Becoming an educational leader – exploring leadership in medical education

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Becoming an educational leader – exploring leadership in medical education

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ABSTRACT
Research on educational leadership emphasizes the importance of having institutional leaders heavily involved with advanced instructional programming. Best practices for developing educational leadership in higher education health care and medical faculties have to be better understood. Within the framework of a seminar series, researchers and practitioners were involved in a dialogical process of inquiry, coupled with an explicit activity-oriented approach emphasizing empowerment among educational leaders. In a reflective paper, 10 participants of the seminar series elaborated on what it meant to develop and to ‘take’ leadership in your professional role and which factors that were identified as adding value to the development of professional leadership expertise. Qualitative content analysis was conducted resulting in thirteen categories reported in relation to Wenger’s theory of communities of practice. The findings show that educational leadership involves processes on the levels of students, teachers as community and at the organizational level. The individuals created a place for backstage conversations at which they got opportunity to develop their thinking and inspiration to break new ideas into their own educational communities. In addition, a systemic approach is essential for the effective implementation of educational leadership to reach all levels via interaction and communication across an organization.

Only the title—at the beginning we asked, we were sceptical, frustrated because we did not know what educational leadership entailed—‘what do you mean?’ we asked. In the role you are assigned you have to live up to something, and we didn’t know what it was. Educational leaders are not made visible in our organisation. However, it is worth to consider how leadership is carried out at different levels. How do I get inspiration in my role as leader? (Course director, female)

Introduction
The demands for quality assurance in health care and medical education are steadily increasing. Yet the implementation of effective quality controls has simultaneously become more costly and complex since health systems must quickly adapt to new challenges in this time of rapid demographic and epidemiological transition (Frenk et al., 2011). These changes in demands pose new challenges for educational leaders within medical education to be able to adapt to societal needs and implement...
changes at the same time as being sensitive to the structural requirements of the academic organization—a challenge that may not be easily overcome.

Research on educational leadership, particularly that from outside of Europe, emphasizes the importance of having institutional leaders heavily involved with advanced instructional programming (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2002). The quality of the learning environment, as well as the degree to which learning processes emphasize necessary skills for implementing quality assurance in health care and medical education, is as crucial as the assessment programmes lending feedback to the students about their progress (Boor et al., 2008; Sargeant, Mann, van der Vleuten, & Metsemakers, 2009).

Notably, the literature reports that instructors of medical education who attend faculty development programmes are better prepared to face these challenges (Steinert et al., 2006), and to identify the changing educational needs of their students. Nevertheless, the extent of achieving educational quality, i.e. when new information can be applied and implemented in educational programmes, appears to be dependent upon—and potentially limited by—faculty traditions, context, and the people inhabiting our higher academic institutions (McGrath & Bolander Laksov, 2014; Trowler, 2008). In a study by Trivellas and Dargenidou (2009), it was found that academic leaders recognized the roles of the director and coordinator in their practice to a much higher degree than other roles, although the roles of innovator and monitor were found more powerful predictors of teaching quality. The reason for this mismatch has been suggested to be connected to the problem of distance between formal power over decision and budget, and informal leadership of how to carry out decisions ‘on the floor’.

The premise of this article is founded on Joseph C. Rost’s (Rost, 1993) definition of leadership, which entails ‘developing an influential relationship between leaders and those who are being led, and relies upon the effectual basis of mutual purpose and shared knowledge’ (p. 102). This aspect of ‘sharing knowledge’ in education creates opportunities for educational leaders, instructional staff and students to effect real changes that can be upheld within a shared vision. However, the current state of academic affairs limits the expression of mutual purpose, since informal power is usually given to those in charge of the organization of higher education courses and programmes. These midlevel managers of education—often titled as programme directors—are often found outside the formal power structure of an educational institution, such as the university president or individual department head. A dilemma of sorts is thereby created for midlevel programme directors, since their position of informal power does not always align with their main responsibilities for developing and implementing instructional programming (McGrath & Bolander Laksov, 2014; Martin, Trigwell, Prosser, & Ramsden, 2003). Midlevel programme directors usually act in closer association with students than those holding formal power (Ramsden, Prosser, Trigwell, & Martin, 2007), but are still mainly responsible to act as the interface between programme ownership and delivery.

