What Might Educational Leadership Mean in the 21st Century?

A phenomenomenographic study
Anduena Ballo

ABSTRACT

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Understanding what educational leadership means remains a challenge for researchers and practitioners despite an extant body of literature focused on this field. This study investigates conceptions of educational leadership among graduates of the Master's Degree Programme in Educational Leadership (MPEL), University of Jyväskylä (JYU). The aim of this study is to qualitatively illuminate distinct ways the participants conceptualize educational leadership.

This study interprets the conceptions of educational leadership based on a framework developed to inform educational leadership scholarship theory and practice (Bush, 2011; English, 2003; Gronn, 1999; Gunter, 2001; Harris & Jones 2016; Heck & Hallinger 2005; Northouse, 2016). This qualitative empirical study uses phenomenography for the methodological framing and data analysis of eleven semi-structured interviews of graduates from MPEL Programme.

The analysis illuminates five distinct categories of description that reflect the participants' conceptions of educational leadership. The participants conceptualize educational leadership as (1) supporting students, (2) coordinating teachers, (3) guiding a group of people, (4) educating young generations, and (5) influencing citizens.

This study concludes that educational leadership entails a far broader context than school leadership, and not only limited to school settings. Anyone involved in educational leadership can be perceived as an educational leader. This study closes with a discussion on the importance of understanding conceptual-level variation of educational leadership, which has clear implications in the scholarship focused in this field.

Keywords: *educational leadership, phenomenography, participants' conceptions, educational leader.*

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ABBREVIATIONS

EA	Educational Administration
EL	Educational Leadership
EM	Educational Management
JYU	University of Jyväskylä
MPEL	Master´s Degree Programe in Educational Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Despite a compelling interest in understanding leadership and considerable body of research, the phenomenon remains, in large part "a theoretical enigma and paradox" (Allix & Gronn, 2005). The confusion over understanding leadership has raised many questions like if "leadership refers to anything real at all, and whether it is even fruitful to entertain such a notion" (Allix & Gronn, 2005). Over the last decades, the systemic investigation of leadership has acquired a privileged status and gained attention of the researchers worldwide. However, the conceptual vagueness of leadership particularly in the light of what educational leadership means, reveals a core challenge to those researching and practicing it (Northouse, 2016).

At the heart of this confusion is the tendency to conceive leadership as a generic concept, absent concern for purpose (Stack et al., 2006). Since little distinction is made between educational leadership and of other forms of leadership for example, military, business or political leadership, this leads by default to conversations about educational leadership purposes and ends (Bush, 2007; Stack et al., 2006; Wraga, 2004). On this point, Gunter (2004) states that "educational leadership focuses on the education system, is about education, is integral to learning processes and outcomes, and is of itself educative".

The term educational leadership is also often used for college and university programs studies, for preparing and training future school leaders and administrators. These programs offering a broad range of programs, specialist degrees and trainings are "a growing international phenomenon" (Sorenson, 2002). Over the last decades the development and effectives of educational leadership programs has been questioned and criticized. Murphy (2005) states that "prospective school leaders have been largely miseducated especially in research universities, which have constructed their programs with raw materials acquired from the warehouse of academe marginalizing practice". In addition, Stack et al. (2006) after examining twelve graduate educational leadership programs asserted that they have not afforded enough

attention to the epistemic facets of educational leadership. Moreover, Jackson & Kelley (2002) point out a number of deficiencies in preparation programs including the lack of the definition of educational leadership.

Educational leadership studies grounded mainly in social sciences, have been explored using different qualitative and quantitative research methods placed in, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, case studies and naturalistic inquiry (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Heck & Hallinger, 2005). There is an increasing interest in using phenomenography, as a research method to explore how educational leadership is conceived (Blakesley, 2011; Fairholm, 2003; MacGillivray, 2010; Hsieh & Shen, 1998; Tian, 2015; Tight, 2017) but still the investigation of this concept particularly in an international education context, it is considered underdeveloped in the literature (Wang, 2007).

The aim of this study is to investigate how graduates from the Master Degree in Educational Leadership conceptualize educational leadership, and the aspects that differentiate varying ways of conceptualizing educational leadership phenomenon. The goal of this research is to provide the bases for understanding the different ways participants think about educational leadership. By sharing the findings of this research it is hoped that the providers of the curriculum can better adjust the teaching content of specialization courses and programs, based on the wide range of educational leadership conceptions that students might have.

The research design of this qualitative study is based on phenomenographic approach. Chapter 1 presents, a literature review of educational leadership. Chapter 2 presents, the research design and the framework while Chapter 3 unpacks and details, the methodological aspects of implementation of the study. Chapter 4 presents central, the results in terms of categories of description and the relation between them. Chapter 5 presents, the discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature and previous studies, and recommendations. Finally, chapter 6 presents, study limitations, further implications and future research.

1 UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

1.1 The historical context of educational leadership

Educational leadership is embedded in the field of educational administration, as a field of study concerned with management and operation of educational organizations (Bush, 1999). Over the last five decades the labels used to define this field have shifted from "educational administration" to "educational management", and, more recently, to "educational leadership" (Gunter, 2004; Eacott, 2015). Labeling the field has its own importance, purposes and functions. Knowing about the field knowledge claims, giving clarity to the meaning which facilitates the understanding, are means by which field members can control their practice and mold their professional identities (Gunter, 2004; Oplatka, 2009). Labeling holds also the power of constituting a political process, in which agency interplays with social, economic and cultural structures where labeling takes place (Gunter, 2004). The next sections and subsections describe chronologically the historical development of educational leadership over a century and the relation with leadership, management and administration in education.

1.1.1 The 1920-1930s: the period of educational administration for school organization

The idea of educational administration dominated during the 1920s and 1930s was systematic, scientific management practice and resulted in school efficacy and achievement of human capital (Brooks & Miles, 2006). In this period, educational leaders seen as administrators were primarily concerned with promoting spiritual values and maintaining social connections within a school community (Stanford-Blair & Dickmann, 2005). Educators and administrators as "scientific managers" were required to adhere to technical and

organizational principals to manage efficient and productive schools and schools systems (Beck & Murphy, 1993). Organization and supervision of employees were seen as critical components of educational administration (English, 2003). During this period, university-based educators contributed to the development of educational administration as a professional occupation, by creating degree programs and special courses of study to prepare educational administrators (Gunter, 2001).

1.1.2 The 40s-50s: the period of "theory movement" in educational administration

World War II had an important effect on the orientation of educational administration, and principals were expected to be leaders on the war front and the home front (Brooks & Miles, 2006). Educational administrators concerned with personnel development were expected to provide democratic leadership, enabling students and teachers to engage in a productive way of life (Brooks & Miles, 2006). The post–World War II period through the 1950s, saw the involvement of various stakeholders in decision-making processes for promoting a positive image for schools and school system (Gunter, 2001). In that period "theory movement" defined the knowledge in educational administration, and helped the field gain academic legitimacy as an area of study underpinned by scientific principles (Oplatka, 2009). Proponents of the administrative theory movement advocated that educational administrators seen as "theory guided administrators", should test theories like researchers in other scientific disciplines such as psychological, sociological, and business, in order to inform action and decisions in educational institutions (Beck & Murphy, 1993).

1.1.3 The 60s-70s: the period of educational management as a form of activity and action in school organization.

During 1960s and 1970, the field sought to develop the workings of educational organization, and the school "as business" became popular (Gunter 2004). Educational management was mainly concerned to describe, understand and theorize strategic and operational matters regarding the educational organizations (Brooks & Miles, 2006). Management was seen as a superior form of activity and action, embracing problem solving strategies within educational institutions (Brooks & Miles, 2006). The headmaster position in the 60s is described as "bureaucratic administrator", in the sense of "policy maker" regarding the curriculum and pedagogy and "policy taker "regarding the decisions on the local and national resources (Gunter 2004; Beck & Murphy, 1993). By mid 70s, headmasters were describing their professional practice in management terms to deliver accountability and responsibility and the headmaster as "chief executive" was in ascendency (Gunter, 2001). In that period the conception of educational administrator as "CEO" and headmaster had a dual role model using administration and management interchangeable (Brooks & Miles, 2006).

In the 1970s, "effective school" movement was launched with dual concern on equity and effectiveness, and principals seen as "humanistic facilitator" were also expected to offer meaningful educational experiences to students, teachers, staff, and community members (Gunter 2004; Oplatka, 2009; Beck & Murphy, 1993). In addition, school administrators became on-site researchers as quantitative and empirical research dominated discussions of the principal's work (Brooks & Miles, 2006). The response from field members in universities and polytechnics was to adopt business management, and the traditional postgraduate courses in educational administration in the universities gradually came into line (Gunter 2004). According to Oplatka (2009) in that period many universities US, UK and later in other western countries established graduate programs in Educational Administration and Management, and research grew in volume and quality.

1.1.4 The 80s-90s: the shift from educational management to educational leadership

The 1980s and 1990s, saw an upsurge of perspectives to solve various problems associated with educational inequity and poor student achievement, leading to new educational reforms and legislation (Brooks & Miles, 2006). As a result of these expectations, educational managers as leaders balanced many roles, including interpersonal facilitator, information manager, and decision maker (Gunter 2001). During the 1990, marketing, strategic planning, quality underpin the growth of leadership in educational settings, particularly performance leadership in schools (Gunter, 2004).

The head master was conceptualised as an "instructional leader" with a vision and mission to bring about school improvement, and able to commit the school workforce and the community under the label of "empowerment" (Gunter 2004; Beck & Murphy, 1993). Teachers, pupils, parents, and communities considered as stakeholders rather than as citizens, were brought into the focus of headmaster as "organizational leader" (Brooks & Miles, 2006). The type of leadership created in this period is separated from other activity that is labelled as "management", and it is organisational leadership in educational settings rather than educational leadership (Gunter, 2001). In this period leadership is defined around notions of controlling uncertainty through charismatic behaviours and strategic tasks, while management is about system maintenance (Gunter 2001).

1.1.5 The 21st century: New approaches to educational leadership

By the turn of the century, educational leaders were questioning whether there really was a field at all, suggesting that fields of educational administration and management were only loosely connected (Brooks & Miles, 2006). A major development was an approach which emphasized the linkage of management support with the role of the educational leader for school transformation (Marsh, 1997). The "accountability movement" at the turn of the 21st century

focus on students' learning outcomes and "leadership for learning" became a new paradigm for 21st century school leadership (Hallinger, 2012).

According to Reeves (2011) being an educational leader of the 21st century is not a requirement but a necessity to ensure 21st century teaching and learning. For Brooks & Normore (2015) a contemporary educational leader must develop "glocal" literacy in many specific knowledge domains such as political, economic, pedagogical, moral, spiritual and organizational literacy. Townsend (2011), claim that the understanding of the importance of educational leadership in 21st century as a means of higher level of student achievement has drastically changed. Moreover, Gronn (2012) evidences the challenge of leading a school in 21st century as "greedy work, all consuming, demanding unrelenting peak performance from super leaders and no longer a sustainable notion". In particular, in this period the emphasis is on how "leadership is needed for problems that do not have easy answers" and leadership in education is often associated with leaders who can bring change (Fullan, 2001).

