

# Experiencing Educational Leadership Development

A Phenomenological Impact Study

Scott Benzenberg

MASTER'S THESIS  
December 2021

Master of Business Administration  
Educational Leadership

## **ABSTRACT**

Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu  
Tampere University of Applied Sciences  
Master's Degree Programme in Educational Leadership

**BENZENBERG, SCOTT:**

Experiencing Educational Leadership Development: A Phenomenological Impact Study

Master's thesis 78 pages  
December 2021

---

The purpose of this study was to conduct an impact evaluation of the Master's in Educational Leadership (MEL) program at Tampere University of Applied Sciences to understand whether the program had impacted the leadership and change leadership capacities of program participants. This study additionally aimed to understand how the phenomenological research approach could provide insights into the study of leadership development more generally.

This research used ten semi-structured participant interviews and phenomenological analysis to explore the impacts of the MEL program regarding changes in the participants' constructs related to leadership, the social contexts of leadership actions, and conceptions of participants' own leadership capacities. The relevant object of investigation was the study participants' experiences with these constructs and whether these constructs were seen or understood differently as a result of participation in the MEL program.

The findings here show that the MEL program significantly impacted participants' understanding of leadership and their self-concept. Participants described significant shifts in their own leadership constructs, attributed these to experiences within the MEL program, and were able to articulate new ways of seeing and experiencing leadership. In addition, the research highlights ways the phenomenological approach can capture emergent, user-side data to understand learning impacts of leadership development programs.

---

Key words: leadership development, professional learning, impact evaluation, phenomenology, educational leadership

## CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION .....	6
1.1	Background.....	6
1.2	Purpose.....	7
1.3	Significance.....	10
2	LITERATURE REVIEW .....	12
2.1	Context.....	12
2.1.1	A Case for Change in Education .....	12
2.1.2	The Task: Leading Educational Change .....	13
2.2	Leadership .....	15
2.3	Leadership for Change .....	17
2.4	Development.....	20
2.4.1	Professional Learning.....	21
2.4.2	Leadership Development .....	25
2.5	Measuring Impact .....	28
3	RESEARCH METHODS.....	31
3.1	Phenomenology .....	31
3.2	Methodology .....	33
3.3	Participants .....	33
3.4	Data Collection.....	34
3.5	Analysis and Interpretation .....	35
3.5.1	Bracketing .....	35
3.5.2	Personal Experiences .....	35
3.5.3	Significant Statements.....	36
3.5.4	Emerging Themes .....	36
3.5.5	Textural Description .....	37
3.5.6	Structural Description.....	39
3.5.7	Synthesis.....	39
4	RESULTS .....	41
4.1	Questioning the Model.....	41
4.1.1	Leadership.....	42
4.1.2	The Educational Landscape.....	43
4.2	Becoming Aware.....	45
4.2.1	Of Self .....	45
4.2.2	Of Others.....	48
4.2.3	Shapes of Leadership .....	49
4.3	Reconstruction .....	53

4.3.1	Reconstructing Leadership.....	54
4.3.2	Frictions, Ambiguity, and Limitations.....	58
4.3.3	Self-Concept.....	60
5	SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION.....	65
5.1	Impacts on Leadership Capacities.....	65
5.2	Impacts on Organization.....	67
5.3	Phenomenology and Impact Studies.....	68
5.3.1	Evidence of Learning.....	68
5.3.2	Insights for Program Development.....	69
5.3.3	Understanding the Target Phenomenon.....	69
5.3.4	Practical benefits.....	70
5.4	Critical Reflection.....	71
	REFERENCES.....	73

**ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS**

TAMK	Tampere University of Applied Sciences
MEL	Master's in Educational Leadership
MBA	Master's in Business Administration
UAS	University of Applied Sciences
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development
WEF	World Economic Forum

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

The Master's in Educational Leadership (MEL) program at Tampere University of Applied Sciences was developed in 2016 and launched the first cohort of students in September 2017. The program grew out of the Global Education department at Tampere University of Applied sciences as a response to a demand for a program to address the emergent needs of leaders in education with an emphasis on change leadership capacities (Curcher, 2017). The MEL program is a blended learning program with yearly cohort sizes around 20-25. There are separate weeklong sessions of in-person classwork and distance learning is organized within study groups for the remaining duration of the program. The degree program aims to graduate students with a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) degree equipped with a global educational perspective as well as the competencies and capacities to influence change in their working contexts. The program is intentionally diverse and emphasizes networked learning and knowledge construction over traditional instructional methods (Curcher, 2017).