Leadership in academic organizations tend to be focused on distributed or shared leadership models (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009) and is often characterized by a collegial culture, where leadership skills are acquired through a process of trial and error (Newton, 2003). According to Muller and Turner (2007), different leadership styles are appropriate in different circumstances. This has been confirmed in a study by Oreg and Berson (2011), who showed that leaders’ traits values and behaviours are reflected in their followers’ reaction to organizational change.

There is evidence that structured processes of support, e.g. reciprocal peer coaching, journaling and interview discussions, are effective for establishing leadership development among faculty in education despite limited institutional power (Goldman, Wesner, Karnchanomai, & Haywood, 2012). Additionally, in higher education institutions that support a research-intensive environment, implementing a community of practice around faculty instruction and learning (Wilkerson & Irby, 1998) has been emphasized as a way to develop a culture of effective leadership (Laksov, Mann, & Dahlgren, 2008). However, best practices for developing educational leadership in higher education...
health care and medical faculties has yet to be fully understood. This article attempts to inform this
gap by investigating the development of midlevel leaders in medical education from the perspective
of those currently working in the profession. Our specific objectives include exploring the following
research questions:

(1) What does it mean to be an educational leader in medical education?
(2) How is the journey towards becoming an effective educational leader currently experienced?
(3) What is the value of a seminar series in terms of creating a learning community around the
development towards becoming an educational leader in practice?

A seminar series was designed and organized with the purpose of identifying limitations and
addressing effectiveness in educational leadership related to medical faculty.

**Method and theoretical framework**

‘Participatory Action Research’ has been suggested as an appropriate methodology for the creation of
participatory action oriented development (Lingard, Albert, & Levinson, 2008), when the phenomenon
is a dynamic process. In the present context, researchers and practitioners were involved in a dialogic
process of inquiry, coupled with an explicit activity-oriented approach that emphasized empowerment
among educational leaders. The method was designed to elaborate what it means to develop and ‘take’
leadership in their role as educational leaders.

**Participants and data collection**

Recruitment of participants was conducted by convenience sampling. Data were collected by the
first author during 2011–2012. The participants consisted of eight women and two men, who were
employed at the time of data collection as midlevel programme directors of a university health pro-
fessions programme. A total of ten different programmes, e.g. medicine, dentistry, physiotherapy,
nursing, psychology, public health, in health and medicine were represented. Participants had held
their leadership positions between 1 and 10 years, and titles were professor, associate professor and
adjunct faculty. Their educational leadership roles included programme director, course director and
general director of various instructional tracks within the medical programme. Their ages ranged
from mid-30s to mid-60s.

**The seminar series**

A total of 14 seminars lasting 2–3 h comprised the series. Each seminar had a theme and included
elaboration on readings and individual writings produced by the participants in relation to the theme.
Data for this study were collected by the use of narratives written by the participants at the end of the
seminar series. Here, they collaboratively agreed they would elaborate their personal experiences about
becoming an educational leader, to later be able to analyse their experiences as a collaborative process.

The design of the seminar series combined systems theory and sociocultural theory as expressed
in Wenger’s theory on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Senge introduced the idea of systems
thinking as a theoretical construct can contribute to the development of learning in an organization
to incorporate both reflective dialogue and expanded understanding of organizational complexity.
Systems thinking is founded on four prerequisites, i.e. disciplines: staff mastery, the implementation
of mental models, building a shared vision and organized team learning. By understanding how these
different ‘disciplines’ influence each other and together form an ecological whole system thinking is
thus compelled to make an organization more or less healthy. It is considered an ecological model
because of its capacity to simultaneously address more than one isolated incident or problem. By
understanding the context and the relationships that exist within the organizational system, it is postulated that we can better work with development and learning. The ideas of systems thinking were inherent in the seminar series.

‘Community of practice’ was conceptually incorporated into the seminar series by asking all participants to regularly, during the time scope of the seminar series, write one page of reflections on their educational leadership practice in relation to pre-specified themes and from themes identified in the literature. According to Wenger (1998), ‘communities of practice’ are formed by shared commitment and interaction between various stakeholders. In a higher educational institution, these stakeholders may represent a variety of interests that coordinate in shared learning. For example, stakeholders may be as diverse as a group of instructors of anatomy or students starting a studying group, as well as surgeons who want to develop a new simulation method of learning or medical students learning about patient care. The stakeholders identified in this project were individuals carrying a role as leader of educational programmes.

