals' lives, though without becoming expressly conscious or directly accessible in their daily routine. Branson aided the participants in recalling the conditions in which they had adopted their espoused values and then reflecting on whether they were content with these values informing their day-to-day decisions and actions. The method proved time consuming and made strenuous demands on participants regarding self-reflection. The principals nevertheless affirmed that the method had been fruitful in encouraging increased self-knowledge and simultaneously strengthened their communication with others. The method echoes the one Burns (1978) described decades earlier, in which he advised aspiring principals to find a mentor to help them adjust their moral compass.

Over the past two decades, academic studies on educational leadership have highlighted the importance of goals, values and shared vision in school practices (Bass, 1999; Campbell, Gold & Lunt, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2009). Such a position is often used as a premise for achieving goals and in that way ensuring successful school practices. The debate often begins by orbiting around which values should act as normative and, by extension, guiding values. A study on the impact of the financial crisis on school practices in Iceland highlighted, for instance, the claim by school staff that the set of values promoted by the authorities in the wake of the financial crisis, largely based on strict austerity measures, went against their own values (Lárusdóttir, Sigurðardóttir, Jónsdóttir, Hansen & Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2015). In contrast, school personnel placed an emphasis on the children and loyalty toward their students. The most prominent values, or the espoused values, listed by staff in interviews were ethical values like care, equity and justice. On the other hand, austerity measures were part of the espoused values promoted by authorities, which are political and managerial in nature, and steered mostly by economic interests. These findings suggest that the values of school representatives, parents, students and teachers are not always concomitant, despite

belonging to the same cultural sphere, municipality or even the same institution. Such a situation is demanding for school principals and creates test conditions for the principal´s understanding of his/her role, moral compass and awareness of own values and the values of others.

Begley (2004) points out that shared opinions and values are not the most important aspects in this context. The fact that most Western nations are multicultural societies must be kept in mind. The assumption that people of diverse backgrounds with differing religious beliefs and traditions can arrive at a homogeneous set of values is problematic at best. What is more important is to improve one's self-knowledge and by the same token learn to understand the opinions and beliefs of others, which creates the conditions where a broader diversity of individuals can influence school activities. More fruitfully, school leaders should encourage an open conversation about differing beliefs and values and hence promote diversity, given that "discussion ... is one of the most important tools in democratic cooperation" (Finnbogason, 2004, p. 180).

Roles and Tasks

Icelandic school laws stipulate that the principal's role is to provide professional leadership for their schools (Compulsory School Act, 2008 No 91). The principal is expected to show initiative when it comes to bringing about changes in school activities, overseeing the changes and ensuring that staff are informed about them (Fullan, 2016; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Matthews & Crow, 2010). Furthermore, principals are largely free to shape their roles in view of relevant laws and regulations. The principal decides his/her central role, task prioritization and project delegation to others. The OECD report *Improving School Leadership* (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008) states that it is important that school policy places emphasis on strengthening the independence of principals and offers them ample support as well as opportunities for professional development.

In this context, Horng, Klasik and Loeb (2010) bring attention to the fact that despite abundant research and reports on the importance of school leadership for educational quality, little has been written on the general everyday tasks of school principals. Horng, Klasik and Loeb (2010) conducted a study in which they observed 65 principals in a populous US state with a highly diverse schools. The researchers claim that principals spent most of their time on organizational management in order to "keep the school running smoothly" or around 30% (p. 502). 20% of their time was spent on finance, administration and personnel, around 15% on communication within the school, and 5% on external relations. Moreover, the least amount of time was spent on tasks related to instructional activities, namely, 6% on day-to-day instruction tasks, such as classroom observations and teacher counselling, with 7% devoted to tasks related to teaching and learning assessment and planning professional development programs. 20% was then spent on miscellaneous tasks.

Based on reviews of numerous studies on the impact of school leadership on student outcomes, Robinson (2011) contends that there are five types of leadership capabilities

that must be taken into account to facilitate student outcomes: Establish goals and expectations (.42), expend resources strategically (.31), ensure quality teaching (.42), lead teacher learning and development (.84), and ensure an orderly and safe environment (.27). According to this list, the most prominent aspect is leadership in the area of teacher learning and professional development.