1.2 Conceptualizing educational leadership

1.2.1 Educational leadership and leadership

Leadership studies focused on explaining conceptions, approaches, theories, styles, models are very useful and give a great contribution to understand educational leadership (Northouse, 2016). A Google search on leadership books, done by Snook, Nohria, & Khurana in 2012, returned in more than 84 million results. In the past 50 years, as many as 65 different classification systems have been developed to define the dimensions of leadership (Fleishman et al., 1991). According to Rhode & Packel (2011) there are some 1500 definitions of leadership and around 40 theories. Almost 50 years ago, Stogdill (1974) states that "there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept". For example, Northouse (2018), gives six main dimensions defining leadership: (1) as a trait – all of us are born

with traits that can have positive impact on leadership, (2) as an ability-natural, acquired or developed to lead, (3) as a skill- competencies that can be developed and learn to accomplish tasks effectively, (4) as a behavior - acting toward others in various situations, (5) as a relationship - an interactive event centered on the communication and collaboration between leaders and followers, (6) and as an influence process - as leaders affect followers to achieve a common goal. On this strand, Bass & Bass (2008) argue that the most common definitions of leadership tend to concentrate on: (1) the leader as a person, (2) a leader´s behavior, (3) a leader´s effects, (4) the interaction process between the leader and the led (2008). Yulk (2002) emphasizing the collective level of leadership states that, "most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person [or group] over other people [or groups] to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organisation". It seems that Burns´s (1978) definition of leadership, might be one of the most inclusive of most of the above dimensions:

"Leadership is the reciprocal process of mobilizing by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers" (p. 425).

Besides the great volume of leadership studies and the variety of definitions, there is no consensus on a common definition of leadership (Bush, 2008; Northouse 2016; Yukl, 2002). It is difficult to define leadership, and it will continue to have different meanings for different people (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Rost, 1991). According to Bolden (2004), the difficulty of defining and understanding leadership lies in many levels, fistly, it is open to subjective interpretation based on the experience and learning and this is difficult to capture in a single definition and secondly, it is strongly influenced by one's

theoretical stance. The difficulty of conceptual vagueness regarding leadership most probably is best identified by Allix and Gronn (2005):

"Despite a long history of interest and fascination, and a relatively shorter history of systematic investigation, the phenomenon that is referred to as 'leadership' remains in large part a theoretical enigma and paradox... In recent years, doubts concerning the integrity of the concept have raised the question of whether leadership refers to anything real at all, and whether it is even fruitful to entertain such a notion. (pp. 181-182) ".

This confusion and vagueness pose considerable challenges to educational leadership as a field of study and it is reflected as well in conceptualizing educational leadership. On this point, English (2003) describes educational leadership a field marked by "frailties, complexities, contra dictions, and discontinuities". Rayner & Gunter (2005), describe it as "an abstraction of propositions and required behaviours, often derived from non-educational settings by those at a distance from where this leadership is practiced". The inability to define educational leadership is further reinforced by the findings of the Fostering Tomorrow's Educational Leaders report (Stack et al., 2006) which concluded:

"Despite much promotional activity, there is no widely accepted definition of educational leadership and no consensus on how to best develop it or foster it. Our participants disagreed substantively about what leadership means and how it is related to management or administration".

With respect to the study of educational leadership, Stack & Mazawi (2009) point to "a striking contradiction that students of educational leadership often face: the conceptual and theoretical confusion over what educational leadership stands for". The contradiction is further exacerbated by the fact that practitioners construct, determine, regulate and define no standardized formats of educational leadership in different contexts.

Helen Gunter (2001) in her work states that "leadership territory is an arena of struggle in which researchers, writers, policy makers and practitioners take up or present positions regarding the theory and practice of educational leadership". Gunter (2001) argues that leadership in education studies can be seen as the process and the product by which powerful groups are able to control and sustain their interest pointing out the significant political position of knowers in the construction of knowledge. For the last five decades there has been an increasing interest in leadership models in educational research. The most influential include distributed leadership, instructional leadership, teacher leadership and transformational leadership, and there is an increasing focus on the effects of leaders on organizational behaviours and student achievement (Gumus et al., 2018).

Figure 1. Development of leadership theories through history
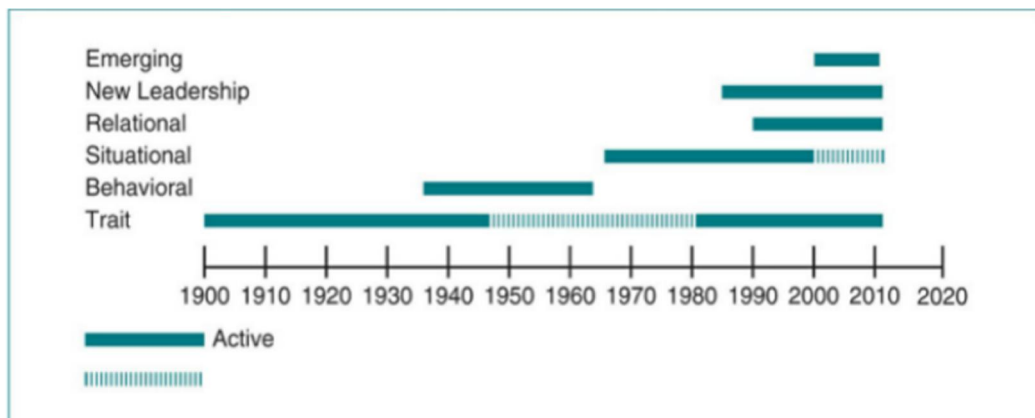
Source: Adapted from Antonakis, J., Cianciolo, A. T., & Sternberg, R. J. (Eds.). (2004). The nature of leadership. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 7.

1.2.2 Educational leadership and educational management

Educational management based on economics, sociology, political science and management is a field of study and practice concerned with operation of educational organization (Bush, 2003). Educational management was derived from management principles applied to industry and commerce in the US, and then have been developed in the educational context to meet the requirements

of educational organizations (Bush, 2003). The key debate over the years has been whether educational leadership is a distinct field or simply a branch of management (Bush, 2007).

Bolam (1999) differentiates management from educational leadership "as an executive function for carrying our agreed policy instead educational leadership has at its core the responsibility for policy formulation and where appropriate organizational transformation". Educational management is concerned with internal operations of educational organizations and their relationships delineating in this way the boundaries of educational management (Bolam, 1999). On this, Connolly, James, & Fertig (2017) argue that educational leadership as "influencing others" and educational management as "carrying a delegated responsibility" are conceptually different.

Cuban (1988) provides a clear distinction between these concepts linking leadership with "change" and management as "maintenance activity" stressing the importance of both dimensions in an organization. Similarly, Northouse (2016) draws a distinction in functions, since management seeks order and stability while leadership seeks change and movement. Within the same strand Day, Harris & Hadfield (2001) claim that management is linked to "systems" and "paper" and leadership is perceived as development of people. Bush (2003) links leadership to values or purpose and management to implementation or technical issues. Furthermore, Fidler (1997) gives a clear distinction as well between leadership and management in respect of motivating people and giving a sense of purpose to the organization. Even though leadership and management concepts overlap all the time they both are perceived as important in developing and maintaining successful schools and education systems (Bush, 2007).

Beside the scholars who support the distinction between these concepts there is another strand of opinions that characterize similarities between leadership and management as both processes involve influencing people toward goal accomplishment (Northouse, 2016). On this point, Leithwood et al., 1999, notice that in everyday practice principals do not make a

difference between leading and managing "since they are simply carrying out their work on behalf of the school". Bush (2003) argues that educational leadership has to be centrally concerned with the purpose and aims of education, which provides crucial direction for school management. The distinction between leading and management remains subject of continuing debate. Giving equal prominence to leadership and management for educational organizations to operate effectively and achieve their objectives remains vital (Bush, 2003).

1.2.3   Educational administration

Educational administration rooted in the 'theory moment' of the 1960's uses system theory as a framework of educational administration. Educational organizations such as schools were conceived as "systems" which exhibit transformational processes, able to self-correct toward an equilibrium (Evers & Lakomski, 2001; Bates, 1980). Educational administration was developed as an applied field based on the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics and politics, but the focus is on administration of institutions designed to foster teaching and learning (Evers & Lakomski, 2001).

Since the establishment of the educational administration as a field of study, scholars in the field have agreed on the absence of clear boundaries of cumulative knowledge base, coherent conceptual unity and consensus over the theoretical issues in the field (Oplatka & Addi-Raccah, 2009). According to Bates (1987) educational administration as a field of theory and research has never been regarded with a "high status in the academic community" because of its practical nature of the activity, lack of consensus over theoretical issues, low level of research methodology and political nature of the field.

Wang & Bowers (2016) study indicates that educational administration is a field that interacts with the sub-fields of education such as teacher education with other disciplines such as economics, human resources, sociology, and psychology, and the research internationally. Similarly,

Willower (2001) argues that educational administration is a field of many specializations in different areas such as politics, organizational studies, school effectiveness, leadership and supervision, human resource management and equity issues. Furthermore, Bates (1987) considers EA as "an umbrella term that covers a multitude of ideas and activities representing considerable difference of views between various groups within the profession". According to Bates (1987) educational administration as a field of theory and research has never held s particular "high status in the academic community" regarding the practical nature of the activity, lack of consensus over theoretical issues, low level of research methodology and political nature of the field.

In the 90′ increased attention to effective leadership for school improvement has led many school leaders to perceive a dilemma; whether to focus on leading as professionals or being an administrator bureaucrat concentrating on technical and administrative workload of school activities (Dimmock, 1999). Over the confusion of school leaders in deciding the balance between them Dimmock (1999) make a distinction between "leadership" as tasks to improve staff , students and school performance, "management" as routine maintenance of present operations and "administration" as lower duties.

Even though the aim of educational administration as a field of study is to transmit and develop theoretically grounded knowledge to inform the practice of educational organizations, many scholars have asked the field if making divisions between leadership, management and administration is helpful for practice and analysis (Gronn, 2003; Gorard, 2005; Oplatka & Addi-Raccah, 2009).

1.3 Framing educational leadership

1.3.1 School leadership

Educational leadership often referred as "school leadership" can be used to describe those who have a formal positions in an organisational hierarchy, or to

describe the practice of leading in an educational institution (Connolly et al., 2017). On this, Gunter (2004) states that educational leadership "is less about the "must" of being a leader and more about doing, leading and experiencing leadership". Moreover, Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins (2008) claim "School leadership is second only to classroom teaching, as an influence on pupil learning.

The main actors in school leadership are school leaders who are held accountable for student outcomes but their leadership have no direct effect on students' outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; 1998, Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). Ross & Gray (2006) assessed in their study that principals' leadership influence indirectly student achievements through teachers. Principals should enhance teachers' capacity, beliefs and commitment and create the organizational conditions to improve teaching and learning in school (Ross & Gray, 2006. Similarly, Thompson (2017) asserted that teachers expectation over their principalship such as, recognition of their commitment, giving, participation in decision making, shared leadership and openness to criticism are essential for effective school leadership. Given their unique position to influence and create a positive teaching and learning environment, principals are considered responsible for teacher's professional development. Principals as an instructional leader should involve teachers in the design, content, delivery and the assessment of professional development outcomes (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000).

Many scholars tend to encompass teachers, community groups and site based teams activities in school leadership but mainly it refers to the work of principals (Kafka, 2009). School principals are required to fill multiple roles in a school system such as creators of culture, decision makers, and change agents but communication remains an effective tool for successful leaders to facilitate effective teaching and learning to enhance student achievement (Ärlestig, 2007) Educational leaders find themselves in, being caught up with administration and management rather than leadership, and often just trying to keep up with

bureaucratic demands (Blakesley 2011). Even though school principal is considered a key factor in school performance the quality of principalship for school effectiveness has been questioned (Fullan, 2014).

1.3.2 Teachers' leadership

Teacher leadership hold a central position in school operations, and core functions like teaching and learning (York-Barr & Duke,2004). According to York-Barr & Duke (2004) teachers' leadership is "the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement". In addition, Poekert (2012) argue that teacher leadership is centered on a vision of leadership built on influence and interaction, rather than power and authority.