The three key elements of community of practice are based on the shared domain, i.e. the commitment to building expertise, among a community of different individuals, who are capable of interacting and learning within a shared objective to practice (newly) acquired knowledge. These themes guided the analysis of the narrative data. Our lens defined domain as sharing in the role as an educational leader—as a leader of colleagues in their shared educational efforts to teach health care and medical students in an institution of higher education. The design was thus based on the premise that the participants continuously shared problems, concerns and experiences of struggles and successes in solving problems, which were designed to create the opportunity for collective expertise on how to work as educational leaders. We defined the second key element, community, as the relationship among participants, and not simply through a commonly shared title, i.e. ‘program director’ or ‘director of undergraduate studies’. The seminar design thus enabled participants to assist each other, share information, create joint activities and to build relationships. This form of learning is constructed in an inter-professional way (Barr, Freeth, Hammick, Koppel, & Reeves, 2006). In the real practice situation, according to Wenger (1998), members do not necessarily work together every day; but through the community of practice they become part of the shared lessons learned from each other, which can be brought into their daily work as educational leaders. Finally, the seminar series design provided a forum for participants to relate how they enabled the key concept of practice, i.e. the execution of educational leadership via a designated shared repertoire of resources, including experiences, stories, tools, ways of dealing with different problems.

Each seminar was given in accordance with various seminar formats so that participants would experience a repertoire of different ways to conduct teaching and seminar discussions. The seminar formats ranged from writing reading logs, workshop-style seminars, focus group style seminars and reflective dialogue seminars. Through the seminar series, an opportunity for participants to learn from, about, and with each other inter-professionally (Barr et al., 2006) was created to explore the core of what it means to be an educational leader in medical and healthcare education.

**Analysis**

The narratives were collaboratively analysed using qualitative content analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) with the intention to carry out a theory-driven, directed process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) that identifies the relationships between identified factors. Initial analysis consisted of a peer review process, where all participants read each other’s narratives and extracted central meaning units. These were written on separate notes and later analysed by the authors. Duplicate concepts were removed and the meaning units were clustered into categories to capture the meaning of each note. A second step of the analysis included a mapping process, where the data were applied to Wenger’s notion of community of practice (Wenger, 2000). Then, we created Table 1 based on information resulting from our data set.
Findings

Table 1 illustrates our findings from the content analysis mapped on Wenger’s three dimensions: the domain, the community and the practice. Each area will be commented below. The citations are labelled according to the dimensions, with D for domain, C for community and P for practice. Additionally, each quote is labeled PD for program director or equivalent, followed by a letter (a-f) to signify which of the program directors was quoted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>The domain</th>
<th>The community</th>
<th>The practice</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>Taking a student-centred perspective</td>
<td>Change of role from administrator to leader</td>
<td>Working with change</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Leading of development and improvement</td>
<td>Awareness of</td>
<td>A learning community</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The leader as visionary and inspiration for others</td>
<td>(a) available literature for educational leaders</td>
<td>A place to reflect</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emphasizing organizational learning and creativity</td>
<td>(b) what educational leaders do locally</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Creating bridges and networks</td>
<td>Tools for conducting and stimulating communication about teaching and learning</td>
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<td>Perspectives on what it means to be an educational leader</td>
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The domain: what does it mean to be an educational leader?

The participants referred to five different activities inherent in the role of being an educational leader: (1) taking a student-centred perspective, so that student learning was used as a guiding principle for all activities; (2) being aware of student and faculty needs for development and improvement; (3) embracing the role as visionary and inspirational when addressing these needs among teachers and administrators; (4) emphasizing organizational learning that enables learning in a creative environment and (5) creating ‘bridges’ and networks, both within the university to other educational instances or levels of the organization, and externally with stakeholders and other relevant organizations.

It is totally useless to devote time to teaching if you don’t co-operate with students and understand their reality. The first and most important in educational leadership is to realize that students need to be at the centre and all activities we manage aim to provide students with as good conditions as possible for successful learning. (D1 PD a.)

The quote above directs attention to the development of personal mastery, one of ‘the disciplines’ that help an organization to move forward and develop into a learning organization (Senge, 1997). This director of studies expresses an intention to constantly deepen the understanding of students’ reality so that the activities carried out by the department are focused on creating good conditions that facilitate their learning. The understanding of the creative tension between the future goals and current reality is a key part of personal mastery. Another aspect of the disciplines that should be in place for a learning organization is the mental models among participants of the organization. Below is a quote that shows how this programme director engaged with the mental models among teachers of quality in the organization:

As educational leader it is important to make the group of teachers [you manage] aware of trends and developments. The quality aspect is an important part which is inherent in the teachers themselves and that is based in their competence. In order to manage change, the learning organisation needs to back up the educational work of the teacher, get an insight into and actualize learning. (D2 PD b.)
Another aspect of the disciplines that together have the opportunity to create the fifth discipline, the systems thinking, is to create a shared vision. However, as pointed out in the following quote, there are risks in all the obligations of the educational leader to take over at the expense of this important aspect.