Studies conducted by Hansen, Jóhannsson and Lárusdóttir (1994, 2004, 2008) provide insight into how Icelandic compulsory school principals actually spent their time and how they wished to spend their time on the tasks framed by McCleary and Thomson (1979). According to them, the principal's tasks fall into the following categories: *program development, personnel, school management/administration, student activities, community, district office*, *professional development,* and *planning.* Data gathering for the studies in Iceland took place in 1991, 2001 and 2006. Each year, the principals claimed they spent most of their time on *school management/administration*, i.e. issues pertaining to finance, administrative tasks and office management. The principals noted a desire to spend considerably less time on those tasks. However, when asked about how they wished to spend their time they all listed *curriculum development* as their top priority, i.e. tasks related to developing the school curriculum, teaching methods, teaching organization, teaching materials, and similar aspects.

The findings suggest that issues concerning teaching are not foregrounded in the list of tasks to the degree the principals themselves desire, or, indeed, as laws and regulations call for (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008). According to these findings, tasks that revolve around finance, administration and office management take up most of the principals' time, whereas tasks concerning curriculum development, teaching methods, teaching organization, teaching material and similar aspects fall under the heading of tasks that the principals would most like to devote their time to. As before, administrative tasks are therefore foregrounded at the expense of educational ones.

Furthermore, *personnel* rises from fifth place on the list of priorities in 1991 to second place in 2001, which is also the year where this category corresponds to the actual time devoted to the task (Hansen et al., 2008). *Personnel* refers to tasks dealing with the hiring of staff, counselling, assessment and teacher support.

In light of the above, it is important to examine which values principals claim they hold in high regard and which guide them in their work and in the prioritization of key tasks. The purpose of this study is accordingly to examine the relationship between values and prioritization of tasks. The following questions guided the study: *Which values do principals say they emphasize in their daily tasks? How do principals prioritize their central tasks? What changes in the list of priorities can be identified over the period 1991–2017?* Findings from the authors' previous studies will be used for comparison.

Method

An integrated image of leadership and management is a values-informed leadership (Begley, 2006). Principals' views on values connected to school work were procured using a questionnaire. The list of values on the questionnaire were extracted through

an analysis of laws, regulations and curricula. The list is not exhaustive, but includes an overview of the key values in these main policy documents. The principals were asked to assess each value on a scale of 1 to 10 with reference to how much importance they gave each value in their work. The links between a principal´s personality and his/her values was not addressed (Rokeach, 1968).

Task prioritization was based on categories offered by McCleary and Thomson (1979) as described above. In previous studies on the prioritization of tasks of Icelandic compulsory school principals, the same categories were used, i.e. studies conducted in 1991, 2001 and 2006 (Hansen et al., 1994, 2004, 2008). The task areas in question are: *curriculum development* (curriculum development, self-evaluation, development projects, instructional materials, teaching arrangements, etc.), *personnel* (advising, conferencing, evaluating, recruiting, etc.), *school management/administration* (weekly calendar, office, budget, correspondence, memos, etc.), *student activities* (child welfare, meetings, supervision, support, planning, etc.), *community* (meetings, task forces, reports, etc.), *district office* (meetings, task forces, information, reports, etc.), *professional development* (reading, conferences, courses, seminars, etc.) and *planning* (annual, long range, etc.). A new category was added to the survey conducted in 2017, i.e., *differentiated instruction*, which refers to work connected to meeting the different needs of students in general, students with learning difficulties, students who are non-native Icelandic speakers, and so on. Recent studies on inclusion and leadership indicate that *differentiated instruction* has increasingly become part of the principal's daily repertoire (Hansen, Svavarsdóttir, Svavarsson & Ragnarsdóttir, 2016; Svavarsson, Hansen, Lefever, Guðjónsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2016). The studies on task prioritization looked at both the actual time and ideal time that each principal devoted to each task area. The principals were asked to rank their tasks in ascending order, with the most time-consuming task area in first place, the second most time-consuming task area in second place, and so on.

In spring 2017, a questionnaire was sent to all Icelandic compulsory school principals via email, a total of 162. The Educational Research Institute, School of Education, University of Iceland administered the processing of the questionnaire. Four assistant principals pre-tested the questionnaire twice. Four reminders were sent to enhance the response rate. A total of 111 responses were received, corresponding to a 69% response rate. Confidentiality was guaranteed and all responses were anonymous. The questionnaire was made using Qualtrics and processed with SPSS and Excel.