According to York-Barr & Duke (2004) teachers' leadership varies from leadership to classroom positions assuming a variety of formal positions such as, department heads, curriculum specialists or mentors. Teachers' informal leadership is positioned when coaching peers, encouraging parent participation, collaborating with colleagues in teams, modeling reflective practice, or articulating a vision for improvement (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Nichols (2011) argues that the central mission of teachers is to generate and disseminate knowledge. Teacher's leadership especially in the classroom is focused on helping and supporting students to gain this knowledge using students' abilities to achieve their goals and purposes. Serving as a leader emphasizes leaders as "servants", whose focus is on their followers' needs, helping them become more autonomous, knowledgeable, and servants themselves (Nichols, 2011). A common theme in the literature is that as of today teacher leadership is confined to the classroom boundaries, and should be shifted not only to school level by taking on more influential roles beyond the school (Watt, Huerta & Mills, 2010; Donghai & Jianping, 2013).

1.3.3 Educational leadership beyond school leadership

Duke & Tenuto (2020) in their study found that is school leaders are responsible for creating communities to support students beyond school experience. Caring of the teachers as "necessary conduits" to the students means sharing civic and social justice responsibility to help and empower students to become better citizens beyond their school doors, preparing in this way students to become "active citizens and contributors to a democratic society" (Tenuto, 2014).

Educational leadership is not only needed within an organizational setting is also needed also within families (Galbraith & Schvaneveldt, 2005). Parents are largely responsible for individual and the whole family growth and for this there is a need for leadership responsibilities related to family life. Parents as leaders are needed to have effective outcomes for their children and the society (Galbraith & Schvaneveldt, 2005). According to Jeynes (2018) if school leaders support parental – involvement and - engagement work together students education outcomes are greatly enhanced.

1.3.4 Some issues on the conceptualization of educational leadership

My review of literature relevant to educational leadership raises key challenges related to conceptualization.Firstly, educational leadership as a relatively novel concept emerged in late 90's is strictly related to administration and management but there is a lack of clarity in the way it is described and used both practically and theoretically. After an accurate look of the historical development of educational leadership it seems more a "mutation" of management and organizational leadership in educational settings than educational leadership. Gunter addresses (2004) this issues with not only with the change of label from educational administration and management to leadership, but also with shift to the type of activities and actions of an educational leader. For example, the educational leader identified with a "bureaucratic administrator", a "CEO" and "instructional leader" have shifted

in different periods depending on changes in responsibility or accountability but being identified as an educational leader still remains unclear.

Secondly, the literature review shows that the conceptualization of educational leadership overlaps with leadership in general terms and this often leads to the confusion over the meaning of both. On the one hand, educational leadership is conceptualized as leadership, similar to any other field, but absent of a specific concern regarding education. On the other hand, leadership theories, models and styles play a significant role in explaining the role of leadership in the education context. On this point, Bush (2003) speculates to what extent educational leadership should be regarded as simply another field for the application of general principles of leadership, management and administration or be seen as a separate discipline with its own body of knowledge.

Thirdly, the confusion over the variety of definitions and vagueness over the conceptualization of leadership it is also reflected within educational leadership. Many studies attempting to conceptualize educational leadership show an inability to articulate a definition and a difficulty of describing educational leadership, as a phenomenon.

Finally, educational leadership often is referred as school leadership emphasizing the process of leading an educational organization and the role of formal positions within the school. Less importance is given to the educational leadership beyond the school settings and informal educational leaders' role which frame the understanding of educational leadership as well. Gunter (2001) argues that educational leadership is more than performance leadership in schools and it requires the field members to articulate their goals and position themselves to be in control of practice and knowledge production in the field. In the end, the conceptualization of educational leadership, across the literature, displays a variety of conceptualizations, but interrelation with the leadership, management, administration and school leadership remains blurry.

2   RESEARCH DESIGN

The following sections of this study cover the theoretical framework including the research approach underpinning phenomenographic research. The research design and methodology of this study are based on theoretical foundation of phenomenography, as a qualitative research approach developed mainly within the discipline of Education (Svensson, 1997). Denzin & Lincoln (2011) describe qualitative research as brigolage, "a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation" which result in an emergent construction of different tools, methods and techniques in implementing a research process (p.47). This study draws on the phases of a qualitative research based on theoretical assumptions and the research approach of phenomenography. The phases of this qualitative phenomenographic study are reduced in Figure.1

Phase 1
- The researcher as a subject
- ernolled in the MPEL brings the perspective of former students in MPEL

Phase 2
- Theoretical assumptions
- Phenomenography

Phase 3
- Research approach/method
- Phenomenography

Phase 4
- Data collection method
- Individual interviews

Phase 5
- Interpretation and evaluation of the study
- Trustworthiness
- reliablity and validity (communicative and pragmatic) of the research process

Figure 1. Research overview (adapted from Denzin and Lincoln 2011, p. 12)

2.1 The researcher

The researcher of this study, an international student enrolled in the MPEL, structured the research design with the intention of exploring students´ conceptualization of educational leadership. Sharing the same experience as a student in the same MA programme, the researcher is aware of subjective evidence of individual views, but this experience is essential to minimize the "distance" or "objective separateness" between the researcher and those being researched (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This experience helps the researcher of this study to be close as possible to the participants, and able to understand what they were experiencing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher brings value to this study based on interest to investigate and understand more in depth educational leadership phenomenon, and opens up a discussion about the conceptualization of educational leadership as a field of practice, research and scholarship (Lingard & Christie, 2003). The following sections aid to understand phase 2 and 3 of this study providing the theoretical foundations of the research approach of phenomenography.

2.2 Phenomenomenography

Phenomenography is a recent *research tradition*, developed mainly within the discipline of Education (Svensson, 1997). More specifically, it was elaborated as an empirical qualitative method, in response to the quantitative research methods in education (Sandbergh, 1997; Svensson, 1997; Uljens, 1996). The word phenomenography, has its etymological roots in Greek phainomenon (appearance) and graphein (description), rendering phenomenography, a description of appearances (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997). The term phenomenograhy used for the first time by Ference Marton in 1981, refers to a *research programme* carried out to *describe people's conceptions,* but it has also the characteristic of a *research method* derived from the general character of the phenomena of the conceptions (Svensson, 1997).

Marton (1992) describes phenomenography as a "research method designed to describe the qualitatively different ways in which a phenomenon is experienced, conceptualized, or understood, based on an analysis of accounts of experiences as they are formed in descriptions". The focus on description of the conceptions to study various phenomena gives to phenomenography the characteristics of a *research tool* related to a specific field of study (Svensson, 1997). Therefore, phenomenographic research represents also the characteristics of a *research orientation,* by delimitation of an aim in relation to a concept as an object (Svensson, 1997). Moreover, phenomenography can be seen as a *research approach* since the emphasis is on creating methods adapted to the objects of conceptions, restricted to ways of the descriptions of the conceptions (Svensson, 1997; Akerlind, 2012). Furthermore, Marton calls phenomenography a *research specialization* as a combination of orientation and approach for identifying and describing qualitative variation in individuals' experiences of their reality (Marton, 1981; 1986).

Svennson (1997) argues that it is appropriate to look at phenomenography as a *research methodology* in line with contextual analysis aiming at categories of description, the open *explorative* form of data collection and the *interpretative* character of the data analysis. Although these characteristics might be seen as general how to carry out research, within phenomenography are seen as motivated by the specific aim of describing conceptions (Svensson, 1997). As such, phenomenography fundamentally rooted in general scientific tradition for its theoretical foundation makes its own ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions.

2.3 Theoretical foundations of phenomenography

Phenomenography has its origin in empirical and pragmatic research and such, is not a system of philosophical assumptions and thesis or derived from such a system (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Sandbergh 1997; Åkerlind, 2005). From this perspective, metaphysical beliefs and ideas about the nature of reality and the

nature of knowledge do not come first (Svensson, 1997). What come first in phenomenography are the assumptions related to the specific character of the empirical research, based on the present understanding of the research objects rather than on beliefs concerning the unknown (Svensson, 1997).

It has been claimed that phenomenography represents a non-dualist position with respect to the ontological perspective, where the person and the world are considered inseparable, and experience and thoughts are not distinguished (Bowden, 2005; Marton, 2000; Svensson, 1997; Uljens 1996). Since there is no distinction between mind and reality, the reality is considered to exist through the way in which a person conceives by experiencing it (Uljens, 1996; Bowden 2005). The only reality is the one that is experienced and lies in the whole range of individual experience (Uljens, 1996; Marton & Booth, 1997). This means that phenomenography does not separate what is perceived, conceived and experienced from the experience per se (Marton, 1981).

The most fundamental assumption about phenomenography concerns the nature of concepts, which are closely related to assumptions about the nature of knowledge and thinking (Svensson, 1997; Uljens, 1996). According to Svensson (1997) knowledge is assumed to be based on thinking, and created through human thinking and human activity. Conceptions are dependent both on human activity and external reality to any individual, as such knowledge and conceptions have a relational nature (Svensson, 1997). The view of knowledge created through thinking about external reality is expected to vary upon thinking, and reality and it cannot expected to be absolutely true in any case (Svensson, 1997). In this sense, conceptions as central form of scientific knowledge, vary and are true only in a relative sense (Uljens, 1996).

In phenomenography ontological assumptions about the research object of conception has the character of knowledge, in this case they also become epistemological in a general sense (Svensson, 1997). The assumptions about the object of research are aimed and achieved in relation to the research results (Svensson, 1997). The object of phenomenographic research is the relation between the subject and the phenomenon as experienced by individuals than

rather than the phenomenon per se (Bowden, 2005). The focus of the research is on the researcher trying to find out the object of the study, which is the relation between the subjects and the phenomenon as depicted in Figure 1.
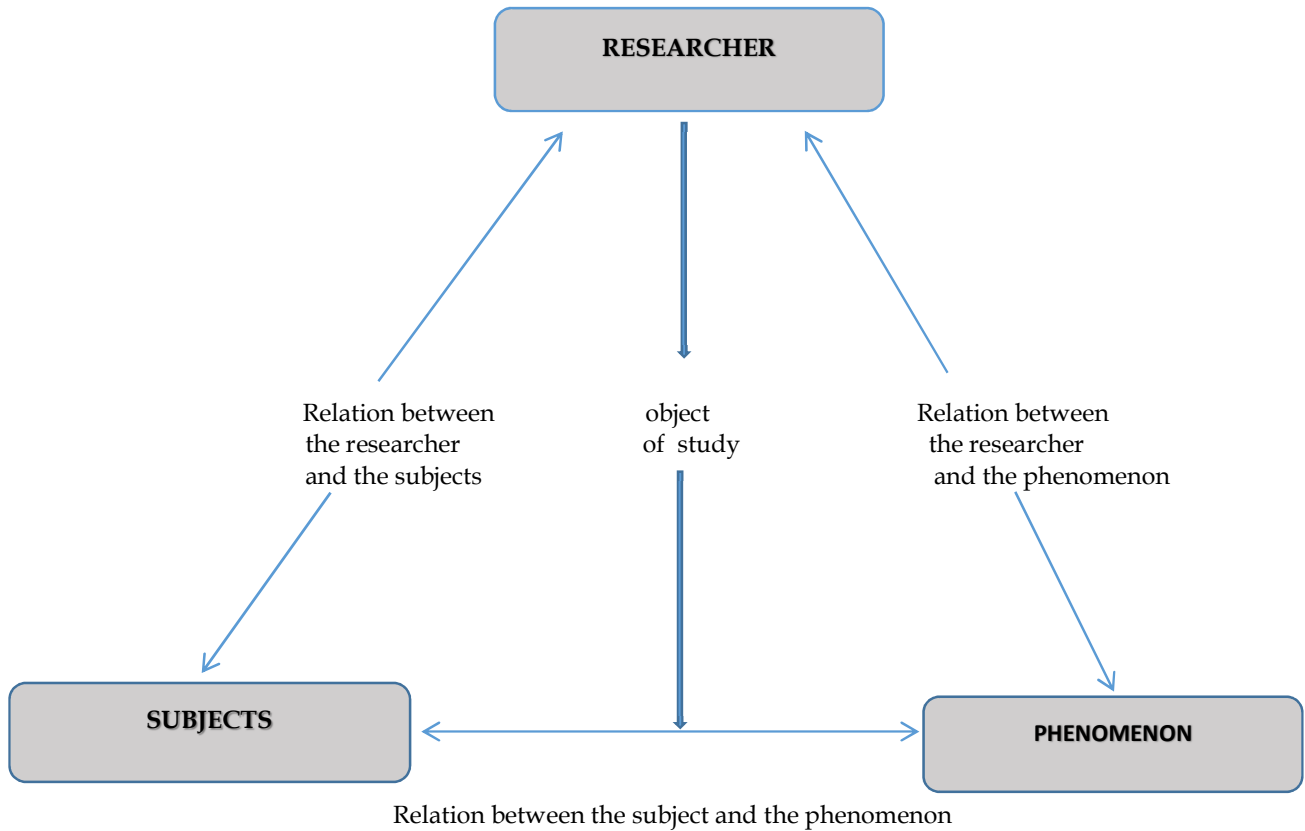
Figure 3. Phenomenographic relationality (based on Bowden, 2005, p.13)

The aim of phenomenographic research is the description of people's experience of various aspects of the world (Marton, 1981). The emphasis is on the description of the meaning of objects and similarities and differences of meaning between objects and between concepts (Svensson, 1997). The assumptions about the object of research are achieved in relation to the research results, in the form of categories of description (Svensson, 1997). The category is a description is the common meaning of the meanings based on comparison, and grouping of data representing forms of expressing the conceptions (Sandberg, 1997).