It is important not to drown in administration as educational leader […] An educational leader shall also be visionary, it is necessary in order to create change. (D3 PD c.)

Finally, the domain of educational leadership was discussed in terms of how to create an openness of teachers that are lead to create team learning, where new ideas can be tested. One strategy was suggested by this programme director:

I see it as my role to be the one who are first with the testing of new things, it is not without risk and the academic world is full of land mines that are easily stepped upon. An important part of educational leadership is thus to map the terrain and know where you have the people who you need to reach out to. (D4 PD f.)

The domain of educational leadership as mapped in relation to Senge’s (1997) five disciplines show that this group of people engaged in the issues identified as central to the development of systems thinking: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning. In the following section, the systems thinking is elaborated.

**The community: how may the journey as educational leader be described?**

Participants described the journey of becoming an educational leader as a process of change and awareness, requiring new tools and perspectives. Change generally involved altering one’s view on what could be included in the role, and specifically, on the change from being an administrator or leader of courses, schedules, students and teachers, to being a leader of education, with its increasing responsibilities in educational matters. This included becoming aware of the educational literature available to support the leading of educational initiatives, as well as the processes required to succeed, and anchoring their new activities within the local context of what other educational leaders are likely to do. These aspects increased participants’ interest in education and change. Because of the design of the seminar series with different seminar formats at each meeting, the participants also faced a repertoire of new tools (e.g. reflective seminar, case seminar) for conducting and stimulating communication with teacher colleagues and students. Finally, the journey included widened perspectives on what it means to be and to become an educational leader.

To be able to be a leader in the academic environment and to see opportunities for solving problems and implement change, it is important to be able to see the system as a whole:

It has become apparent to me that the overarching organization is of great importance for the role as educational leader to become distinct, so that it is easier to enact a leadership. (C1 PD c.)

By developing systems thinking, the roles of leaders take on new meaning. Leaders are not only administrators or visionaries, but become designers, teachers and stewards. As designer, educational leaders are responsible for building foundations for the core values to be translated from policy level into the local department, here exemplified by a quote emphasizing the bridge building function of educational leadership:

An insight that has grown during the seminar series is about how we can act as bridge builders between different actors on education, and integrate the bureaucratic, the entrepreneurial and the professional roles. (C2 PD d.)

The teacher role of educational leaders require a range of teaching tools that can be used in helping colleagues at their departments to face their mental models and identify underlying assumptions. The seminars in its formats helped towards that end, but most of all, as expressed in the following quote, the seminars enabled the participants a space for reflection, negotiation and learning, something that facilitated the development of a sense of community and trust:

The pedagogical seminars have been important in the sense of establishing a pedagogical forum for a learning community within the university where all we were learners, and the group was organized to learn as a whole system. (C3 PD e.)
One of the values strived for in health professions education is inter-professional learning; where members of different professions learn with, from and about each other. It seems that the seminar series with its inter-professional character enabled leaders to take on the role of stewards, protecting and advocating the core organizational values and to transfer the understanding developed in the seminar series to other levels of the organization:

What we created through the seminars was an inter-professional understanding within different professions and programmes [...]. I have already experienced practical consequences in the form of increased understanding for each other and a more genuine interest for collaboration. (C4 PD f.)

A sense of community of educational leaders was built through the seminar series. By engaging in the community, the leaders often went from an identity as being administrators to identifying as educational leaders. Educational leadership became characterized by the acknowledgement of systems thinking and adapting to the roles of designer, teacher and steward.

The practice of educational leadership: What value did the participants attribute to the seminar series in terms of their learning and development towards becoming an educational leader in practice?

Three important aspects about engagement were included in educational leadership: a learning community, working with change and a place to reflect on the role as educational leader. These categories related to working with change and involved gaining inspiration and developing models for how to change. Succeeding involves the establishment of a forum for dialogue between teachers about teaching and learning and acquiring a systems approach to change processes. The requirements to apply reflective writing throughout the seminar series and the different formats of the seminars enabled reflection but also empowerment in the role as educational leader in relation to other leaders/managers within, for example, the department.