Findings

School conditions

As stated above, 111 compulsory school principals responded to the questionnaire, corresponding to a 69% response rate. Around 38% of respondents were male and 62% women. About 38% of the principals had a graduate degree in school management and leadership and 16% had other graduate degrees. About 24% of the schools are located

in the greater Reykjavík area (8% in Reykjavík and 16% in the capital region) and 76% in other parts of the country.

School size varies considerably, 35% of the schools had 100 students or less, 30% had 101–300 students, 17% had 301–500 students and 19% of the schools had 501 or more students. 73% of the schools had 20 or fewer employees and around 27% had 21–60 employees. About two-thirds of the schools with 20 or fewer employees had 149 students or less. 70% of the schools had 30 students or fewer with learning difficulties, 17% had 31–90 students with learning difficulties and 13% of the schools had 91 or more students with specific learning difficulties.

Classroom teaching (homeroom teacher with one class or subject teacher) was the dominant teaching arrangement in 38% of the schools, team-teaching (two or more teachers co-responsible for teaching one grade level or in mixed-grade classes) in 11%, and mixed teaching arrangements (combination of classroom teaching and team-teaching) in 39%. 11% of the schools were structured differently.

Values

The principals' views regarding values were captured by asking them to rate each value on a scale from 1 to 10 depending on how much they emphasized the value in their work. Table 1 shows the principals' emphasis on six values defined as 'ethical values', and then another group of six values defined as 'managerial values'.

Table 1: Values – emphasis of principals

VALUES	SCORE 1–4 %	SCORE 5–7 %	SCORE 8–10 %
Ethical:			
Care	3	2	95
Equity	2	8	90
Democracy	2	6	92
Independence	2	4	93
Tolerance	3	2	95
Justice	2	2	96
Managerial:			
Competition	51	41	9
Effectiveness	1	17	82
Efficiency	11	44	44
Accountability	3	6	91
Productivity	2	31	67
Outcomes	2	7	91

As seen in Table 1, all of the principals claim they place considerable emphasis on ethical values in their work; on average 94% of the principals rate ethical values at 8–10.

The case is different when it comes to managerial values. The lowest rating in this category is *competition*, with 9% of the principals rating it 8–10, then *efficiency,* with 44% of the principals giving it an 8–10 rating. However, 91% of the principals say they place great emphasis on *accountability* and *outcomes.*

Task prioritization

Table 2 shows how principals prioritized key task areas in the spring of 2017, i.e., how they actually devoted their time (actual) and how they wished to devote their time (ideal) in these task areas. For comparison, findings from previous studies are also presented, namely, from 1991, 2001 and 2006. Note that the category *differentiated instruction* was added to the questionnaire in 2017.

Table 2: Rank ordering of tasks in 2017, 2006, 2001 and 1991

TASK AREAS	ACTUAL				IDEAL			
	2017	2006	2001	1991	2017	2006	2001	1991
Program development (curriculum development, self-evaluation, development projects, instructional materials, teaching arrangements, etc.)	**3**	4	5	2	**1**	1	1	1
Personnel (advising, conferencing, evaluating, recruiting, etc.)	**2**	2	3	5	**3**	2	5	6
School management/ administration (weekly calendar, office, budget, correspondence, memos, etc.)	**1**	1	1	1	**7**	7	6	5
Student activities (child welfare, meetings, supervision, support, planning, etc.)	**4**	5	2	3	**2**	4	4	3
Student behavior (discipline, attendance, meetings, etc.)	**6**	6	4	4	**9**	9	9	8
Community (PTA, advisory groups, parent conferences, etc.)	**9**	8	8	7	**8**	6	7	7
District office (meetings, task forces, information, reports, etc.)	**8**	7	7	9	**10**	8	8	9
Professional development (reading, conferences, courses, seminars, etc.)	**10**	9	9	8	**4**	5	3	4
Planning (annual, long range, etc.)	**5**	3	6	6	**5**	3	2	2
Differentiated instruction (concerning students in general, students with learning difficulties, non-native Icelandic speakers, etc.)	**7**				**6**			

School management/administration ranked highest on the list of actual prioritization for spring 2017, as it also did in 1991, 2001 and 2006. *Personnel* ranked second, the same as in 2006, rising from fifth in 1991. *Curriculum development* ranked third, compared to

second in 1991 and fifth in 2001. The category *differentiated instruction*, added in 2017, ranked seventh.