Since some of the ontological and epistemological assumptions are quite general in character, also the methodological tend to have some generality regarding the explorative character of the data collection, and the contextual analytic character of the data analysis (Svensson, 1997). The explorative character of data collection is related to the relational character of conceptions and the uncertainty of this relationship (Svensson, 1997). For this purpose, an interview becomes focused on specific parts expressing conceptions of objects, and the exploration concerns the interviewee delimitation and experienced meaning of these objects (Svensson, 1997).

The contextual analysis is an aggregation of specific data with the given interpretations, the delimitation of data related to each other referring to parts of the same phenomena (Svensson, 1997). In differentiating significant parts of the data, the comparison is important to make up a whole description and summarize it in the form of a category (Svensson, 1997. The aim is to find the relation of expressing the same conceptions in many different ways and different conceptions expressed in terms of a category and categories in general, while finding the characteristics of structure and contents together (Sandberg, 1997).

3   IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

The implementation of this study and the following subchapters and sections provide the necessary insights to both the research itself, as well as justifying the research design presented in the previous chapter. The next sections address the background of the study, the rationale and the significance, aims and objectives of this study. Details about the participant and research process, including data collection and data analysis, are also explained in the following sections. This chapter ends, with the procedures and practices implemented to assure sense-making data analysis, resulting in a trustworthy and valid, high-quality and ethically responsible discussion chapter.

3.1   Research background

The two-year Master's Degree Programme in Educational Leadership (120ECTS) was offered by Institute of Educational Leadership, Faculty of Education and Psychology, at the University of Jyväskylä from 2007 until 2017. The programme provided theoretical knowledge and practical skills required in the complex field of educational leadership in different settings (University of Jyväskylä, n.d.a; n.d.b, p.5; 2009, p.5; 2010,). The Master Degree programme aiming to develop internationally oriented professionals and experts in the field of education and educational leadership was offered for both domestic and international students (University of Jyväskylä, n.d.a; n.d.b, p.5; 2009, p.5; 2010). The purpose of this programme, was to build an international learning environment, utilizing the best possible resources of theoretical knowledge and practical skills integrated with key elements of educational administration and leadership (University of Jyväskylä, 2014, p.4).

In ten years period 2007-2017, the curricula for advanced and specialization studies has been pertaining changes related to leadership approaches. For example, the curricula of 2007-2014 offered advanced and optional studies in dimensions of leadership in organizations, educational administration and

educational reform in an international context (University of Jyväskylä, n.d.a; n.d.b, p.9; 2009, p.10-11; 2010, p.10-11; 2012). The new programme structure of 2014-2017 amended by the Faculty of Education in March 2015, included advanced studies in educational leadership and management and specialization studies in areas such as educational leadership, early childhood education, guidance and counseling, pedagogical studies, special needs and adult education (University of Jyväskylä, 2014, p.13-15). This programme emphasized peer learning through the interactions between students coming from different professional and cultural backgrounds (University of Jyväskylä, n.d.a; n.d.b, p.4; 2009, p.4; 2010, p.4).

The graduates of this international programme come from all the continents representing twenty seven different nationalities, creating in this way a professional network of seventy five graduates. The nationalities of the graduates varies, seventy percent of the graduates are from African and Asian countries and fifty percent from only three countries, Cameroon, Ghana and China. The MPEL programme designed mainly for international students did not excluded domestic students which represent around seven percent of the graduates.

Graduates average age to enrollment period is 30.2 years. Interesting information emerged from the demographic data are the length of study years, and the student graduated in each cohort. The average time to degree is 3.2 years despite the expected period of two years of the study period. There are a limited number of graduates from 3 to 5 for each cohort in comparison to 12 to 15 students enrolled in each cohort. The balanced number of graduated males and females shows no difference in gender. The MPEL demographic data are displayed in the Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic data of the graduates in the Educational Leadership Master Degree Programme for the period September 2007- September 2017.

SEPTEMBER 2007-SEPTEMBER 2017							
Number of students graduated	Nationalities	Males	Females	Average age to enrolment	Time to degree	Cohorts	Average number graduated per cohort
75	27	40	35	30.2 years	3.2 years	8	3-5

3.2   The rationale and significance of the study

One may safely assume that any student undergoing studies in educational leadership programme such as the one described above, has an individual way of understanding the phenomena being studied (Marton, 1981). Furthermore, one might reasonably assume that students enrolled in the same study programme are expected to have similar ways of experiencing or conceiving the same phenomenon (Marton, 1986). Giving voice to the graduates, who have experienced this particular programme is an opportunity to understand students´ conceptions of educational leadership. Recently the research has shown an increasing interest in exploring how leadership or educational leadership is conceived (Blakesley 2011; Fairholm 2003; MacGillivray 2010; Hsieh & Shen 1998; Tian 2015; Wang, 2007) but still the investigation of these concepts it is considered underdeveloped in the literature (Wang, 2007).

Educational leadership studies has been explored using different qualitative research methods placed in phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, case studies and naturalistic inquiry (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Heck & Hallinger, 2005). In addition, quantitative methods are significantly progressing. According to Bowers (2017) a search of the ERIC.gov education research search engine, shows that in 2014 among 20,000 articles that mentioned "leadership" or "administration," there were 3000 of these

mentioning "statistical analysis" as a keyword. Tight (2017) reports that around 12.100 academic publication using terms 'phenomenography' or 'phenomenographic' have been published since 2000. In spite of considerable interest in phenomenographic research in education, relatively few empirical studies employing such approach have examined conceptions of educational leadership held by students, particularly in an international education context (Wang, 2007).

The results of this study are intended to be used for both pedagogical issues and further improvement of the curricula offered in the future. In this light, an adequate consideration of the findings of this research is essential for any decision-making when planning and designing courses for educational leadership graduate programs. Finally, as an international student enrolled in the same MPEL programe, led to a great motivation for investigating educational leadership, triggered curiosity and expanded my interest to understand this phenomenon in depth.

3.3 Research purpose, aim and goal

The *purpose* of this research is to explore educational leadership conceptions of the graduates from the Master's Degree Programme in Educational Leadership. This study *aims* to investigate what are the educational leadership conceptions and the different qualitative ways of understanding, educational leadership as a phenomenon. The goal is to provide description of participants´ ways of thinking about educational leadership as a basis for their understanding of educational leadership. Participants may have similar or different ways of understanding educational leadership, in this light, my qualitative approach intends to answer two main research questions:

a) What are the MPEL's graduates conceptions of *educational leadership*?
b) What are the aspects that differentiate qualitatively varying ways in understanding the *educational leadership* phenomenon?

The following subchapters provide the necessary information to justify the research design, research method, data collection process, analysis, evaluation and the ethical consideration of this study.

3.4 Research methodology

This study explores the conceptions of educational leadership using a phenomenographic approach. This qualitative methodological approach was pioneered by a research team at the University of Gothenburg, in Sweden, in late 1970s (Bowden, 2000). Since then, it became a notable research methodology for investigating, at a collective level, the different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive and understand the same concept or a phenomenon in the world around us (Bowden & Green, 2005; Bowden & Walsh, 2000; Marton, 1981, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997).

The aim of phenomenographic research is to ascertain the range of ways that a particular group of people see and reflect about a particular phenomenon within the sample group (Green & Bowden, 2009). According to Akerlind (2018), recently the aim has shifted from unpacking different ways of understanding a phenomenon to unpacking different component parts of the phenomenon as experienced within the sample group, associated with different ways of understanding the phenomenon. Marton (1981) argues that phenomenography seeks variation in people's interpretations of reality, through description, analyses and understanding of different experiences. The main characteristic of phenomenography is non-dualist ontological perspective where the person and the world are considered inseparable and experience and thought are not distinguished (Bowden, 2005; Marton, 2000).

According to Bowden (2005) phenomenography deals with the relationship between the individual and the world, in specific as it appears to individuals. Adopting a "second- order perspective" phenomenographers try to describe an aspect of the world based on as different perceptiveness and experiences of the

individuals in terms of their content (Marton, 2005). Within phenomenography, thinking is described in terms of what is perceived and thought about, and the research is never separated from the object of perception or the content of thought (Marton, 2005).

Content-oriented phenomenography interprets the description of the different ways in which people think, live, learn and understand their reality and develop individual ways of relating to the world around us (Marton, 1981). People experience in different ways a specific phenomenon and phenomenography helps to describe the aspects that make the single way of experiencing the same phenomenon qualitatively distinct from another (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018). Using phenomenography to capture the diversity of constructed conceptions of reality is considered to be used in "facilitating the grasp of concrete cases of human functioning" (Marton, 1986). Various phenomena, concepts, and principles, can be understood in a limited number of qualitatively different ways (Marton, 2005).

As an empirical qualitative research methodology, this approach can be very useful. Higgs & Cherry (2009) state "it reveals what people think about their practice, which can then trigger them to transform practice" and in this way contribute to social change and the development of human practice (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018). The purpose of using phenomenographic research outcomes is to help students to learn. The insight from the research outcomes can help in planning of learning experiences and will lead students to a more powerful understanding of the phenomenon under study (Bowden 2000).

3.5 Research participants

Sample selection is key element in phenomenographic studies seeking to maximize the *variation, and the diversity* of representatives. Purposeful sampling strategy is used for the selection of informant-rich cases to reveal and illuminate important group patterns for this study (Patton, 2015). The decision to interview participants who had similar educational experiences, to those who

understand educational leadership, is to maximize the range of the perspectives encountered from (Bowden 2000; Marton, 2005). In phenomenography, small number of participants is sufficient to capture the variation (Åkerlind, Bowden & Green, 2005). It is important to underline that in phenomenographic studies using a large number or participants (N=1662) did not provide any added value or difference with similar studies using a small number of participants (N=11) in terms of research outcomes (Töytäry et al., 2016).

In this study participants who have been awarded the MPEL Degree were selected. In order to capture the variation, and document diversity in alignment with the purpose and the aims of this study, other criteria such as gender, age, nationalities were also applicable to this sample. In total, eleven participants, six males (N=6, 54%) and five females (N=5, 46%), average age of 30.6 years, representing nine different nationalities, and eight mother languages, including all the cohorts from 2007 to 2017 took part in this research. The graduates represented different professional backgrounds from researchers, teachers to nurses working in different organizations worldwide.

