

Exploring novice principals' professional confidence: insights from a Swedish perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study explores novice principals' professional confidence within the context of Sweden's National Principal Training Programme (NPTP). The significance of professional confidence, an area that has been relatively underexplored within educational leadership research, is elemental for fostering effective school leadership. This is particularly pertinent during the transitional phase from instructional to administrative positions. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected from 256 novice principals via programme evaluations, including digital questionnaires and group discussions. Thematic analysis identified four key themes: building deeper knowledge, developing leadership capabilities, professional learning with peers, and role clarity. The findings highlight the transformative potential of the NPTP in fostering professional confidence through theoretical grounding, practical application, and peer collaboration. Principals reported increased confidence in school law, communication, management, and decision-making, linking these capabilities to leadership efficacy. Peer interactions and mentorship significantly contributed to professional growth, reinforcing identity and confidence. The study underscores the NPTP's role as a model for context-sensitive leadership development, emphasising the importance of integrating knowledge, practice, and reflective learning in leadership preparation programmes. These findings have implications for designing leadership training that addresses the cognitive, relational, and contextual dimensions of professional development for school leaders.

KEYWORDS

Leadership preparation; novice principals; principal training; professional confidence; Sweden

Introduction

The relevance of educational leadership for successful schools is widely recognised (e.g. Day, Sammons, and Gorgen 2020; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020). Over the past few decades, research evidence has consistently demonstrated that developing a professional identity is critical for successfully exercising leadership (e.g. Notman 2017; Ritacco and Bolívar 2019). There exists a relatively solid empirical knowledge base internationally regarding the professional identities of school leaders (e.g. Bolívar and Ritacco 2018; Crow and Møller 2017; Cruz-González, Rodríguez, and Segovia 2021; Nordholm, Real, and Bezzina 2023), complemented by extensive case study findings and the narratives of successful school leaders (e.g. Day and Gurr 2014; Gurr, Longmuir, and Reed 2021; Hudson and Gurr 2025). However, the focus on and exploration of school leaders' professional confidence remains underdeveloped. Notably, the current body of research on professional confidence is predominantly situated within the healthcare professions (e.g. Bäck et al. 2017; Holland, Middleton, and Uys 2012). While some educational leadership studies mention 'professional confidence', it is not the main focus of the studies (e.g. Oplatka 2012; Saarukka 2017; Simon, Dole, and Farragher 2019). This paper seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the concept of professional confidence and examining it within the context of leadership preparation and development for novice principals.

For novice principals, competence obtained through pre-service and in-service training is influential in exercising leadership successfully (Jerdborg 2022a; Oplatka 2012; Young and Crow 2016). Becoming a principal entails a professional and identity transition (Bøje and Frederiksen 2019; Bush 2018), whereas Cruz-González, Rodríguez, and Segovia (2021) refer to the importance of a principal's education and training, along with 'professional experience,' as being decisive in the consolidation of a 'leader' identity. This is also emphasised by Payne and Smith (2018) and Simon, Dole, and Farragher (2019), who argue that training for future principals is fundamental to developing leadership identity. According to Bøje and Frederiksen (2019), becoming a school leader is often a departure from a previous professional identity, usually as a teacher. When transitioning from teaching to managerial roles, novice principals experience an induction stage in which 'a novice principal undergoes socialisation into the school or into the role ... such as attaining acceptance, learning the organisational culture, and establishing ways to overcome the insecurity of being inexperienced and to develop a sense of confidence' (Oplatka 2012, 131). This has implications for their development as confident professionals.

There are solid arguments for focusing on novice principals' professional confidence. As emphasised by Kilinc and Gümüs (2021) in their systematic literature review on novice principals, this research is still in its infancy, and most of the related studies are found to be lacking in terms of a solid theoretical grounding. Three broad areas of research were found: *preparation and development of novice*

principals, their socialisation process and the challenges they face, and their role in school improvement. However, previous studies indicate that building a solid professional identity is vital for successful leadership and positively impacting results (e.g. Ritacco and Bolivar, 2019). Other studies have shown that a strong identity can be important for principals to navigate complex situations (Saarukka 2014). Research on novice principals' professional identities and professional confidence can contribute to leadership development and provide valuable knowledge to consider in leadership preparation and professional development (Crow and Møller 2017; Montecinos, Bush, and Aravena 2018). Professional confidence can also contribute to an understanding of leadership preparation and the development of novice principals, but it needs further exploration (Kılınc and Gümüş 2021). This introduction provides the background for this study, which aims to explore the professional confidence of Swedish novice principals within the context of the National Principal Training Programme (NPTP). Role identity theory (Burke and Stets 2022) will be employed to provide a more theoretical interpretation of the findings of the study in the discussion. The research questions guiding the study reported in this paper are:

- 1) How do novice principals perceive their participation in the NPTP as contributing to developing professional confidence?
- 2) How do shifts in novice principals' emerging principal role identity (salience, meaning-making, commitment) contribute to their development of professional confidence during the NPTP?