My educational leadership has developed during these seminars. I’ve worked with the teaching staff in a totally different way than before. I have used articles for discussions in the team. The articles include distance education, reflection groups, assessments etc. (P1 PD b.)

As exemplified with the above quote, the implementation of a learning organization requires new ways of working where the promotion of learning is at core. A first step in building such a foundation is to create awareness of how the structure of the organization drives behaviour (Senge, 1997). By sharing experiences between departments through written assignments, by reading literature and research on teaching and learning in higher education and by engaging in dialogue with peers in an open atmosphere where ideas are challenged and developed, the following two quotes exemplify how the seminar series was experienced as supportive in the development of confidence as leader to make demands on their organization and to use scientific creativity in relation to their role.

It has contributed to the fact that I, in a constructive way, together with the department management, have been able to discuss and motivate content, development and time needed for my educational leadership. (P2 PD f.)

The setup of seminars and the narratives that I and others formulated and discussed have contributed to an increased scientific creativity in my role as educational leader. (P3 PD f.)

The practice of educational leadership included the involvement of the different stakeholders, teachers and students, as a way of working:

A conscious approach to students and co-workers. For a functioning educational leadership it is important that students and co-workers are part of the decision making process. (P4 PD c.)

The practice of educational leaders became clearer throughout the seminar series as the participants learned from each other by sharing alternative ways of carrying out practice in relation to the literature on communities of practice and systems theory. The practice developed by some to engage and listen to colleagues and students in the ambition to learn and develop the organization became more common as several of the educational leaders introduced ‘teachers’ days’ focusing on different aspects of teaching and learning at their departments. However, when roles are transformed and possibilities
expanded, there is a risk to take on too much, something that can lead to reduced motivation and increased risk of experiencing exhaustion and depression in the future (Björklund, Jensen, & Lohela-Karlsson, 2013). These leaders, who were often appointed as a result of their drive and motivation in relation to educational issues, were aware of the importance of not losing motivation as their role and ambition to make a difference changed:

How to handle high pressure without losing the joy of work are important issues in the daily work of chairing a learning organization and not only a working organization. (P5 PD d.)

Discussion

A complex picture emerged of what it means to be an educational leader. Educational leadership is seen as a process where different tasks involve the collaboration with students and teachers; where communication around vision and objectives is integral; the handling of change and working with improvement in the existing organization, no matter if it is at a departmental, programme or faculty/university level; and the creation of a pedagogical culture where educational issues and learning is central for the learning organization. In this sense, our findings are in line with previous findings (Gibbs, Knapper, & Piccinin, 2008) on leadership of teaching and learning in research-intensive departments, where the conclusion was drawn that leadership must adapt to the system of a certain environment and interact with the culture and structure to be successful.

Several factors that characterized what it means to be educational leaders were identified. These include leading development, enabling learning, creating a learning environment and creating bridges and networks. A community of practice was created for this group of participants. They were allowed via the process of the seminar series to take on the role of ‘brokers’, where they could ‘break’ new ideas for teaching and learning into their own community of practice, which was essential to their role as leaders. In this way, their capacity for creating change was created as a result of the seminar series. Capacity building is in this sense understood as something more than formal training, as exemplified in extracts C3 and C4 (above). It implies a developmental process where a group works to become more effective together than its parts and goes beyond only doing, e.g. a course together (Meyer & Stensaker, 2006).

Our work suggests that to become an effective educational leader at an institution of health care and medical education, a relationship between educational leaders needs to be established, and then expanded between teaching staff and students. By doing so, the opportunity to create occasions for exploring and sharing knowledge as is exemplified by the citation P1 can be supported. It also involved influencing real changes about the value of life-long learning and to create strategies designed to build and promote a shared vision.

The literature about educational leadership has mainly emphasized the institutional level in higher education but is scarce at mid-management level (Bolden, Gosling, & O’Brien, 2012). Nevertheless, a review by Bryman reveals 13 aspects important for leadership at departmental level (Bryman, 2007), some of which are clearly overlapping with the findings of our study; e.g. a clear sense of direction, ability to communicate and acting as role model.

By applying the idea of building ‘communities of practice’ around teaching and learning to the idea of capacity building through our seminar series, the concepts of the teaching-learning literature took an ecological bend and became tools—a language—through which change was perceived as possible. To embed change, there is a need to re-culture the university and change prevailing beliefs, values and attitudes of teachers and students (Fullan, 2011; Land, 2001).