3.6 Data collection process

The data collection of this study included two phases. In the **first phase**, demographic data about the MPEL graduates for the 2007-2017 period, was granted access and processed. The procedure of gaining access of the data from the Jyvaskyla University Administration Unit, was done in conformity and compliance of the Finnish Personal Data Act (523/1999) in September 2017. An official request was filled and sent to the JYU Administration Unit by the researcher of this study, supported from the Head of Institute of Educational Research and the Head of the Education Department, emphasizing the study relevance for the institutions mentioned above. This data was saved and protected on a specific private drive from the IT department accessible only by the researcher for specific period of time, and after that the data were destroyed.

For the **second phase**, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. A protocol procedure was used to contact the interviewees and conduct the interviews provided from the Faculty of Education, JYU. In order to contact the graduates from all the cohorts, different channels were used in conformity with the privacy act. A voluntary participation was encouraged by announcing and inviting the graduates over different platforms. First, an email containing an invitation with a short description of the study and contact information of the researcher, were sent out from the coordinator of the MPEL programme. The invitation was also posted on and social media channels, such as LinkedIn Alumni and Facebook page of the programme.

Participants expressed their willingness to participate in this research by filling out a so-called pre-questionnaire providing their contact information and a preference for the scheduled interviews. Then, an official consent form with detailed information about the data collection and data processing was sent to sign, before the interview. Since the graduates came from different continents most of the interview were conducted online, using different platforms such Skype, and Blackboard Collaborate a more specialized web tool which facilitated the connection. Some of the interviews were conducted face to face in JYU premises. All the interviews were conducted in English, audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Throughout the transcription process, any mentioned names of students, or teaching and administrative staff were anonymized. In order to maintain anonymity age, nationality of single participants will not be revealed. The semi-structured interviews took place between February-March 2018, with an average length of an hour for each interview.

3.6.1 Individual interviews

Interviews and written text have been the primary methods used in phenomenographic data collection (Marton, 1981; Marton, 1986; Bowden & Green 2009; Åkerlind, 2005; Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018; Walsh, 2000). The data is

collected through interviews and the role of the interviewer as in any qualitative interview is crucial. What questions are asked and how we ask questions, of course, are highly important aspects of the method (Marton, 2005). For this, interviews with open-ended questions were used in order to let the participants to choose the dimension of the question they want to answer, in order to reveal an aspect of the individual´s relevance structure (Marton, 1986). The focus of interviews was to elicit underlying meaning of phenomenon investigated, and to explore in which way the interviewee was thinking about the phenomenon (Akerlind, 2005). Interviewees were encouraged to reveal through discussion, their ways of understanding the phenomenon and disclose their relationship to the phenomenon under investigation (Bowden, 2000). Follow up questions were asked to clarify and explain the meaning of what they have said. Questions such "could you explain that further?" "what do you mean by that?", "is there anything else you would like to say about this problem? were asked to make interviewees reflect on what they have expressed and explain their way of understanding the phenomenon (Bowden, 2000). After the interviews have been completed, they were transcribed and the transcripts were analyzed.

3.7   Data analysis

In any phenomenographic research, the significance of the research outcomes depends on the processes by which they have been obtained (Bowden, 2005). The researcher maintained an open-mind to minimize any predetermined view about the nature of categories of the description, allowing them to emerge progressively from the data, while co-combining the meaning and the structure during the analysis process (Akerlind, 2012; Ashword & Lucas, 2000; Bowden, 2005; Walsh, 2000). Phenomenographic data analysis practice varies from considering the whole transcript (Bowden, 2000), large chunks of each transcript (Prosser, 2000), or smaller excerpts representing particular meanings interpreted within the larger interview context (Marton, 1986). For this study,

analysis began with reading the transcript as a whole, and then large sections were considered to select excerpts, being aware of the decontextualized approach (Bowden, 2005). The focus was on transcripts and the emerging of categories of description on the collective experience of the phenomena, rather than on the individual one, despite the fact that the phenomena maybe perceived different by different people (Akerlind, 2005). In order to make the data more manageable, the phenomeographic analysis of this study included three stages.

According to Kettunen & Tynjälä (2018) the **first stage** of the analysis, focuses on identifying and describing the participant ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon. Reading through transcripts was characterized by a high degree of openness to more possible meanings "bracketing" any preconceived idea, presuppositions or personal understanding about phenomena (Ashword & Lucas, 2000). Repeated readings brought familiarization with the data, focusing on similarities and differences in the meanings being expressed and aspects of variation were grouped accordingly. This phase is a kind of selection procedure based on criteria of relevance (Åkerlind, 2005). Utterances found to be of interest for the research questions being investigated are selected and marked (Marton, 1986). The meaning of the utterance lies more in general than the utterance itself and the interpretation must be in made in relation to the context from which it was taken (Marton, 1986; 2000). The selected quotes made up the data pool which forms the basis for the next steps of analysis. The "pool of meanings" emerged from the data and focuses on the meaning of the quotes themselves abandoning the boundaries between individuals (Marton, 1986).

In the first stage of analysis, the most important aspects of the process are reading and classifying the descriptions of the phenomenon, searching for the most distinctive characteristics that appear in the data, trying to find structurally significant differences of people's definitions of the phenomenon (Marton 2000). Then, a step by step differentiation is made within the pool of meanings and the utterances are brought together into categories on the basis of

the similarities (Marton, 1986). The quotes are sorted into piles and borderline cases are examined (Marton, 1986). The group of quotes are arranged and re-arranged and narrowed into categories, and differentiated form each other on terms of differences (Marton, 1986). In this stage a set of the descriptive categories were developed and defined not only as a set of different meanings but as a logical structure related to different meanings (Åkerlind, 2005).

The **second stage** of analysis focuses on delineating logical relationships among various categories (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018). Themes that ran through and across the data were identified and used to structure the logical relationship within and between the categories. The aim was to discover the structural framework in which various categories of understanding exist (Marton, 2005). These categories were described in a nested hierarchy, expanding from the least to the most complex understanding (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018). In this respect, each category is a potential part of a larger and more complex structure related to other categories of description revealing "an increasing breadth of awareness of different aspects of the phenomenon" (Marton 2005, p.154). In this stage, being faithful to the data as close as possible, categories of description were defined and the characteristics of each category were described. As recommended by Bowden (2005) the labeling of the categories was postponed until late in the analysis to avoid researchers´ awareness in a single direction and limit the further development of the categories of the description. A tabular approach was used to display the structural relationships and description of categories and illustrative quotes from the transcripts were selected to offer a holistic view of participants´ conceptions (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018). Most phenomenographic researchers emphasize the importance of collaboration during the constitution of the "outcome space", and for this purpose this study had an individual approach during the initial stage of analysis, and an additional researcher was consulted for the consequent phases as a way to improve the final outcome space (Bowden, 2000; Walsh, 2000; Trigwell, 2000).

The third and final stage of the analysis was focused on the fulfillment of the three quality criteria of the categories of description elaborated from Marton & Booth (1997); (1) each individual category clearly describes a distinct and particular way of experiencing the phenomenon; (2) categories are in a logical a hierarchical relationship with each-other; (3) the categories are parsimonius and limited in number for capturing the critical variation in the data (1997). As Marton states the phenomenographic analysis is:

"tedious, time-consuming, labour-intensive, and interactive. It entails the continual sorting of data. Definitions for categories are tested against the data, adjusted, retested, and adjusted again. There is however a decreasing rate of change and eventually the whole system of meanings is stabilized" (Marton 1986).

Doing a phenoemographic analysis requires a certain amount of time and specific techniques, as Marton (1986) claims "it takes some discovery to find out the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or conceptualize a specific phenomenon".

3.8   Trustworthiness of the study

Phenomenography, similarly with other qualitative research traditions for its rigour in the research process has quality criteria particular to it (Akerlind, 2005). One approach to ensuring rigor in phenomenographic research is the application of principles of trustworthiness (Collier-Reed, Ingerman, & Berglund, 2009) . Trustworthiness in qualitative research is determined by its credibility as "truth-value", transferability as "applicability", dependability as "consistency", and confirmability as "objectivity" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Credibility refers to defensibility of data interpretations and rigour of the research process through which the findings have been obtained (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In phenomenographic research credibility of the findings is obtained by three approaches of validity; (1) content-related, (2) methodological

and (3) communicative (Booth, 1992; Collier-Reed et al., 2009; Kvale, 1996). The present study shows the researchers´ familiarity with the subject under investigation as a student studying for two year in the MPEL, and as having an extensive work experience in educational leadership context. These experiences allowed the researcher to have a comprehensive understanding of educational leadership phenomenon while maintaining an "open understanding" of the topic. Setting aside personal assumptions about educational leadership, the focus was on the participants´ ways of experiencing educational leadership and

Methodological validity was ensured in every step of the research process, from the research design, aims and research questions to the data collection, data analysis and the interpretation of the results. To this end, the purposeful sampling was selected from MPEL' graduates from 2007-2017 period, based on age, nationality, gender and cohort to maximize diversity and variation. The interviews were held in a very informal and conversional context to allow participants to discuss, and express their understanding of educational leadership as fully and openly as possible, to "establish a joint definition of what is being talked about" (Säljö, 1996). The semi-structured interviews were formulated with a few key questions predetermined to open and deep the discourse between the researcher and the interviewee in order to obtain rich and meaningful data for the analysis. The analysis approach focused on the "search for meaning" to "retain a sense of the whole while pursuing the particular" constantly questioned the data during the process of constituting the categories of description (Booth, 1992). The iterative re-reading and redrafting the continued to the point of saturation until re-reading failed to produce any significant change in the categories of description (Bowden & Green, 2005).

Two types of validity checks, termed communicative and pragmatic validity are commonly practised within phenomenographic research (Akerlind, 2005; Kvale, 1996). In terms of communicative validity check, the researcher ensured that the results were presented and discussed in several research seminars with an intended audience of researchers and students

currently involved in educational leadership research and studies (Guba, 1981; Kvale, 1996; Uljens, 1996). The pragmatic validity check includes the extent to which the research outcomes are seen as useful and meaningful to the intended audiences (Kvale, 1996; Uljens, 1996). The value of this research lies in producing useful "knowledge" to perform effective actions and insights into teaching and learning about the conceptualization of educational leadership (Kvale, 1996; Entwistle, 1997).

Transferability, relates to the generalisability of the research outcome to the extent to which the findings may be applicable to other times, settings, situation and people (Guba &Lincoln, 1985). A detailed description has been provided of the research process and methodological choices for this study making in this way possible for the reader to be in better position to judge the study applicability. Qualitative study findings are context specific and applicability is not possible, as such direct application to a broader context is limited (Collier-Reed et al., 2009; Sin, 2010). However, there are phenomenographic studies that identified the application of findings in learning contexts, to bring about qualitative changes in the conception of a phenomeon (Bowden 2000; Johansson et al., 1985). The research design of this study considers the possible application to other progamme and degree studies in education leadership similar to the one in the Faculty of Education, JYU, Finland. The findings can be usefully applied for students learning in a similar educational leadership context in Finland or other countries.

Dependability refers to consistency of the data interpretation and research findings of a research investigation (Collier-Reed et al., 2009). In the present study, care has been taken to ensure depedability in each step of the research process, interviews converstation, transcription of the data and the data analysis for the consitution of categories of transcription. The researcher ensured that interviwees were expressing their conceptualization of educational leadership phenomenon, paying attention to non leading question during the interview conversation. The researcher took the approach to transcribe spoken words as accuratelly as possible.

Dependabilty of data analysis in a phenomenographic research in terms of intersubjective confirmation of categories of description are called dialogic dependability check and coder dependability check (Akerlind, 2005). Marton (1986) argues that, the implementation of the coder dependabilty check done by the original researcher is reasonable, since the finding of the categories of desciption is a form discovery emerging from the iterative process of reading and analysis and such discoveries do not have to be replicable. The approach taken in this study was the original researcher responsibility to construct first and draft the categories of description. Then, another researcher later checked them, until a high degree of intersubjective agreement was reached about the recognition and the usage of the categories of description (Marton, 1986; Johansson et al., 1985; Saljo, 1998). In this way, researcher´s personal subjectivity was minimized and interpretive awareness true to the data was ensured (Sandberg, 1997; Ashword & Lucas, 2000).