This paper starts with a review of research on professional confidence and then outlines the theoretical framework and the Swedish context, including principals' professional development. Then, it presents the methodology and analytical work. Subsequently, it provides the findings and analysis of the study, and it finishes with a discussion, conclusions, and implications for practice and further research.

Literature review: professional confidence and the principalship

This literature review begins with a brief overview of the conceptualisation of 'professional confidence', and then turns to international empirical literature regarding professional confidence for school principals.

A literature search on school leaders' professional confidence identified few that focus explicitly on this construct. Instead, some studies within the leadership preparation and development field mention 'professional confidence', but this notion is not the main focus of these outputs. The broader literature search identified other interrelated concepts (such as 'self-confidence', 'professional bravery', 'professional courage', 'self-efficacy', 'self-concept', and 'self-esteem'). However, these do not relate to educational contexts.

Bandura's (1995, 1997) self-efficacy theory defines self-efficacy as 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations' (3). Self-efficacy addresses 'Can I do it?' in a task-specific manner. By contrast, professional confidence in this study is broader: it comprises not only capability judgments but also an emerging professional self-concept and affective assurance. Thus, while self-efficacy underpins confidence in discrete tasks, professional confidence encompasses sustained belief in one's legitimacy and competence as a school leader, shaped by affirming experiences and identity validation.

Professional confidence is the focus of this paper, which can be seen as intertwined with professional identity and understood as competence and knowledge (Holland, Middleton, and Uys 2012). In this paper, we define the concept of 'professional confidence' in alignment with Holland, Middleton, and Uys (2012):

Professional confidence can, therefore be defined as a dynamic, maturing personal belief held by a professional or student. This includes an understanding of and a belief in the role, the scope of practice, and the significance of the profession. It is based on their capacity to fulfil these expectations competently, fostered through a process of affirming experiences. (Holland, Middleton, and Uys 2012, 222)

Bäck et al. (2017) describe confidence as an ability to do something successfully and efficiently. They note that confidence is linked to competence and knowledge within the profession. Their study, which focuses on developing midwives' professional confidence during training, emphasises the importance of individual capacity and professional culture in building professional confidence and self-confidence. Professional confidence can be understood as the basis of competence and is linked to professional identity (Bandura 1982; Björklund and Svensson 2006). Professional confidence can be conceptualised as a combination of competence, identity, and self-efficacy. Competence appears well defined and understood as a concept (e.g. Huber 2010; Leithwood, Sun, and Pollock 2017) and in terms of what is required for principalship (e.g. Bush 2018; Jerdborg 2022a; Oplatka 2012; Young and Crow 2016). In the Swedish national document about the NPTP (National Agency of Education 2021), there are goals about principals' competence and capabilities that inform the programme's content, which is assessed and accredited, but developing professional confidence is not mentioned. This study therefore addresses this gap by exploring how participation in the NPTP fosters not only discrete efficacy beliefs but a broader, identity-anchored professional confidence among novice principals.

Professional confidence related to leadership preparation and development

In the literature search, no specific studies were found that addressed principals' professional confidence. However, professional confidence and related concepts appeared as subordinate themes in various studies.

The socialisation and induction of novice principals

Oplatka's (2012) comprehensive review synthesises the scholarship to expand global understanding of the early career stages of principalship. First, in the induction stage, a novice principal undergoes socialisation into the school and the role. They must confront many issues and difficulties, such as obtaining acceptance, learning the organisational culture, establishing ways to overcome the insecurity of inexperience, and developing confidence. Crow (2007) examined how new English principals perceived the socialisation process and its impact on their roles as principals during professional and organisational socialisation experiences. He found that new principals experienced 'traumatic' first-year experiences characterised by management issues, highlighting the initial hurdles in building confidence. Crow's study found that self-confidence in themselves was a significant learning need for these new principals. The principals' comments emphasised two types of confidence: self and school (Ibid.).

A recent study from China explored the emotional trajectories of principals throughout their careers (Chen and Walker 2023), noting a shift from negative to more positive emotions as they gained confidence in their ability to achieve professional goals. Arar (2018) conducted a study in the Arab education system in Israel on the challenges facing 40 novice principals and the coping strategies they developed at the inception of their managerial careers. The findings revealed three critical needs representing various emergent categories. The participants' comments revealed one aspect regarding the entry into principalship of interest in this study: 'their need to demonstrate high professional competence and confidence as principals to establish their value to the school.' (594). This theme of confidence as a foundational element of leadership is echoed in Malaysian research, where principals expressed a desire for further professional development and school leadership programmes to bolster their leadership confidence (Bøje and Frederiksen 2019).

Jerdborg's (2022a) Swedish study shows that the need to educate principals is often presented as a solution, and confidence in what education for principals should be able to achieve is still high in many countries. Yongmei et al. (2016) argue the need for leadership preparation programmes. Although outcome studies are still relatively few, they have significantly contributed to the growing body of evidence on how programme preparation can contribute to leadership outcomes, such as students' high levels of programme satisfaction, efficacy as instructional leaders, and confidence. Numerous studies acknowledge principals and school leaders increased confidence as a part of their professional development (e.g. Browne-Ferrigno 2007; Hayes and Burkett 2021; Petridou, Nicolaidou, and Kargiorgi 2017; Versland 2009).