The notion of networked learning and the socio-constructivist approaches to learning about leadership is central to the MEL program and forms an important rationale for this study. The socio-constructivist view holds that the learner builds knowledge by reorienting and reconstruing what is already known through social roles, contexts, and interactions (Wenger, 2018). For the MEL program, this view of learning is operationalized through the taught curriculum and pedagogical approaches, as much of the coursework requires partner or group work. Similarly, MEL participants are grouped into smaller study teams of six to eight people each. The study groups and the network of participants are deliberately used as learning partners throughout the course. For this study, the networked view of learning provides a clear opportunity to understand the impact of the program from the participants themselves.

Understanding the user side of the program and its outcomes is particularly relevant in the domain of Finnish universities of applied sciences (UAS). The UAS

model “emphasizes co-operation with the business, industry and service sectors at the regional level in particular” (Finnish National Agency for Education, no date). Students may apply to a UAS master’s degree in the Finnish university system with a bachelor’s and relevant working experience (Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, 2010, p. 11). As a result, the graduates of this program are practitioners who might further inform program decisions based on experiences from their working contexts. Furthermore, as the course is intentionally diverse in terms of the countries represented, insights from this wide range of contexts can provide insights into the broader field of educational leadership.

## **1.2 Purpose**

The purpose of this impact evaluation is to capture participant experiences and analyze to what extent participation in the MEL program at Tampere University of Applied Sciences prepares users for leading educational change. The findings here aim to provide formative information for the ongoing development of the MEL degree program and establish a picture of the components of the program and its impact on participants and their working lives. How are participants able to demonstrate changes in leadership capacities? How might these capacities be measured? How might this be attributed to the MEL program?

The insights of MEL participants shape the design of the research approach in this study. Because the MEL program emphasizes a networked, socio-constructivist view of learning, and because the participants in the program are themselves working professionals in a wide variety of educational contexts, the research must provide opportunities for new meanings to emerge from the participants themselves. In this way, the scope of the MEL program and this impact study should be coherent and philosophically aligned.

There are also practical considerations for the scope of this study. First, leadership development is not easily measured. Examples of leadership development instruments are further discussed below, but many require a baseline and results over time. The MEL program is still in its early years and using quantitative methods or a longitudinal study is beyond the scope of this research. Similarly,

traditional qualitative impact measurements such as 360-feedback instruments would need to investigate how participation in the MEL program has led to impact in the participants' working organizations by examining results against a baseline. This dataset does not exist.

For the reasons above, the study uses a qualitative approach to capture the experience of the MEL program from the user side. This approach can provide detailed descriptions of how MEL participants view the program and how it has impacted their own lives. Since the MEL program itself is at an early stage, these emergent responses have particular value.

This impact evaluation project aims to provide formative information for the ongoing development of the MEL degree program and provide additional feedback to program stakeholders about the needs of emerging leaders in localized contexts. Because the Master's in Educational Leadership is a new degree track, and because its creation is an innovative scheme for leadership development, evaluating the impact of this program has significance both inside the TAMK community and the broader domain of graduate education in leadership and management.

Finally, this study will explore the suitability of using qualitative methods to analyze higher education programs' impact more generally. While institutions in higher education are already deeply engaged in measurements to understand the broader social impacts of research and training, many of these measurements focus on quantitative methods such as citation tracking (Toukoushian and Webber, 2011). Qualitative impact measurements which seek to identify the user side experience to understand the impacts of learning and development in an emergent setting are far less common. How might qualitative approaches to measuring the impact of higher education programs provide new information about the effects and outcomes of the user learning experience?

The research here will investigate the extent to which the program has been impactful - both in the competencies of its participants and the extent to which these participants have been able to enact change in their own organizations.



Furthermore, this research will explore the use of qualitative and emergent approaches to measure the impact of learning in higher education settings.

- What are the impacts of the MEL program on leadership and capacities for participants of the program?

How has the MEL program helped participants develop the personal and professional competencies necessary for engaging in leadership roles? Since leadership is a complex topic, this study will be particularly interested in how participants themselves can articulate their conceptions and understanding of leadership in practice. The study also seeks to understand the degrees to which participants in the MEL program have made sense of their own stories and identified personal values necessary for effective leadership. Finally, learning impacts will be evident in how participants can articulate the scope of leadership related to the ability to understand and navigate policies and practices in the broader educational contexts.