Confirmability is the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers. Confirmability is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination, but clearly derived from the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Confirmability is achieved through documentation kept from the researcher to reflect and interpret all the events happened throughout each phase of the research process, and ensure that data was not fabricated by them (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). To this end, a diary was kept by the researcher which helped to report the process as explicitly as possible. Illustrative quotations from the transcripts are presented to evidence the link between the data and the researcher´s interpretation. Trustworthiness in phenomenographic research is the "amorphous fluid" that gives relevance to the outcomes and guides the interaction with a broader pedagogical, social and epistemological context to ensure that the results can meaningfully have an impact on societal change (Collier-Reed et al., 2009).

3.9 Ethical considerations

The ethical principles of this study were guided by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2019) for research with human participants and ethical review in human sciences using three main guidelines: (1) respecting the dignity and the autonomy of human research participants; (2) respecting material and immaterial cultural heritage and biodiversity; (3) avoiding risks, damage or harm to research participants, communities or other research subjects. This study was designed, conducted and implemented according to these guidelines in order to meet the requirements of good scientific practice. The procedure of gaining access of the demographic data from the Jyvaskyla University Administration Unit was done in conformity and compliance of the Finnish Personal Data Act (523/1999).

To ensure the autonomy of individual participants, the recruitment was done on voluntary basis and any demographic information, such as age, gender and nationality were obscured. All the participants of this study were informed that their identity will be safe and the participation was voluntarily. The researcher made sure to inform the participants of the right to discontinue their participation and withdraw anytime from the study (Appendix 1). They were also informed about the aim of the study, methods, data collection, the significance and the potential benefits from this research. A consent form was given in a written format and participants were asked to sign at the same time as the interviewer (Appendix 2). A copy was sent to the participants by email. Before the interview, were made aware that the interview will be recorded.

To ensure avoidance of any risks, damage and harm the researcher familiarized herself with the international student community in advance, and made sure to not provide any information about interviewees or treating them as subject of observation. The results and interpretations were reported in a way to ensure an honest presentation of the participant experiences. In processing the data, the transcription of the interviews, data were anonymised by deleting the names and removing any identifying information to avoid any possible harm, misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

4 RESULTS

Data analysis illuminates five distinct categories of description reflecting MPEL graduates´ conceptions of educational leadership. Educational leadership is conceived as (1) supporting students, (2) coordinating teachers, (3) guiding a group of people, (4) educating young generations, (5) influencing citizens. (See. Table 2).

Table 2. *Master's Degree Programme in Educational Leadership graduates´ conceptions of educational leadership*

DIMENSIONS OF VARIATION	CATEGORIES				
	supporting students	*coordinating teachers*	*guiding a group people*	*educating young generations*	*influencing citizens*
Cognizance of educational leadership	indefinable	basic	good	deep	comprehensive
Settings of educational leadership	classroom	school	organization	learning environments	everywhere
Educational leader	teacher	formal leader	informal and formal leader	stakeholder	Anyone
Leading as an educational leader	assigning tasks	balancing needs	providing support	inspiring	empowering
Duties of an educational leader	Serving	communicating	organizing	managing	leading
Forms of educational leadership	dealing with class issues	curriculum development	composing an educational statement	structuring a research design	formulating an educational policy
Responsibilities of educational leadership	students development	teachers professional development	intellectual development	knowledge construction and dissemination	create societal justice and welfare

The **categories** above are arranged as hierarchies, expanded from the least to the most complex understanding of the phenomenon investigated. The aspects of phenomenon that differentiate the categories are called **dimensions of variation.** They comprise the critical aspects for expanding a more complete or complex level of understanding. The dimensions are labeled: cognizance of educational leadership, settings of educational leadership, educational leader, leading as an educational leader, duties of an educational leader, forms of educational leadership and responsibilities of educational leadership.

Each category is described in more detail below. Quotes from relevant interview transcripts are extracted to illustrate the key aspects of each category. It is important to note that this categorization depicts collective conceptions of educational leadership, rather than individual conceptions. It is assumed that at an individual level, some graduates might have more than one conception of the phenomenon investigated.

4.1   Description of the categories

Category 1: Educational leadership is supporting students

In this category educational leadership is conceived as supporting students. Participants´ cognizance of educational leadership is indefinable. They express difficulty and hesitance in trying to articulate their understanding about educational leadership. This difficulty appears in using pauses and interjections when answering, or paraphrasing the question about their understanding of educational leadership.

"Uh, uh, uh, still I am thinking about what is educational leadership. Um, it is uh, I was looking for a definition about educational leadership but still I cannot find. So, it's really difficult to define, what educational leadership is "

"How do I understand educational leadership, well, that is a good question"

"Um, um, um, um, that is a very broad question…"

The participants perceive educational leadership as happening in a classroom setting and teachers in charge of a class are identified as educational leaders. The focus of an educational leader is always the students. Leading is perceived by assigning different tasks during the teaching and learning process, in order to teach students how to learn. In this category educational leadership is conceived in the form of dealing with different issues in a class setting.

"Educational leadership probably, somehow it belongs to teachers because they are in charge of class"

"You know, if you are in a classroom then educational leadership is about how you deal with uh, class issues in a learning process …"

"I guess, educational leader is the leader that must have one focus, it is to be students, let it be children or adults and to do everything for the students, with the students and for the students to be there for them rather than they are there for you"

"…main target is student, always student so, when I think about the student, who is to get most benefit from, um, a leader can do. I think they are leaders…the best educational leader is for student…"

"I think the most important thing that and educational leader can do is to teach the student how to learn. So, the meta-learning strategies you know, not only to learn the content but the effective processes of learning and in order to do that well you have to kind of support their welfare in a certain sense I think"

In terms of responsibilities of educational leadership helping students in their life process, their development and wellbeing are emphasized in the first category. Participants identified serving everyone as a core duty for an educational leader.

"An educational leader is not someone when you approach after the class, he cannot backs away because his time has run out and he's not getting paid for that anymore. But before that he get paid, I mean he is like all yours against educational leader is someone who is helping you to get to the point of the purpose of life, you know, who love likes"

"A school leader is also responsible for a student over their development, academically and also in terms of their health, their well-being, their attitudes and morality"

"And uh, one thing I want you to mention, I want to mention to you serving is the center of all…. So the children or adults or whatever you do, you have to serve, educational leadership is about serving in my opinion. Yeah, that's how I see educational leadership"

Category 2: Educational leadership is coordinating teachers

Participants in this category express their understanding of educational leadership literally based on key words or associate the phenomena to definitions from books. Their articulation is reduced to simple sentences perceiving in this way a basic understanding of educational leadership.

 "What I know is that the key word is leadership"

"It is attached to certain books, you know definitions from books"

        Educational leadership is coordination of a group of teachers in a school setting and school is perceived as an educational organization with different components.

 "For example, in the school settings, everyone can exert their own strengths for the organization goals. So, the role of the leader is just to coordinate, coordinating teachers…"

"Yeah, I mean the organization includes uh, of course, school is the center and the surrounding that there are communities, and also stakeholders"

        Being an education leader it is identified as being assigned a formal position such as principal, head teacher, dean, and a director in charge of an educational institution. Leading as a formal educational leader is perceived as balancing needs of parents and teachers and everybody involved in a school setting. Communication is perceived as the duty of an educational leader, who deals with different administrative tasks, from paper work to child protection services, city legal entities, legal issues, and teachers' conferences.

"Yeah, I mean I see that [educational leadership] in couple of different ways… so, formal in terms of position, head teacher, director…kind of leading an office"

"So, first, I got an impression that ok probably is like people who just kind of high positions, kind of principals of the school, I don't know dean of department etc"

 "As a school principal I have to deal with many different needs…I have to be in the middle in balance of parents needs with my budget, with my teachers capabilities and that is most of the

one difficult aspects. Learning to balance everybody´s needs but at the same time really enjoy too. I think leading education is balancing all their needs”.

“when you actually are leading a school, what you are doing is communicating with the city alive and you are dealing with child protection services and you are dealing with these legal entities, administrative education…everything from paper work to the legal issues, to how to deal with parents, how to set up teacher parents conferences, how to organize teachers”

In this category designing or developing a curriculum at different levels in an organization is manifested as a form of an educational leader. Educational leader´s focus is also teachers. Providing a good working environment for all teachers is seen as a way to affect students indirectly. The responsibility of educational leadership evidenced toward teachers is their professional development and personal growth.

“What I did in that president position as head of department was coordinating the whole project…So, part of my job also included curriculum development”

“So, the only leadership I did then was curriculum writing. I was just leading my own curriculum design for my classes….”

“ So maybe uh, the leader also should work to hold teachers. So, uh, maybe is kind of.. how do I say, uh, setting the situation, a good situation and environment for all the teachers and then um, indirectly, the leader can affect the students”

“a school leader is responsible for example teachers’ professional development and their personal growth”

Category 3: Educational leadership is guiding a group of people.

In the third category participants develop a good understanding of educational leadership. They explain and elaborate their perspectives in more details related to different subjects, context or as manifested in different forms.

“I see educational leadership as a phenomenon related to different practitioners, in different context and manifested in different forms”

Educational leadership it is perceived as phenomenon not limited only to the classroom, school or an organization settings. While in the previous

categories educational leadership is perceived as happening in school environment in this category the emphasis is in other settings as well.

"It is not only limited to classroom. So, if you limit this concept only to classroom is really inferior"

"It is not limited only to let say to a secondary, primary schools, it goes up to where students are"

"It is not only what happens in the classroom or what happens in the organization to kind of to maintain what we learnt"

"Yes, I am an educational leader, not in a classroom setting, but when I am educating for example nurses in an internship"

An informal or formal leader, as any person in terms of position or not, involved in education is identified as an educational leader. Leading as an informal or formal leader is conceived from the participants as providing support to team members in an organization by bringing personal experience and skills. Composing a recognition statement for an organization is manifested as a form of educational leadership in this category.

"the main point of that is the educational leadership is not just one person it is *everything* from a person in a *school* or in an *institution* has to think about or be involved with"

"I am just thinking of that kind of team culture of the institution like can be anybody, that is not in terms of position necessarily but I always tried to be kind of that culture influencer I guess with a good moral at the school of being part of"

"probably what I am leading is trying to provide support to other team members…what I can bring to support others is my experience and research skills and different perspectives.."

"I worked in a hospital teaching medical and business English so, I don't know if that counts for educational leadership but for example there was one time that the hospital wanted to create a recognition statement for the hospital and a patient bill of rights, so they asked me for my help in composing this"

Educational leadership it is also about organization of an institution or different educational institution where the educational leader has different duties and responsibilities toward people that he/she is leading. People´s intellectual development is acknowledged from the transcripts as a responsibility of educational leader.

"Educational leadership I understand now is how you can organize uh, things like education exactly how you can organize things in an educational institution wait, let it be a school, university or a private entity, kindergarten or something like that charter school"

"Yeah you think about all the details that have to be organized right, the logistics of a place the responsibilities that you have in terms of what needs to be done right, but it is all these concrete practical matters. Organization of the institution you are part of, that is what came to my mind first.."

"But then also goes to the other people in the team and make sure that their goals are being achieved that you are doing and showing them but they can also do the same thing but giving them the freedom to work authentically themselves right"

"What is important in education, an educational leader will think for betterment of human beings… I mean, improvements in the intellectual development if we speak about educational context"

Category 4: Educational leadership is educating young generations.

Here participants express a deeper understanding of educational leadership than in the previous categories. They express and articulate easily their understanding mentioning different aspects and dimensions of the phenomenon. One of aspects that discern the concept of educational leadership from other concepts of leadership or a leader is the education context.