The role of internships, on-the-job experiences and mentoring

Many studies are focused on the US. For example, Reyes-Guerra and Barnett (2016) conducted a follow-up literature review on US internships and other

on-the-job practices. The authors argue that internships have become integrated into most preparation programmes as an essential capstone experience supporting aspiring principals to connect theory, research, and practice. Besides affecting their motivation to become school leaders, internship experiences can impact participants' self-confidence – expectations, and vision clarification (Orland-Barak and Hasin 2010; Orr 2011). Numerous studies acknowledge graduates' increased confidence to take on leadership roles, primarily in full-time internships (Browne-Ferrigno 2007; Donmoyer, Yennie-Donmoyer, and Galloway 2012; Orland-Barak and Hasin 2010; Perez et al. 2010). Davis and Darling-Hammond's (2012) analysis of five innovative programmes in the US further corroborates this, identifying a combination of adult learning principles, mentored internships, and using a cohort-based model as critical factors contributing to the development of confidence and efficacy in new principals. Tucker and Dexter (2011) reported findings from over 200 students from multiple sites implementing online leadership case studies in the US. The findings include detailed student reactions to using the cases and reported increases in students' self-reported confidence to make decisions and decision-making self-efficacy.

A study from Canada (Acton 2021) found that while formal professional development on change leadership was limited, principals reported gaining confidence through on-the-job experiences and peer networking. Similarly, the findings from evaluating a pilot of the South African leadership preparation and development programme highlighted enhanced confidence among participants as a critical outcome (Bush, Kiggundu, and Moorosi 2011). In Norway, Aas and Vavik (2015) suggest that leaders develop greater confidence in their leadership role through personal and contextual feedback from other leaders. They focus on how group coaching can contribute to professional development and the construction of leadership identity. From textual responses from participants, it is suggested that principals require personal and contextual feedback from other leaders to develop confidence in their role, and that bringing together generations of school leaders may positively impact principals' identity development. Vennebo and Aas (2022) explored principals' leadership learning in the Norwegian leadership preparation programme, and the findings show that tensions occur on both personal and systemic levels. If linked to daily practice, they can serve as resources for reflection and promote enhanced knowledge, thereby increasing confidence in trying new leadership practices. This finding aligns with the study by Augustine-Shaw and Liang (2016) in the US, where a state model provides mentoring and induction for new school leaders. The authors concluded that novice principals within trusting relationships can seek advice on aligning goals and building confidence to meet the complex needs of school settings. Beisser, Peters, and Thacker (2014) reported that having a mentor for new principals was essential for gaining professional confidence. Next, the Swedish context and the Swedish NPTP are presented.

The Swedish context and the Swedish national principal training programme

Municipalities and independent school organisers are responsible for hiring principals in the Swedish education system. According to the Education Act (SFS 2010, 800), individuals selected for principal positions must possess '*pedagogical insight gained through education and work experience*' at the time of their appointment. This requirement stipulates that candidates must have a university education, including a minimum of 23 credits in pedagogy, and several years of work experience in a relevant field, which does not necessarily need to be in education. However, in practice, most new principals have previously worked as teachers. Statistics indicate that about 90% of compulsory school principals aged 50–65 have a pedagogical university degree, while this is true for 82% of those aged 30–39 (SNAE 2023).

Principals are expected to enrol in the NPTP within the first year when taking on a principal position. The NPTP is a mandatory in-service programme that requires principals to allocate 20% of their working time during the first three years for its completion. The programme's design comprises three courses – school law and jurisdiction, governance, organising and quality assurance, and school leadership – totalling 30 credits. The NPTP is grounded in contemporary educational leadership theories and evidence-based practices (National Agency of Education, 2021). Core modules integrate frameworks of transformational leadership, distributed leadership, social justice leadership, and practice-based leadership, alongside sessions focused on evidence-informed decision-making and organisational change theory. Participants engage with research syntheses on school improvement, data-driven instructional leadership, and collaborative professional learning communities.

The programme involves two 3-day residential stays each semester in conference hotels. Between these stays, principals are expected to engage in reading literature and educational tasks as part of their professional practice (Jerdborg 2022b). The NPTP is currently hosted by seven universities at the request of the SNAE. It is based on an agreed-upon national document that coordinates their expectations. This enables the creation of a shared knowledge framework for all principals in Sweden (Brauckmann, Pashiardis, and Ärlestig 2020). Principals' formal professional development includes the mandatory NPTP. The Swedish model exemplifies a context-sensitive leadership preparation programme (Brauckmann, Pashiardis, and Ärlestig 2020). Brauckmann, Pashiardis, and Ärlestig (2020) highlight that little is known internationally about how leadership programme content translates into context-specific leadership actions. While it is often assumed that professionalising principals improve leadership practices, empirical evidence supporting this claim remains limited (Ibid.).