As in previous studies, *curriculum development* ranked first on the list of ideal task area prioritization in 2017, *student activities* ranked second and *personnel* third, moving up from sixth in 1991. *Differentiated instruction* ranked sixth in this category. It is noteworthy that *planning* ranked fifth in 2017, falling from second in both 1991 and 2006.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how the principals spend their time, task prioritization was explored in relation to the following factors relative to school environment:

– *Gender*
– *School size*: 99 students or less, 100–299 students, 30 students or less.
– *Location of school by area*: Capital region, rural areas.
– *Teacher aids (personnel aside from teachers)*: 20 or fewer employees in schools with 100–299 students; 20 or fewer employees in schools with 300 or more students.
– *Number of students with specific learning difficulties*: 30 or fewer students with specific learning difficulties in schools with 100–299 students; 61 or more students with specific learning difficulties in schools with 300 or more students.
– *Dominant teaching arrangement*: Classroom teaching (homeroom teacher or subject teacher), team-teaching (two or more teachers co-responsible for teaching one grade level or mixed-grade classes, wholly or partially), mixed teaching methods (combination of classroom teaching and team-teaching).

There is no marked difference between actual and ideal task prioritization based on gender. However, a slight difference in task prioritization is evident depending on school size, i.e., actual prioritization of all tasks is identical aside from *differentiated instruction,* which ranks ninth in schools with 300 students or more, but seventh in schools of other sizes. Ideal task prioritization is largely the same in all instances except for *professional development*, which ranks second in schools with 99 students or less, sixth in schools with 100–299 students and fourth in schools with 300 or more students.

Prioritization of tasks is also largely unrelated to school location, aside from schools in the greater Reykjavík area where *curriculum development* ranks fourth and *differentiated instruction* ninth, compared to second and seventh in rural areas. Differences in ideal prioritization are also negligible regarding school location, with the exception of *curriculum development* and *student behavior*, ranking ninth and seventh respectively for the capital region, compared to seventh and ninth in rural areas.

A minor difference is evident in the list of actual task prioritization and the number of teacher aids (school employees other than teachers). In schools with 20 or fewer teacher aids and 100–299 students, *curriculum development* ranks second, *personnel* third and *differentiated instruction* seventh. However, in schools with 20 or more teacher aids and 300 or more students, these same categories rank fourth, second and

ninth. There is hardly any difference evident in ideal task prioritization aside from in schools with 20 or fewer teacher aids and 100−299 students, where *professional development* ranks seventh. In schools with 20 teacher aids or more and 300 or more students, this task ranks third.

There is no difference in actual task prioritization in relation to school size and the number of students with specific learning difficulties. Nevertheless, there is a small difference in relation to ideal prioritization. In schools with 100−299 students and 30 or fewer students with specific learning difficulties *school management/administration* ranks sixth and *professional development* seventh; these same categories rank ninth and fourth in schools with 300 or more students.

A minor difference is perceptible regarding the relationship between actual task prioritization and dominant teaching arrangement. In schools where classroom teaching is the prominent arrangement, *personnel* ranks second. In schools that emphasize team-teaching this task ranks first. It ranks fourth in schools with mixed teaching arrangements. *Community* ranks ninth in schools with classroom teaching and in mixed-method schools, but seventh in schools with team-teaching. This disparity increases slightly when it comes to ideal task prioritization, where *curriculum development* ranks third in schools with classroom teaching and mixed arrangements, but falls to fifth in team-teaching schools. *Differentiated instruction* ranks fourth in classroom teaching schools, eighth in team-teaching schools and fifth in mixed-method schools. *Professional development* ranks seventh in classroom teaching schools, third in schools with team-teaching methods, and fourth in mixed-method schools. Finally, *planning* ranks fifth in schools that emphasize classroom teaching, fourth in team-teaching schools and sixth in schools with mixed teaching methods.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to highlight what values compulsory school principals claim they emphasize in their work and how they prioritize important tasks. The principals were asked to list the values they regard most highly in connection with their work, i.e., their espoused values, as well as to prioritize the ten most pertinent tasks in order.