"Well educational leadership shows a pretty big, big a concept for me I will try to define it from my perspective. I will start from the leader and then put it in the educational context…"

"I think I know what is educational leadership, for me is leadership in educational context"

"I look at it in a very practical sense of it in terms what you do in a role rather than in a field of the research I guess of educational leadership"

The educational leadership setting in this category it is perceived as where meeting students, teachers and educators. The educational leader´s focus is preparing young generations for future life challenges. Participants identified an educational leader with a stakeholder who advocates young generations' education and inspire them.

"…because in the sector of education we are meeting the students, we are meeting the educators, other teachers in our daily life. So, sometimes we need and should take this special context into consideration"

"..because you are educating the future generation and so, you are making the new people.."

" because of the people you are leading it is like young people, young generation, at the same time what we are leading not a like physical product we are making with the spiritual of the future generation"

"So, now I am leading a research project at the moment including some researchers so we are in the similar ages and when you are leading you are inspiring the members"

The form of educational leadership in this category is conceived with research design. When designing a research in a research process, it contains many elements of educational leadership, such as communicating the research purposes with the research subjects. In this category managing the workflow and people is evidenced as a duty of an educational leader.

"In the process of research there are actually contents of educational leadership as well, in terms of how we design a research and we how we communicate our research purposes.."

Educational leadership, I understand now, is how you manage the workflow there and how you manage people..it is how you manage things.."

The responsibility of educational leadership for the construction and dissemination of knowledge in effective ways is also acknowledged from the transcripts in the fourth category.

"Educational leadership, it needs to be a learning unit of construction, as a kind of custodian of the knowledge based and to disseminate that knowledge in effective ways"

Category 5: Educational leadership is influencing citizens

Participants have an expanded understanding of educational leadership as a phenomenon very diverse and multidimensional. From this point of view, their understanding encompass aspects such as leading styles, attitude of a leader and the influence of educational leadership.

"Just to understand educational leadership is so diverse and dimensional. It was very important for me to understand about serving people and like being a dictator…having this bottom up attitude, not like from top to bottom….but it is interesting to see the influences too.."

In this category, the settings where the phenomena is happening is shifted to learning environments to everyday life places. Anyone can be an educational leader. A significant shift in identifying an educational leader is also perceived in this category. Being an educational leader is not anymore related to specific formal or informal position.

I find idea of educational leadership everywhere. It is in family, it is I don't know you go to shopping, it is in your office, even with your colleagues while you communicate with them…

"So, but in educational sector everybody is leader nowadays"

"In educational concept of course again I would apply the same logic, I believe that in educational sector leader is in fact everybody.."

"I think everyone in a sense is an educational leader"

An educational leader people-focused and learner-focused is evidenced from the participants as anyone who has a leading role and the ability to influence and empower people. This perspective also shifted from inspiring young generations to empowering citizens.

"I think educational leadership should be focus more connecting with people and that has been the biggest challenge"

"you know, learner focused not teacher focused learning but learner focused learning, learner focused education, you know"

"Yeah..i think everyone is an educational leader actually. In the protest sense of the term because our first educators are our parents and they often learn from someone and at some point in their learning process they had to progressively take on this kind of leadership roles"

I think educational leadership is about empowering the learner

I think that is what the educational leaders do, they empower those people they are leading and they give them the tools to make sense of what they learned and how to make effective use of what they learnt.

"is about like kind of anybody in an educational organization and main idea is that you have the ability to affect by your tongue, by your speech minds of others and like make people to believe and follow you and your ideas, your visions, your beliefs and whatever you are looking for"

Graduates evidence educational leader´s main responsibility as creating a societal welfare and build responsible citizens for a nation.

I think still believe that you have to have a broad perspective right not only what is good for me as a teacher or what is good for that student in terms of, you always have to come down to a creating welfare in our society.

I really think a leader helps the students for himself and what I am going to do with what I learnt you know, and how I might going to help my parents, my society, my children, my neighbors and helps the learner to develop the understanding how he is going to help the society in those ways right. So, I think societal justice and welfare.

"Then also being responsible for civic system because what you deliver in a school and how the kids graduate from the school and entering into society, whenever they become responsible citizens for the whole nation, I think the school leader is responsible for that.

Composing educational laws and writing a curriculum at governmental or ministerial level with an impact on national educational policy are seen as forms of educational leadership.

"You can be in the government and deal with the uh laws and be an educational leader and because you are writing those laws and it can be in the government or in the ministry, you deal for example with the curriculum at a national level.

4.2   Relationship between the categories

The categories of description emerged from the data were delineated from each other and arranged hierarchically through dimensions of variation. Due to the structural hierarchy of inclusiveness, some of the conceptions can be regarded as more complete and more complex than the others (Akerlind, 2005a).

Participants´ cognizance of educational leadership changed from indefinable to an expanded understanding of the concept across the categories. In the first category where educational leadership it is conceived as supporting students graduates using pauses or paraphrasing the question express difficulties to articulate their understanding. A basic cognizance appeared in the second category where educational leadership is coordinating a group of

teachers. Participants here used simple sentences and key words or citations from books to express their understanding. The turning point was in the third and fourth category where educational leadership is guiding a group of people and educating young generations. Participants have a deeper and more developed understanding of the concept elaborating their perspectives of the concept fluently. In the most complex category, where educational leadership is conceived as influencing citizens graduates have an expanded cognizance of the concept articulating many aspects and dimensions of educational leadership.

Educational leadership settings diversified from educational to everyday life places. In the first two categories, where educational leadership is supporting students and coordinating a group of teachers the setting is evidenced with classrooms, schools or educational institutions. A shift appears in the third and fourth categories where educational leadership conceived as guiding a group of people and educating young generations where settings is not anymore limited or related only to educational institutions but to any organization. The most distinctive difference with the other categories was the fifth category where the settings of educational leadership as influencing citizens are daily life places such as homes, offices, etc.

Being an educational leader for the participants appeared differently in all categories. Educational leadership conceived as supporting students from the graduates in the first category identify teachers in charge of class as educational leaders. An educational leader as being assigned a formal position in terms of an director, head of a school, head teacher etc., was expressed in the second category where educational leadership is conceived as coordinating a group of teachers. A change was discern in the third and fourth category where being an educational leader when guiding a group of people and educating young generations is not anymore related to the formal positions but is strictly linked with the involvement of the leader in educational leadership in terms of an informal leader and a stakeholder. The most distinctive difference in the fifth category in relation to other categories where educational leadership conceived as influencing individual citizens, an

educational leader is perceived with anyone who has an educational leadership role and the ability to influence and empower people.

Shifts in leading as an educational leader were the transitions from assigning tasks to empowering citizens across the categories. In the least complex category of supporting students assigning tasks was perceived from the graduates as leading as an educational leader. A shift from assigning tasks to balancing needs and was perceived in the second category where educational leadership is conceived as coordinating a group of teachers. Providing support to team members appeared as leadings in the third category where educational leadership is conceived as guiding a group of people. A turning point was in the fourth category where educational leadership is conceived as educating young generations and this marked a change from leading by providing support to leading by inspiring future generations. A significant shift was perceived in the fifth category where educational leadership is conceived as influencing citizens and leading as an educational leader is regarded as empowering learners.

Educational leadership forms varied across the categories. In the least complex category where educational leadership conceived as supporting students, educational leadership form it is perceived as dealing with everyday class issues. Participants indicated curriculum development as another form of an educational leadership in the second category where educational leadership is perceived as coordinating a group of teachers. In the third category where educational leadership is conceived as guiding a group of people the educational leadership appears in the form of composing a recognition statement for an institution. Designing a research was perceived as a form of educational leadership in the fourth category where educational leadership is conceived as educating young generations. In the most complex of the categories where educational leadership is perceived as influencing citizens the educational leadership form was regarded as the one who writes educational laws, curriculum and deals with educational policies in the government or ministerial level.

In terms of educational leader's duties the transition across the categories was from delivering and acting to leading. Basic duties of an educational leader such as delivering education professionally and acting as a leader were identified from the graduates in the first category where educational leadership is conceived as supporting students. In the second category where educational leadership is conceived as coordinating a group teachers, dealing with teachers, parents and administrative tasks is evidenced as a duty for an educational leader. A change from dealing with administrative education to organizing an institution was evidenced in category three where educational leadership is conceived as guiding a group of people. Management of people, workflow and time was perceived as educational leader's duty in the fourth category where educational leadership is regarded as educating young generations. In the most complex category where educational leadership is conceive as influencing citizens leading as a duty of an educational leader was emphasized.

Shifts across the categories regarding educational leadership responsibilities moved from student development to society welfare. In the least complex categories where educational leadership is conceived as supporting students and coordinating a group of people the responsibilities are perceived toward students development and teachers professional development. A turning point was the third category where educational leadership is conceived as guiding a group of people and the educational leadership responsibility is indicated as people's intellectual development. Knowledge dissemination in effective ways was discerned in the fourth category where educational leadership is perceived as educating young generations. A significant shift appeared in the fifth category where educational leadership is conceived as influencing citizens and the responsibility of educational leadership is to build responsible citizens and create societal justice and welfare.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Examination of results

This study and its research questions aimed to reveal how MPEL´s graduates conceptualize educational leadership and the variety of those conceptions. To begin with, the first research question "What are the MPEL's graduates *conceptions of educational leadership?*" – this study revealed MPEL graduates´ conceptions of educational leadership in five distinct categories of description that ranged from supporting students to influencing citizens. For the second research question "What are the aspects that differentiate qualitatively *varying ways in understanding educational leadership as a phenomenon*?"- seven dimensions of variations were identified: cognizance of the educational leadership, settings, educational leader, forms of an educational leader, duties of an educational leader, leading as an educational leader and responsibilities of educational leadership. These conceptions frame MPEL´s graduates understanding of the educational leadership as a phenomena investigated in this study. This section discusses these conceptions to my review of the scientific literature on educational leadership.

The findings align with previous research literature and studies but they also provide new insight into understanding of how graduates of an international Master Programme in Educational Leadership conceptualize educational leadership as a phenomenon.

The findings showed that the educational leadership *is undefinable and difficult to describe for many, even surprisingly for students who have successfully completed a master´s degree programe focused on this area*. The difficulty to articulate a definition aligns with the previous literature and studies related with the confusion, vagueness and the variety of leadership definitions (Allix & Gronn,2005; Northouse, 2016; Rhode & Packel, 2011; Rayner & Gunter 2005). This finding is also supported from similar previous studies where finding a

common definition about educational leadership resulted in a disagreement (Stack at al. 2006).

A significant finding showed that the conceptions are conflated with school leadership and leadership in other educational settings, as an unquestioned assumption for some participants. It is possible to draw a bright line between conceptions 2 and 3 where the phenomena of educational leadership *shifts from school settings to other organizations related to educational purposes.* As such, educational leadership thus does not stop at the schoolhouse door it extends to other organizations where meeting students and young people. Another important qualitative distinction lies between conceptions 4 and 5 where the educational leadership settings shifts from learning environments to everywhere since educational leadership is educational it happens in every setting where both its ends and means are educative (Wraga, 2004). This finding casts doubt on literature and previous studies emphasizing the main characteristics of educational settings such as "a concentrated population of children and young generation" (Wraga, 2004). Here should be noted that educational leadership as a phenomenon does not stop at the schoolhouse door but it goes beyond the school settings such as different organizations and environments to everywhere where learning and education happens (Wraga, 2004; Mulford, 2006).