Theoretical framework

In the study reported in this paper, the role identity theory (Burke and Stets 2022) is used as a theoretical lens to interpret the findings in the discussion.

Role identity theory, rooted in symbolic interactionism (Burke and Stets 2022; Stets and Burke 2014), offers a robust interpretive lens for understanding how novice principals' evolving sense of self underpins their professional confidence gains during the NPTP.

Individuals enact multiple social roles – each comprised of internalised meanings, expectations, and behaviours – within their identity repertoire (Burke and Stets 2022; Stets and Burke 2014). The principal role, in this context, encompasses the cognitive schemas and affective investments that differentiate the leadership of a school from other professional roles. There are three key dimensions in role identity theory (Burke and Stets 2022, more specifically: 1) *salience* – which indicates an identity's prominence in the self-concept hierarchy. As principals engage in NPTP activities – such as collaborative workshops, peer mentoring, and reflective seminars – the salience of the principal identity may rise, making leadership-related experiences more psychologically central and accessible, (2) *meaning-making* – through structured reflection, dialogue, and feedback, novices construct personal narratives around what it means to 'be a principal.' These narratives integrate values such as instructional leadership, equity advocacy, and school development stewardship, thereby shaping how participants interpret and prioritise programme experiences, and (3) *commitment and verification*, which refers to the strength of social ties – mentors, cohort peers, and institutional supports – that affirm the principal identity. Identity verification transpires when external feedback and social appraisals align with participants' self-meanings. Such congruence reduces identity-role discrepancies and fosters professional confidence, whereas nonverification may prompt identity negotiation or emotional dissonance.

Method

This study explored novice principals' professional confidence in Sweden within the context of the NPTP. Given the interest in a contemporary, bounded programme – and in how programme structures, institutional supports, and experiences interact to shape professional confidence – a qualitative case study design was adopted (Yin 2014). Unlike phenomenology, which seeks to distil the shared lived experience, case study methodology enables in-depth exploration of a phenomenon in real-life contexts and accommodates multiple data sources (Stake 1995; Yin 2014). Principals' professional confidence is complex and situated: it emerges through interactions with curricular modules, mentorship networks, and organisational expectations. A case study design offered the contextual depth and analytic flexibility to examine how specific NPTP components

(e.g. reflective seminars, peer cohorts) shape confidence development. To ensure rigour, we applied Yin's four quality tests (construct validity, internal validity, external validity, reliability) and embedded case study tactics (e.g. pattern matching, explanation building) throughout data collection and analysis (Yin 2014). Purposive and convenience sampling included novice principals undertaking the NPTP between 2018–2022. The study coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which NPTP delivery shifted partially or fully to digital formats. The degree of this disruption varied: some cohorts experienced considerable shifts to digital learning, while others continued with in-person sessions.

Data collection

Data were collected from post-programme evaluations of the NPTP conducted between 2018 and 2022, comprising responses from 256 ($n=256$) school leaders across 10 cohort groups. Participants included principals and deputy principals from preschool, primary, secondary, and adult education settings. The evaluation instrument was developed in 2015 by a multidisciplinary steering group when the university became an NPTP provider. This group – comprising the programme director, faculty, administrator, and course leaders – aligned the questionnaire with learning objectives, pilot-tested, and refined it. Data were collected via comprehensive digital questionnaires and small-group oral assessments, documented in summary reports. The evaluation aimed to capture participants' perceptions of the programme content, methods, activities, leadership development, and applied practice. Participants completed open-ended digital questionnaires during their final residential session, allowing for rich, unrestricted responses. These responses supported qualitative depth while offering standardisation for cross-cohort comparison (Braun, Tricklebank, and Clarke 2013). Following individual responses, participants formed groups of 6–8 to discuss their programme experience using open-ended prompts. Each group produced a summary document highlighting key themes, which was submitted to the researchers. These documents added to the data and created multiple sources of evidence (Yin 2014).

Only responses directly related to professional confidence were included in the analysis. While participants made numerous additional reflections (e.g. about programme logistics or content areas), only comments clearly addressing how the programme influenced their confidence as school leaders were coded. Other remarks were documented but excluded from the thematic analysis.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on NPTP format

The pandemic affected the delivery format of NPTP residential sessions for several cohorts. Four cohorts (Autumn 2015 to Autumn 2019) were unaffected, completing their training before the pandemic. One cohort (Spring 2020) had only the final session (approx. 8%) delivered digitally. Two groups (Spring

2020 and Autumn 2020) completed their last three online sessions (approx. 25%). Four cohorts (Autumn 2018 to Spring 2021) had up to five sessions (approx. 40%) conducted digitally. This format shifts likely influenced participants' experiences and may have impacted their confidence development. This variation was considered in interpreting the study's results.