It seems safe to assume that the principals' desired task prioritization will to a large degree reflect their espoused values. However, it is more difficult to infer about the relationship between the list of actual priorities and actual values because apart from the principals' self-reporting, no other witnesses were asked to corroborate which values the principals in fact emphasize in their practice; and behavioral observations were not performed. It is therefore impossible to make definitive assertions about whether the principals' actions actually reflect or correspond to their espoused values. The principals might be ill-suited to judge values held by themselves and others and hence unaware of the values that influence their work. If so, they would be in the same shoes as many of their colleagues according to research (Begley, 2004; Branson, 2005; Tuana, 2007). In the next section, *Self-Knowledge*, we discuss the two value groups in

relation to their role as educational leaders. In the subsequent section, *Accountability,* we discuss the ways in which the principals prioritize these values.

Self-Knowledge

The principals made little distinction between the importance of the ethical values they were asked to review. Their rating of ethical values, i.e., *care, equity, democracy, independence, tolerance* and *justice,* was nearly identical; about 90% of the principals gave these values 8–10 points. It is possible that a majority of the principals consider these values to be equally important (espoused values) and therefore place equal emphasis on these values in their everyday work (actual values). However, it is more likely that they have not actively reflected upon these values and hence are unaware of how they influence their work. Studies, in fact, indicate that most individuals are oblivious to the values that influence their daily life (Branson, 2005, 2007).

In this context, it has often been pointed out that leadership education should include ethical issues on equal footing with technical aspects (Hodgkinson, 1991). Ethics-based leadership and management programs should therefore be offered to principals. The central goal of such programs would be to support both acting and aspiring principals in their endeavor to lead with authenticity and develop their moral conscience (Branson, 2007; Lárusdóttir, 2014). Moreover, this kind of education would prove fruitful not only for school principals, but also for students, who will go on to become the future leaders of our societies. Academic discussion on values and ethical leadership has a long tradition within the school leadership program at the School of Education, University of Iceland, i.e., by encouraging students to reflect on their own values. Such an approach nevertheless falls short of providing each and every student with enough time and support for self-reflection and developing ethical judgments. One solution would be to follow Branson's (2007) example and provide students with a 'mentor' or a guide who could work with them over a certain period and help them reflect on their own values, in order to encourage them to assess to what extent espoused values echo actual values.

As discussed above, it is important that within schools there is an active and meaningful conversation about the visions and values held by all school stakeholders (Begley, 2004; Lumby & Coleman, 2007). The principal's central task in this regard is to create space with her/his collaborators in which diverse perspectives are respected. In order to achieve this, the principals must learn to recognize their own values and learn to assess whether espoused values are manifested in their everyday practices.

Accountability

In contrast to ratings for ethical values, the principals readily made distinctions in relation to the importance of managerial values, i.e., *competition, effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, productivity* and *outcomes.* For example, only 9% of the principals gave *competition* 8–10 points. Around half of the principals or 51% gave *competition* 1–4 points, and 41% gave it a 5–7 point rating.

Competition and competitive spirit can manifest in a variety of ways. In education students are often encouraged to compete against themselves rather than against others. Sports seem to be governed by different laws, where competitions are held within the school itself and between schools, and students are encouraged to aim for victory. In a broader context, schools compete with one another in the form of test scores, where each school fights for the best results at the municipal, national or international levels. However, this outlook on school competition was hardly visible in the data, given the proportionally low number of principals who rated this category highly.

A large proportion of the principals, 44%, gave *efficiency* 8–10 points, and only 11% gave it 1–4 points. If the two top categories are merged, a vast majority of the principals, or 88%, give *efficiency* points between 5–10. It is possible that traces still linger of the austerity measures imposed across the public sphere following the economic crash (Einarsdóttir, 2010; Rafnsdóttir, Snorradóttir & Sigursteinsdóttir, 2014). Studies that analyze the impact of the economic crash on Icelandic schools show similar findings (Lárusdóttir et al., 2015). Therefore, principals' emphasis on *efficiency* could stem from the economic crash and the government's persisting demands for cutbacks.