The findings showed that the conceptions of educational leadership were *interrelated with the conceptions of leadership, administration and management* in education. These concepts are strictly related with the context of education. The relation with the leadership concepts is shown especially in the fifth category where educational leadership is influencing citizens. The finding is congruent with the literature that leadership is about influencing people to achieve a common goal and other studies how leadership and educational leadership is conceived (Fairholm, 2002; Hsieh & Shen, 1998; Tian, 2015; MacGillivray, 2010). Influencing others can be seen as process that can be undertaken by any member of an educational institution or in any environment where learning

happens. Influencing citizens it is not restricted only to those who have a formal position but it goes to anyone who is involved in educational leadership.

The most complex category supports the findings from similar leadership studies where the phenomenon can happen everywhere and a leader can be anyone (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). The finding is congruent with the literature that leadership is about influencing people to achieve a common goal and the literature of how educational leadership is conceived (Northouse, 2016; Yulk, 2002).

The relation between educational leadership and administration and management in education can be found in third and fourth category. In the third category organizing a group of people in an organization and in the fourth managing young people are seen as duties for an educational leader. Organization and management skills are seen as essential for an educational leader especially in dealing with people and not only in school settings but also in other organizations. This finding is sustained from that strand of scholarship who doesn't find appropriate to make a distinction as they find both essential for educational leadership (Blakesley, 2011)

However another significant finding showed *leading as an educational leader is distinguished from administration and management*. This finding is consistent with that strand of scholarship which places an emphasis and importannce to distinguish leadership from administration and management in education (Bolam, 1999; Connolly, James, & Fertig, 2017; Day, Harris & Hadfield, 2001) . Here we can draw a division line between categories three and four where leading as an education leader shifts from providing support to inspiring young generations. Similarly, in in the fifth category leading is considered as empowering citizens, giving them power which leads to self-leadership. This finding show agreement with that stand of scholars who sustain that leading is distinguished from administration and management (Carson & King, 2005;)

This study showed that *educational leadership is human-centered* being perceived with the central presence of an educational leader. This finding, is consistent with previous studies on identification of educational leaders as a teacher, head teacher or a principal in a formal and informal positions inside and beyond the classroom (Angelle & DeHart, 2011; Angelle & Shmid, 2007; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015). The educational leader is also identified with a stakeholder, such as member of a learning community, a consultant, a school network, or family members who advocate educational leadership. Educational leader is identified and with anyone involved in educational leadership, no matter formal or informal position (Galbraith & Schvaneveldt, 2005).

Another finding of this study showed that the educational leader is conceived in a variety of forms. This finding is related to the informal and formal positions of an educational leader, not only in a school setting but also beyond it. Here should be noted that the drawing line between category 2 and 3 shows that also the forms of educational leadership are related to the settings. Forms vary from dealing with tasks and developing a curriculum in school and composing an educational statement, a research design or an educational policy in an organization. This finding is consistent with Mulford (2006) study which extends the concept of educational leadership beyond school in the surrounding community, partnerships and government.

There are similarities between the responsibilities of educational leadership findings of Connolly, James & Fertig, (2017), the responsibilities of educational leadership taking actions at individual and system level for student and teacher development, knowledge construction and societal justice and welfare, rather than improving students´ academic outcomes. The responsibilities of educational leadership are wider than in educational settings it goes in the society where knowledge constructions and dissemination is needed to achieve societal justice and welfare at individual and community level.

5.2 Recommendations

The variety of educational leadership concepts found in this study suggests that some participants have a limited view and some others have a quite sophisticated and comprehensive understanding of educational leadership phenomena. Based on the findings, it could be argued that educational leadership is conceptualized not only as a phenomenon related to school leadership but also to other organizations and learning environments at group level and collective level. The conceptualization of educational leadership has a key player and it is the educational leader. Whatever position or not an educational leader might have, their role remains essential for school leadership and beyond. There is an interrelation with educational administration and management but leading as an educational leader is distinguished from them.

These findings can be used as **pedagogical tool** to update the current curricula and specialization courses regarding educational leadership. The findings from this research can foster the means of enabling dialogic learning to occur within a community of learners, teachers, and educational leaders through a sort of "negotiated dialogue" (Racionero & Walls, 2007). One of the anticipated gains of this sort of dialogic process within this community of practitioners and academics is that new knowledge is able to emerge in an organic way without top-down imposition on the part of educational leaders (Alexander, 2006; Wegerif, 2013; Wells, 1999).

This study may serve as a sort **of repository for new knowledge**, and thus make it possible for it to be shared among this community of educational leadership in practice. For example the Faculty of Education or the Insitute of Educational Leadership can offer in-service training course or optional course syllabus witht the findings of this study on the concpetualization of educational leadership. Such sharing of knowledge is essential for all organizations that seek to maintain high standards of ethics and responsibility in building knowledge and program effectiveness. Every educational institution must have norms pertaining to what those being

educated should be learning, and what the desired outcomes are (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 1–2). In this light, an adequate consideration of conceptual level variation aspects of this study, are essential in decision-making for any higher education institution when offering degree educational leadership programs. An effective and high quality degree programme in educational leadership should enact and contribute significantly to enhance student learning and leadership development increasing their level of skills and knowledge in the field (Eich, 2008).

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was designed with the purpose to investigate MPEL graduates' conceptions of educational leadership and therefore is limited to the student perspective. Their perspective is considered important since they represent the ones who have been studying in MPEL but their understanding captures only one perspective of many stakeholders involved in educational leadership. Therefore, stakeholders', especially the ones teaching in educational leadership programs should be explored to give them the opportunity to express their understanding about educational leadership.

This study was based on the perspective of eleven participants graduated from the MPEL which provided a limited representation across the variety of graduates. The sample did not include the enrolled international students or Finnish students form similar programs.

This study was not designed as quality insurance or instrument to evaluate the effectiveness of the MPEL in building educational leadership knowledge However, this opens up the discussion of creating quality evaluation instruments from students perspective and not only the institutional one.

Further caution should be considered when generalizing the findings of this research because qualitative studies' findings are unique to their context, in this case to Educational Leadership Master Degree programme studied in

Finland but the transferability in other settings maybe possible. This study doesn't take into consideration the Finnish context where MPEL was taught. It didn't consider for the analysis the role of the context in experiencing the educational leadership phenomenon, and the relationship between the concept and the context in which the concept has been experienced (Berglund, 2005).

The study has also methodological, practical and pedagogical implications. From the methodological perspective this study contributes to the investigations of educational leadership conceptions using a phenomenographic approach to describe students' concept about the phenomenon being studied. Such a description may contribute to expand the aspects of understanding of educational leadership field and provide an impetus for the development and the implementation of the curricula in the current educational leadership modules and specialization studies.

Further research on approaching phenomenography from Berglund's (2005) innovative perspective of considering the role of context in which a concept been experienced and learn in the future phenomenographic research can provide a holistic account of the experience of learning in this particular environment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Invitation form and information about the study

Dear Graduates in the Master Degree Programme in Educational Leadership (MPEL)

I would gently like to invite you to take part in a semi- structured interview for my Master´s Thesis research, which intends to investigate educational leadership phenomenon understood from the students graduated from this MA Programme.

The two-year International Master's Degree Programme in Educational Leadership (MPEL) started in 2007 for both domestic and international students aiming to develop internationally oriented professionals and experts in the field of education and educational leadership. During the ten years period of the progamme the curriculum has been changed pertaining different educational leadership approaches.

After more than ten years, it is time to investigate educational leadership conceptions of students enrolled in the MPEL. As an international student myself in this the programme I am quite interesting to know and understand from the perspective of an graduate also the impact of the studies done in this MA Degree in building educational leadership skills.

In giving voice to you, who have experienced this programme in person is an opportunity to share your thoughts in an official space as former students and evaluate the content of programme from the students´ perspective.The results and findings will be used for recommendations and suggestions for the development of the curricula and theoretical frameworks regarding educational leadership course contents in future.

The results can be used as a feedback for future international and domestic students in applying in for MA Programme offered by Faculty of Education and Psychology at the University of Jyvaskyla. This research contributes also in achieving quality standards for an excellent academic offer, which meet the students' expectations.

The semi-structured interview should not last longer than an hour. In order to contact you and schedule the interviews properly, I would like to ask those interested in participating, to fill out the following form created with Google Docs **by 30th of January 2018** latest:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScbj65l3Yll_MELIYINIfPJf7m_g0M2VCQ2dNmAWMp-R7rXFQ/viewform?c=0&w=1

More details on when and where the interviews will take place, will be send to those filling out the form. If you have any questions regarding my research, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Anduena Ballo (anballo@student.jyu.fi)

Educational Leadership Master's degree student at Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä.

Appendix 2

Information sheet for research subject and consent to participate in research

INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH SUBJECTS AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Contact information of researchers

<u>Researcher:</u>

Name: Anduena Ballo

Title: Master's student in Educational Leadership

Location: University of Jyväskylä, Faculty of Education and Psychology

Telephone number: +358418075892

E-mail address: anballo@student.jyu.fi

<u>Supervisor:</u>

Name: Hoffman David

Title: Senior Researcher, Ph.D. (social sciences)- Finnish Institute for Educational Research

Location: University of Jyväskylä

Telephone number: +358408054247

E-mail address: david.hoffman@jyu.fi

Research background information

This research will be conducted as an individual Master Thesis at the Faculty of Education and Psychology, Institute of Educational Leadership at the University of Jyväskylä. This study has a *qualitative* methodological approach, and uses *phenomenography* as research method and data analysis. Data collection comprises a *semi-structured interview* with *open-ended questions* in a sample of **11 (eleven)** participants from the graduates **in the Master Degree Programme in Educational Leadership.**

Purpose, target and significance of the research

The purpose of this study is to investigate educational leadership phenomenon understood from the students graduated from MA Programme in Educational Leadership (MPEL) and the implications of these understandings in practice. This study intends to investigate *what are* the educational leadership conceptions of the graduates, *different ways of understanding* the educational leadership as a phenomenon and the perceived influence of the Programme upon educational leadership conceptions in practice.

Purpose of use, handling and storage of research data

The data will be used only for research purposes. During the study, every subject will have its own digital folder. The data will be kept in a safe encrypt coded folder in my personal account. Manual and digital data will be stored for 2 years after the end of the research.

Procedures targeted to the research subjects

Different platforms will be used to contact the graduates from the previous cohorts. Interviews are scheduled and will take place between February and March 2018. The main criteria used to select the subjects is being graduated from the MA Degree ne Educational Leadership. Since the number of the students graduated is big other criteria such as previous experience in education, age, gender, graduation year, nationality will be used to have an inclusive sample.

Benefits and potential risks to subjects

In giving voice to who has experienced this programme in person is an opportunity to share thoughts and opinions in an official space and evaluate the educational leadership phenomenon studied from the students´ perspective.

Use of research results

The results and findings for this Master Thesis research will be used for improving the curricula and theoretical frameworks regarding educational leadership course contents in future. The results will also be used as a feedback for future international and domestic students in applying in for MA Programme offered by Faculty of Education and Psychology at the University of Jyvaskyla. This research contributes also in achieving quality standards for an excellent academic offer, which meet the students' expectations.

Rights of research subjects

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate in it, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The organization and conduct of the ways in which the research and the reporting of its findings will be done so that your identity is treated as confidential information. No personal information that is collected during the research will be disclosed to anyone else besides you and the researchers. When the results of the research will be published, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. At any point, you will have the right to receive further information about the research from the members of the research group.

Insurance

No insurance is assured for this research study.

Consent to participate in research

I have been informed of the purpose and content of the research, the use of its research materials, and the potential risks and problems it may cause to myself as a research subject, as well as of my rights and insurance protection. I hereby agree to participate in the study in accordance with the instructions given by the researchers. In case of illness – cold, fever, for example– , while recuperating from an illness, or if I'm not feeling well, I will not participate in physical tests that involve such measurements as blood tests or other sampling, or physical strain. I can withdraw from the research or refuse to participate in a test at any time. I give my consent to the use of my test results and the data collected on me in such a way that it is impossible to identify me as a person.

_____

Date   Signature of the research subject

_____

Date   Signature of the researcher