Data analysis

The data analysis was guided by study's purpose and research questions. To explore principals' perceptions of professional confidence, a qualitative inductive analysis of the empirical data was conducted (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2020). Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) was employed to identify and construct themes, which involved reflective reading and re-reading, coding of emergent sub-themes, and grounding them in representative participant quotations. To strengthen trustworthiness, the three-member insider-outsider team applied the systematic procedures (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2020), including consensus coding, external audits, data-source triangulation, and reflexive documentation. The analytic process was led by one international external researcher who conducted the primary analysis, developed the initial codebook, and drafted the thematic write-up. A second international external researcher then reviewed and audited this work – examining the coded data, analytic memos, and theme structures to ensure consistency and confirm that interpretations were firmly grounded. Finally, the Swedish insider researcher, deeply familiar with the NPTP context, reviewed the full analysis, offering contextual insights and critical feedback on code definitions and theme narratives. This staged collaboration – primary analysis and writing, external audit, and insider review – enhanced the credibility and the reflexive integrity of the findings (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2020).

Ethical considerations

This study followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2017), adhering to four principles: information requirement, consent requirement, confidentiality requirement, and use requirement. Participants were informed about the study's aims, assured of confidentiality, and their participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without consequences. Therefore, in reporting the data, no individuals can be identified by more than a year of the programme. Since the data was collected at the end of their programmes, there was no potential conflict of interest for participants between the programme assessments and data collection.

Researcher transparency was also prioritised (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). Complete objectivity is unattainable, as researchers are embedded in the social context they study. One researcher's institutional role in this study

facilitated close interaction with participants. While the researcher effect cannot be eliminated, reflexivity is essential (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2020). As Young and Crow (2016) note, programme research often involves faculty members, which may introduce bias. They recommend the involvement of researchers not directly teaching or administering the programme. In this study, the research team consisted of three members – two with external perspectives – who regularly reviewed the findings. One external member led the data analysis and coherence review (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018).

Findings

In analysing Swedish novice principals' perceptions of how their participation in the NPTP contributed to their professional confidence, the following themes and sub-themes emerged. This thematic analysis presents insights illustrated by participant quotations based on empirical data from programme evaluations.

Building deeper knowledge and understanding

This theme highlights how acquiring foundational knowledge and developing a comprehensive understanding. This theme encompasses the knowledge and capabilities principals have acquired, including integrating theoretical insights with practical experience. Many principals ($n = 213$) emphasised how the NPTP's focus on theory and research findings, research-based practices, and applied knowledge in school law and leadership theories strengthened their professional confidence and readiness.

More than two-thirds of the principals ($n = 198$) expressed the need for knowledge of school law and the importance of gaining that knowledge within the programme: *'I felt that I lacked knowledge of the law, and that course gave me a lot.'* (4). Many of these principals also highlighted how learning about school law improved their confidence. They described how legal knowledge provided a foundation for making decisions and advocating for students, staff, and the educational mission. For example, one principal (1) mentioned, *'I feel more confident as a school leader, above all in resting on school law and regulations. It has helped me stand straighter and argue rights for the children and pupils I am responsible for.'* The NPTP programme seems to provide participants with knowledge that gives a sense of improved confidence, e.g. in school law, which participants in this study explicitly acknowledge.

Integration of theory with practice

Many principals ($n = 198$) across cohorts expressed that grounding their decisions in leadership research, theories, and research-supported strategies

provided them with a structured way to handle the complexities of their role. They appreciated how the programme allowed them to connect theoretical knowledge with day-to-day challenges, reinforcing their competence and confidence. For instance, a principal (3) reflected, *'The programme has given me tools to develop my employees and a deeper understanding of my leadership and its impact, linking theory directly to practice.'* Another principal (6) added, *'The theory has helped me connect frameworks to everyday situations, making me a more reflective leader.'*

Most principals ($n = 213$) referenced gaining deeper insights into leadership research and theory, which shaped their leadership and approaches. One principal (5) described, *'I've been able to understand the principles of leadership theory and apply them in a way that helps my staff align with the organisation's goals.'* Another principal (10) noted, *'Learning about organisational theory has given me a clearer picture of the structural challenges and helped me guide our work with clarity.'*

Application and development of leadership capabilities

While the first theme focuses on foundational knowledge and understanding, the second focuses on translating this knowledge into specific leadership applications and actions. Principals reported increased confidence in critical areas of their roles, particularly regarding *communication and interpersonal capabilities, management and organisational capabilities, and decision-making capabilities.*

Communication and interpersonal capabilities

Principals ($n = 198$) often reported feeling more capable in engaging staff and setting clear goals, with many attributing their confidence to the programme's leadership training. As one principal (2) explained, *'Through the training, I've gained the ability to communicate clear goals to my team, which has been invaluable in guiding them.'* Similarly, a principal (9) remarked, *'I now feel more confident in my communication style, ensuring clarity and alignment with our goals.'*

Management and organisational capabilities

Several principals ($n = 132$) from various cohorts mentioned the value of strategic planning, working with organising and managing organisational change, which they refined through the NPTP. One principal (1) shared, *'I've gained tools to help me manage objectives, measure outcomes, and keep our focus on quality improvement.'* Another principal (6) stated, *'I feel more secure in managing organisational structures and understanding the importance of culture in driving positive change.'*

Based on the above results and quotes that validate the analysis, the principals' application of new capabilities and knowledge seems to have

strengthened their internal self-view. In applying their new knowledge, they are empowered as leaders, whether externally by colleagues or internally through self-perception. One principal (5) reflected on how participation in the NPTP supported her in her position: *'I have received much confirmation that I am doing the right thing and thinking correctly in my assignment.'* This recognition and validation of 'being a leader', external or self-recognition of themselves as principals, have an emotional domain and relationship with their professional and personal identities and self-perception.