However, a large proportion of the principals, 91%, give the values *outcomes* and *accountability* 8–10 points, but only 2–3% of them give these values 1–4 points. Their rating for these categories suggests that institutional responsibility is a serious concern and figures strongly into their daily activities. Principals, like other public servants, are held accountable for their words and actions both toward the public and the authorities. Their work is subject to constant surveillance, in terms of school activities, leadership methods and student outcomes. As an example, school authorities in the capital Reykjavík assess school performance every few years and the Directorate of Education also assesses ten compulsory schools each year (Menntamálastofnun, 2018).

Compulsory schools are responsible themselves for assessing student outcomes and ascertaining ways to use the findings to improve learning. In addition to these assessments, laws and regulations call for national examinations in Icelandic and mathematics in Grades 4 and 7, and in Icelandic, mathematics and English in Grade 9 (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008). Furthermore, certain student groups also participate in international tests such as PISA, which measures the performance of 15-year-olds in mathematics, science and reading (Menntamálastofnun, 2017). This is not an exhaustive list, but it shows that there is considerable public scrutiny of compulsory schools in Iceland.

Prioritization – Interesting changes

One of the central aims of this study was to examine how principals prioritize important task areas and to examine how this prioritization has changed over the years. A quarter of a century has passed since the authors carried out their first survey with this focus.

Firstly, *school management/administration* was the highest ranked category throughout the 25 years under study. This suggests that too much time is still allocated to tasks related to office management, finance, administrative issues, correspondence, reports, etc., at the expense of curriculum issues. This is consistent with the findings of Horng, Klasik and Loeb (2010) who write that the principals they studied devoted most of their time to administrative matters that revolved around keeping "the school running smoothly" (p. 502). However, principals' ideal prioritization of *school management/administration* falls as time passes.

The principals' ideal prioritization has always been directed toward *curriculum development*, which they have always ranked first. The task area *curriculum development* can be viewed as the core aspect of schooling, and refers to implementation of the National Curriculum, development of school curricula, schools' self-assessment programs, development projects and other work related to teaching methods, teaching arrangements, teaching materials, etc. The fact that *curriculum development* is rated so highly each year as an ideal prioritization can be seen as an indication of principals' professional view toward their own role with regard to developing their schools.

It is interesting to note that the task *personnel*, i.e., staff recruitment, counselling, support, assessment, etc., continually ranks higher on the list of actual priorities as time passes; ranking second in 2006, in contrast to third and fifth place in the years prior. The changes in ideal prioritization seem to reflect this development, with the principals ranking *personnel* higher as the years pass. This trajectory is unsurprising. The research of Hansen, Jóhannsson and Lárusdóttir (2008) shows how the arrival of middle managers altered the role of principals and allowed them more time for staff counselling.

Moreover, this emphasis is in line with theories on school management that emphasize the importance of progressive leadership, where school leaders are encouraged to engage in active cooperation with teachers on the development of teaching and learning (Harris, 2008; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Kaplan & Owings, 2015; Robinson, 2011; Sergiovanni, 2009). According to Robinson (2011), these changes in the prioritization of *personnel* should be viewed positively; the principles' initiative and leadership concerning professional development programs will bring about the most fruitful improvements in student outcomes. Another reason for the ascending ranking of *personnel* might be due to an increase in unspecialized employees in compulsory schools' public statistics (Hagstofa Íslands, 2018). The composition of the workforce has changed and principals are now responsible for employees that have little to no teaching experience, which most likely figures into the growing emphasis on the task *personnel*. However, more research is needed to properly extract the causal factors involved.

The task *professional development* of principals has always received a low ranking (8–9) and now ranks tenth, at the bottom of the list of actual priorities. It is cause for concern that principals' reading of academic texts, course participation, conferences, workshops, and similar practices have seen a continuous decline in ranking

over the years. This is no less worrisome given the responsibilities principals assume, and as stipulated by both the Icelandic Compulsory School Act (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008) and the main curriculum guide (*Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla. Almennur hluti*, 2011).