Our results about the creation of a community and practice around educational leadership are supported in the literature on change in social psychology and organizational development. Here, the underlying beliefs and values about change have been shown to impact how people communicate. Further, it has been shown that academic teachers engage in personal, complex and trustful conversations about teaching with a few significant others (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). These can be
colleagues sharing a professional context or individuals found elsewhere. The most important feature of these conversations is their backstage nature. Our seminar series effectively created such a backstage environment according to the participants (e.g. C2–C4), where participants could share ideas, probematize and challenge each other. In other words, these trustful conversations contributed to the process of becoming an educational leader.

The practice of educational change is difficult, and according to the participants, the seminar series helped preparing and empowering participants to work strategically with different layers of the organization in relation to change (e.g. P2). As Stigler and Hiebert (2009, p. 83) noted, teachers tend to replicate the culture and pedagogy of their personal experiences as students. A major shortcoming of leadership studies has been the failure to overtly acknowledge that leadership is always about addressing issues of change, where leaders attract followers by offering to change at least one aspect of the followers’ personal circumstances. By bringing attention to the approaches between the educational leader and colleagues and students, the seminar series enabled successful change. This was exemplified by the extracts D1 and D2 as they show that the participants in the seminar series started to see the bigger picture Senge talks about, where student learning is connected to and interrelated with the system of teachers and their prerequisites for carrying out good teaching. Fullan (2011) claims that in people-based organizations (such as schools and universities), relationships are the key to successful change. He stated ‘… we have found that the single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve’ (Fullan, 2011, p. 5). Relationships are important parts of the determinants of success but are also a consequence of success. Leaders are charged with constantly fostering purposeful interactions and problem-solving (Fullan, 2011, p. 5). Similar to our findings (C1–C4), Fullan also noted the sense of community as one extension of positive relationships within a university. Relationship building is dependent on many interpersonal skills (McEwan, 2002). While the literature on instructional leadership emphasizes cultural change, the interpersonal relationships between staff are a key factor in effecting the cultural change (Fink & Resnick, 2001; McEwan, 2002).

Much learning occurs in academic organizations, in terms of student and research learning. However, a lack of a shared pedagogic ideas seem to leave mid-management leaders astray about setting a clear goal supported by strategies for how best to work with colleagues and students as a learning organization. A seminar series such as the one described in this article offers one possible approach because it stimulated the participants to become change agents, or brokers to use Wenger’s (1998) concept, in their own communities of practice.

In a follow-up meeting, 6 months after the seminar had finished, the following citation from one of the participants promotes confidence in these findings:

> It was exciting to see that everyone got inspiration and reflected during the seminar series. It was a creative journey where you became aware that you are not alone. That which existed as a feeling or unestablished thought became verbalised. Instead of only being a ‘cog’ in the system, the seminar series created focus on activity, that you should do something. The seminar series created new perspectives, exchange of knowledge, reflections and new tools for analysis.

**Methodological considerations**

This was a small-scale study with 10 participants. However, the participants represented a variety of professional backgrounds and leadership in a range of different health professions educational programs. All participation was voluntary and built on convenience sampling, hence the participation may be biased based on interest in the subject. However, the aim of this study was to explore the meaning of educational leadership how the journey towards becoming an effective leader was experienced and to what extent the seminar series was valuable in terms of creating a learning community around the development towards becoming an educational leader in practice. We acknowledge that the outcomes cannot be generalized across all contexts, but we believe they are useful in deepening understanding of the role of educational leaders and the needs to provide a framework for exploration and development of this role in higher education.
Conclusion

This article contributes to educational leadership literature by articulating how an initiative based on both sociocultural perspectives of learning and the idea of supporting the development of communities of practice around teaching and learning in higher education makes it possible for the participants to articulate their role in educational leadership. A consequence was that these individuals created a place for backstage conversations at which they got opportunity to develop their thinking and get inspiration to break new ideas into their own educational communities. New arenas for strategic support for the educational leaders were developed, but a systems thinking approach within the organizations is still lacking. Future considerations for the implementation of effective leadership are essential for a systemic approach in which all levels are affected through interaction and communication across an organization.

Future research/policy implications

Future steps will include exploring possible ways of how educational leadership impacts the quality of teaching in context regarding a number of factors identified previously as important for enabling rich teaching and learning environments for students and staff, as well as the educational conversations of leaders in their respective organizations.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

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