Decision-making capabilities

Principals ($n = 40$) emphasised how the NPTP developed their decision-making capabilities. The principals felt more prepared to make informed choices, citing specific instances where knowledge of leadership strategy helped. A principal (4) noted, *'The programme has made me more confident in handling decisions and addressing questions from employees and parents. I feel I can make well-informed choices that benefit the school.'* Another principal (9) shared, *'I have become more confident in making the right decisions and have the patience to see them through.'*

Professional learning with professional peers

Most principals ($n = 220$) highlighted the crucial role of professional learning with other professional peers, mentorship, and shared experiences in developing their confidence. This theme underscores the social dimensions of professional growth, emphasising how professional interactions with professional peers provide validation, new perspectives, and support. The principals expressed above all how important the study groups were during their education and how they contributed to their development and confidence, as well as the opportunity to exchange experiences with professional peers who are also novice principals, and that peer mentoring was an important part of the education.

Peer mentoring and support

Most principals ($n = 230$) valued peer mentoring for providing guidance, reassurance, and gaining knowledge. One principal (2) remarked, *'Our peer mentoring sessions helped me gain confidence in my decision-making by hearing how others approached similar issues.'* Another principal (5) expressed, *'The support I received from my group has been instrumental in helping me navigate challenging situations with a sense of community.'* Most principals ($n = 230$) appreciated the possibility of engaging with professional peers and novices in their positions and discussing and reflecting together on wicked problems, thoughts, and ideas.

However, to nuance the picture, it is also important to mention that there were some reflections about how peer mentoring was carried out over time,

how different study groups functioned differently, and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected how the principals perceived both the professional learning and peer mentoring, where several participants who were affected by the pandemic by having digital teaching instead of residential stays expressed that the physical meetings were better.

Collaborative learning and dialogue

Many principals ($n = 190$) highlighted the value of collaborative learning and structured dialogues in various guided group activities and exercises, supporting them in refining their approaches, reflecting on different challenges, and confirming the effectiveness of their methods. One principal (1) noted, *'Talking through challenges and hearing others' solutions allowed me to see my methods in a new light, reinforcing my confidence.'*

Most principals ($n = 235$) stated that *networking and building professional relationships* are essential throughout the NPTP. Building networks with other principals was commonly cited as a vital part of the NPTP experience, with a considerable number of principals ($n = 220$) across cohorts mentioning that these relationships offered a source of continuous learning. One principal (4) shared, *'The contacts I made through the programme have become lifelong connections that provide support and insight in our field.'* The broader design aspects of the programme include peer mentoring, structured dialogues and the explicit development of professional networks and relationships during the programme through residential stays and group activities.

Based on the above findings, the principals seem to have improved their recognition and self-perception as leaders. It can be understood as a socially validated aspect of their professional development. The principals shared how they had changed using words such as brave, courageous, strong, stand-up, and fight to describe how they felt or had been empowered by the programme as leaders to be more proactive and more decisive, as illustrated by the extracts below. One principal (6) expressed feeling braver in making changes as a principal: *'Braver in changing. More professional in not being affected as a person.'* Another principal (8) expressed greater confidence and courage in making decisions as a principal: *'It has given me confidence and courage to decide whether to have children needing special support.'* Within the positive comments on the emotions and perceptions of themselves as leaders, there were examples of how the pressures of the leadership role, alongside a greater recognition of what being a principal entailed, led to some feeling less optimistic in some respects:

Since the studies have taken a lot of time and I have not had the opportunity to have a reduction in the position, it has affected me negatively. I have not had time to be as present a school leader as I want and have had to make priorities that did not feel good. (Principal, 3)

On the one hand, feeling less optimistic might create discomfort in the participants. Still, on the other hand, it might create the opportunity for critical reflection and transformational learning in the same way that a more positive emotional response can create. This transformational learning is not necessarily solely located within knowledge domains. One principal (2) expressed how education as a whole contributed to their perspective on leadership, which in turn contributed to her gaining more self-insight: *'Among other things, the education has given me more perspectives on leadership, which in turn has contributed to me gaining more self-insight into how I act as a leader.'* This leads to a transformation as their perceptions of themselves are changing. It is an emotional response: *'I feel more confident'*, which was not explicitly included in the data collection tools but was reported almost without exception as a result of the programme.

Based on the interpretation of the data, initial knowledge input makes principals feel more secure in critical areas of their roles, such as school law and jurisdiction. This new knowledge can be directly applied, leading to recognition by others or self-validation that builds confidence and positive emotions.

Role clarity and understanding of mission

A recurring theme across all cohorts was the clarity gained in understanding the principal's role, mission, and boundaries. This role clarity also seems to have supported the development of their professional confidence.