The professional development needs of principals becomes even more important given that only a minority, 38%, of principals have studied school management and leadership at the graduate level. It is therefore safe to assume that principals have in many cases less formal education than the teachers they are set to lead. An OECD report, written by Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008), points out the importance of facilitating principals' independence in shaping school policy, and providing them with ample support through consultation and opportunities for professional development. Emphasis on renewing their own knowledge should be placed much higher on the principals' list of priorities than the actual ranking highlights in the current study. Despite the low ranking of *professional development* in terms of actual prioritization, the story is different when it comes to ideal priorities, where it ranks fourth, just as in 1991. A keen eye should be kept on this trajectory. Furthermore, principals should be provided with appropriate opportunities to further their professional development. Municipalities are key in this regard, because their support for professional development programs, both financial and professional, can prove decisive in relation to this task moving up on the list of priorities. Nevertheless, it is the principals themselves who are responsible for their own education, and their ambition plays a large role in pursuing graduate studies in leadership and management and seeking out professional development opportunities.

There was little change in the list of other categories, aside from *student activities, student behavior* and *community,* all of which have fallen slightly lower on the list of actual priorities over the years. This tendency can be explained in terms of the growing number of middle leadership positions as well as access to support services. These middle leaders have largely assumed responsibility for many of the tasks which before were in the hands of principals. Often these middle leaders have specialized skills, such as handling behavioral problems and home school relations. Tasks that fall under the heading *student activities* refer to cooperation and counselling, as well as extended services and pastoral support for students. The tasks therefore largely reflect the ethical values that the principals underlined, such as care, democracy and equity. Given the weight of these values, however, *student activities* should have ranked higher.

The task area *differentiated instruction* was added to the list in 2017. Aspects related to this task have shaped schooling considerably over recent years, e.g. policies on inclusive schools and emphasis on individualized learning, diverse teaching methods, etc. (*Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla. Almennur hluti,* 2011; Ólafsdóttir, Jóelsdóttir, Sigurvinsdóttir, Bjarnason, Sigurðardóttir & Harðardóttir, 2014). It is therefore impossible to discuss developments or changes to this task in comparison with others. It was nevertheless surprising to see how low *differentiated instruction* ranked on the list of both ideal and actual priorities. The concepts that compose the list of ethical values underlined by the

principals also pertain to the ideological framework of the inclusive school, namely, *equity, justice* and *democracy*, which should also bump *differentiated instruction* higher on the list. As a result, the principals' relationship to this task requires further scrutiny in order to produce a better understanding of why it received the rating it did.

The 2017 study examined whether particular school conditions influence task prioritization. The schools in question vary considerably in size, dominant teaching arrangements, number of non-teaching staff, number of students with specific learning difficulties and so on. These diverse environments produced only minor differences in the list of priorities, and in no way played a decisive role, whether actual or ideal.

Teaching arrangements produced the biggest difference in this context, contributing to a small difference in the list of actual and ideal prioritization of the task areas *personnel, community, differentiated instruction, professional development* and *curriculum development.* The study *Teaching and Learning in Icelandic Compulsory Schools* (Hansen & Lárusdóttir, 2014) brought to light that leadership varied depending on the dominant teaching arrangements and manifested in varying levels of job satisfaction. This was most apparent in schools where the dominant teaching method was team-teaching.

Conclusion

In light of the above it is safe to conclude that the extent and nature of the compulsory school principal's role in Iceland has changed considerably over the last 25 years, or since the authors' first study on the subject was conducted in 1991. A moderate difference between the ideal and actual is not unnatural and can be interpreted as an ambitious future vision. Large differences, on the other hand, can be an indicator that there are undesirable obstacles present.

Theoretical writings on school leadership over recent decades have often emphasized the importance of a leader's self-knowledge, i.e. that school leaders are aware of their own value base and that they are able to consistently act on their values as they engage with important tasks. The authors agree with these ideas as well as the importance of facilitating practices which encourage principals to move closer to the vision reflected in their ideal prioritization. *Curriculum development, student activities* and *personnel* rank highest in this context. It would be interesting to follow international precedents and offer guidance by asking critical questions about their own vision and values, and help them analyze to what extent their words and their action correlate. If successful, these values could form the foundation and become the guiding light of principals' everyday work, making their practices rightfully value-based.

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