Defining the professional mission

A quarter of the principals ($n = 63$) clearly expressed that the programme helped them understand the principal's mission, clarifying their responsibilities and reinforcing their professional identity. One principal (7) reflected, *'The training clarified my mission as a principal, which has allowed me to lead with purpose and direction.'* Another principal (10) mentioned, *'I now have a structured approach to my mission, understanding what I am responsible for and where I can make an impact.'*

Role boundaries

A number of principals ($n = 54$) appreciated how the programme delineated their roles and responsibilities, particularly in areas requiring legal and ethical judgment. One principal (9) stated, *'The programme has given me a clear framework that defines my role, which helps me approach decisions with a focused mindset.'* Another principal (8) shared, *'Having clarity on legal responsibilities has grounded my approach to managing the school, making me more confident in my role.'*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the professional confidence of novice principals and how it developed during the mandatory principal training programme in Sweden. The exploration of professional confidence among principals continues to be an underdeveloped area of research focus. While some studies mention 'professional confidence,' it rarely takes centre stage (e.g. Oplatka 2012; Saarukka 2017; Simon, Dole, and Farragher 2019). Yet, it holds potential to contribute to leadership preparation and development (Bush 2018; Crow and Møller 2017; Kilinc and Gümüs 2021). This paper addresses this gap by examining the concept of professional confidence and its implications for leadership preparation and development. The study provides a comprehensive description of how principals experienced their participation in the NPTP and its contributions to their professional confidence. The findings reveal a multidimensional process in which principals' professional confidence develops through knowledge acquisition, leadership application, peer learning, and increased role clarity. Several key results warrant highlighting for further discussion based on the research questions and theoretical framework on role identity theory (Burke and Stets 2022), placing them within broader empirical and theoretical discussion.

Regarding novice principals' participation in the NPTP as contributing to the development of professional confidence, first, *building deeper knowledge and understanding* emphasises the foundational role of programme content in fostering professional confidence. Participants frequently cite the integration of theoretical perspectives and leadership theories with practical applications and connections to their leadership practices. This finding can be understood as a link between competence and knowledge in the profession (Bäck et al. 2017), and forming professional confidence and professional identity (Bandura 1982; Björklund and Svensson 2006; Bush 2018). The finding is consistent with existing research that emphasises the role of knowledge in enabling principals to navigate complex decisions and advocate for their school communities effectively (Browne-Ferrigno 2007; Hayes and Burkett 2021). The emphasis on actionable knowledge aligns with Bandura's (1995) conception of self-efficacy, whereby a sense of competence arises from mastering essential capabilities and applying them in context.

Second, regarding the *application and development of leadership capabilities*, principals reported increased confidence in critical areas such as communication, management, and decision-making. This aligns with Tahir et al.'s (2023) findings, where principals emphasised the need for professional development to enhance leadership confidence. Similarly, Tucker and Dexter (2011) found that leadership case studies bolstered participants' decision-making efficacy and confidence. Equally, Vennebo and Aas (2022) further illustrate how reflective practices tied to daily challenges can turn tensions into learning

opportunities, fostering growth in leadership capabilities. Together, these studies underscore how professional development and training, peer feedback, and reflective practices foster leadership confidence.

Third, *professional learning with professional peers* underscores the relational and social dimensions of developing professional confidence. This finding resonates with the broader literature on professional learning communities, which suggests that peer networks support knowledge sharing, foster emotional resilience, and validate leadership practices (Aas and Vavik 2015; Vennebo and Aas 2022). The participants' accounts of feeling 'less alone' in their roles, and becoming 'braver' as leaders, illustrate the social construction of confidence, whereby trust, feedback, and shared problem-solving reinforce their leadership identity. This finding can be connected to the study by Augustine-Shaw and Liang (2016), which concludes that novice principals can seek advice on aligning goals within trusting relationships. While participants appreciated the collaborative environment, some noted limitations related to group dynamics and logistical challenges, such as pandemic-driven shifts to digital interactions. These reflections underscore the importance of designing peer-learning models that are adaptive and inclusive.

Fourth, the theme of *role clarity and understanding of the mission* further emphasises the importance of defining professional boundaries and responsibilities in fostering professional confidence. Many principals expressed that the programme clarified their mission as principals, supporting them in leading with purpose and direction with greater confidence. This aligns with earlier research emphasising that a clear understanding of role expectations reduces uncertainty and enhances leaders' capacity to act decisively (Crow 2007; Oplatka 2012). The interplay between clarity and confidence is evident in how participants described their ability to connect organisational goals with actionable strategies, thus reinforcing their professional identity and self-efficacy.

Fifth, the descriptive accounts of how NPTP activities fostered confidence also reveal classic psychosocial dynamics: participants frequently cited peers' affirming feedback as pivotal in validating their emerging professional confidence (Bandura 1995). In line with social-cognitive theory, vicarious exposure to peer successes and structured reflection sessions further served as mechanisms through which novices internalised capability beliefs, transforming discrete achievements into a broader sense of professional confidence.

Considering how shifts in novice principals' emerging principal role identity (salience, meaning-making, commitment) contribute to their development of professional confidence in the NPTP, the findings of this study suggest that the NPTP functions as a transformative experience for novice principals, providing both the cognitive tools and the social and emotional support necessary for confidence-building. The recursive interaction between knowledge acquisition, application, peer learning, and role clarity seems to foster a holistic

developmental process, echoing Bandura's (1982) assertion that self-efficacy is constructed through mastery, modelling, and social persuasion. By immersing novices in both theory and practice – through structured and collaborative reflections, peer mentoring dialogues, and practice-based leadership tasks – the NPTP raises the 'principal' identity to the forefront of participants' professional confidence. As Burke and Stets (2022) note, heightened identity *salience* increases the likelihood that individuals will consistently enact and internalise role-consistent behaviours, thereby laying a foundation for lasting professional confidence.

The findings of this study can serve as evidence of playing an essential role in the induction stage for novice principals (Oplatka 2012). Participating in the NPTP involves professional socialisation within the school and roles, which seems to assist principals in developing their leadership capabilities while gaining knowledge and competence, ultimately fostering professional confidence. According to Stets and Burke (2014), such *meaning-making* processes infuse role enactment with purpose, further reinforcing participants' sense of legitimacy and professional confidence. This theme of competence and confidence as foundational elements of leadership is echoed in several studies (e.g. Arar 2018; Tahir et al. 2023).

The NPTP's deliberate cultivation of peer learning, peer mentoring, and peer networks serves as a powerful mechanism of identity verification. When external appraisals – from principal trainers, or professional peers – affirm participants' self-meanings, identity-role discrepancies diminish, and professional confidence is reinforced. This social *commitment*, as described by Burke and Stets (2022), sustains the principal identity and motivates ongoing enactment of leadership behaviours, ensuring that confidence acquired during the programme persists in practice.

Another finding concerns the principals' descriptions of the importance of context-sensitive approaches, which integrate theoretical perspectives with practical applications. This discovery can be connected to various US studies (Orland-Barak and Hasin 2010; Orr 2011), highlighting the significance of practical applications through internships, on-the-job experiences, and mentorships. However, a key distinction is that in Sweden, the NPTP is compulsory for Swedish principals, who must commence the programme within one year of assuming their roles. Despite this difference, there is a common denominator: practice has been incorporated into most preparation programmes as a vital capstone experience that aids aspiring principals in merging theory, research, and practice. Moreover, internship experiences influence candidates' motivation to pursue school leadership and can boost their self-confidence (Orland-Barak and Hasin 2010; Orr 2011). This aligns with Darling-Hammond's research, which identifies a combination of adult learning principles, mentored internships, and a cohort-based model as critical elements contributing to developing confidence and efficacy in new principals.

Limitations of the study

As with all studies, this research has limitations, particularly regarding its context variable scope.

First, the shift from in-person to digital residential sessions may have influenced confidence development. Physical sessions are designed to foster peer interaction and collaborative learning, elements that were diminished in digital formats. Cohorts with substantial digital exposure (approx. 40%), may have faced more challenges building professional networks and developing confidence, while unaffected cohorts (approx. 0% to 8%) likely experienced the programme as intended.

Second, while the findings highlight that peer interactions and group reflections provided necessary social reinforcement for novice principals' emerging confidence, this study did not systematically investigate how peer mentoring influences self-efficacy beliefs, nor how individual characteristics (e.g. experience, personality) shape confidence. Development. These psychosocial dimensions warrant deeper and more prospective study – ideally with data collected longitudinally and methods (e.g. surveys, interviews) designed to unpack peer-mentoring processes and moderator effects on confidence trajectories.

Conclusions

This study concludes that leadership preparation programmes, such as the Swedish NPTP, can offer novice principals in-depth knowledge about professional confidence. By integrating theoretical knowledge, practical application connected to the principals' leadership practices, peer learning, and role clarity, the programme supports a developmental process that empowers principals to navigate the complexities of their roles with greater professional confidence. The findings indicate that leadership training should adopt a holistic approach, addressing cognitive and relational dimensions of professional development. Its contribution centres on the role of programme design in providing opportunities and spaces for personal and professional growth, resulting in increased professional confidence in this study. By advancing our understanding of this construct and its development, this study contributes to the ongoing effort to enhance the quality and impact of educational leadership worldwide. There is potential for other educational systems and policymakers to draw insights from its structured approach to leadership development.

The findings have several implications for designing and implementing leadership preparation programmes. Notably, the structured integration of theory and practice, as illustrated by the NPTP, emerges as a significant factor in fostering professional confidence among participants. Further research should explore how professional confidence develops across cultural and institutional settings. Longitudinal studies could provide a deeper understanding of

how initial training influences long-term leadership trajectories. Additionally, the construct of professional confidence itself warrants further exploration, especially its relationship with other constructs, such as resilience, emotional intelligence, and organisational outcomes, to refine its definition and operationalisation in educational leadership.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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