- What are the impacts of the MEL program on the participant's ability to enact change in their own organization?

The study will explore the extent to which the program has enabled participants to develop a capacity for change management. Enabling capacity includes understanding the tools and approaches for managing change projects, a synthesized understanding organizational culture and its impact on change projects, and the potential challenges inherent in enacting change.

- To what extent can the phenomenological approach provide insights into the impact of a leadership development program?

Since phenomenology offers ways of capturing how participants experience a phenomenon, one of the aims of this study is to explore to what extent this type of study might be appropriate for understanding the learning impacts of a development program. Can a change in the way the concept is understood or experienced constitute evidence of learning? How might a phenomenological approach give insight into the impacts of learning and development in ways that other

research approaches might not account for? What are the conditions that would make this type of study suitable and relevant?

### **1.3 Significance**

The MEL program is a relatively new degree program, and this study provides qualitative data about the impacts that the program has had on the initial student cohorts. There is value for the course instructors and organizers to identify whether the intended impacts of the program are indeed evident in learner outcomes. Since the MEL program has a clearly articulated theory of learning which informs the written and taught curriculum, phenomenological interviews can provide rich information about student experiences. The descriptions of these student experiences are already beneficial as informal feedback, but at the level of scientific phenomenological analysis they offer valid data to inform curricula at instructional levels. In short, this study is significant because of how it can provide information about the program's learning outcomes to inform future development.

The research can additionally capture information about the experiences of educational leadership from leaders and emerging leaders working in a wide variety of geographic and organizational contexts. The program's intentional diversity, coupled with the fact that the entry to the program requires relevant working experience, means that the participants in the MEL program offer a body of knowledge about leadership and the needs of educational leaders around the world. This diversity of user background within the shared experience of the MEL program is a body of expertise that has been intentionally incorporated as part of the learning design within the MEL program. Likewise, this research is designed to capture this body of expertise to better understand the phenomenon of leadership development.

In addition to understanding the impact of the MEL program on participants' capacities for leadership, one of the aims of this research is to investigate the suitability of a qualitative phenomenological approach for impact studies in higher education. This preference for emergent data should be fundamental for the MEL program and similar programs with student populations working in diverse

environments. Since the MEL program is intentionally diverse concerning geographical and professional working contexts, the insights from the users can provide the TAMK Impact Team with feedback about the impact of study programs as they exist and provide a range of potential insights about what is happening in the field. For these reasons, qualitative and emergent approaches were chosen as a broad starting place for the methodology in the study. This type of qualitative phenomenological research creates a reflective space for study participants to illuminate their understandings of leadership development within MEL. This user-side research is of particular importance to the users of this study. The Impact Team at Tampere University of Applied Sciences has commissioned this project to explore additional ways of collecting data about the impact that participation in its programs has on individuals and wider society.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Context

Since the MEL program aims to graduate learners with the “necessary competencies for leading the human and technological changes faced by educational institutions” (Tampere University of Applied Sciences, 2021), the section below will underline the current operating contexts of educational leadership and identify significant drivers of change. Additionally, this section will highlight the challenges of navigating change and the competencies required to do so successfully.

#### 2.1.1 A Case for Change in Education

Even before the global pandemic, educational leaders have long been operating in a world of complexity and change. Local, regional, and international leaders in education must contend with the pressures brought about by globalization, technology, and political pressures. These pressures are extensive and constantly evolving, therefore leaders working in education must navigate ambiguity while providing a credible rationale for collective actions. The demands for leaders who seek to operate effectively in these environments are significant, and, as Donahoe writes, “the plain fact is that there simply aren’t enough good principals to go around” (1993, p. 299). There is a considerable need to understand how to develop credible leaders who can operate in this context.

In complex environments such as education in which a multitude of actors are collaborating through formal and informal channels, the sheer amount of feedback and interactivity can seem impossible to navigate effectively (Blanchenay and Burns, 2016, p. 162).

Globalization and its effects on economies and educational needs is not a new development for educators. Still, its impacts are often oversimplified and poorly understood at the level of educational institutions (Reimers, 2020). Globalization is driving policy changes in education. Leaders at all levels need to know how these drivers will impact their own educational organizations and the learners

they are preparing for the future. Understanding macro policy drivers like globalization enable educational leaders to make informed decisions and prepare organizations for the future.

A core challenge that educational leaders face is the changing needs of education at all levels, emphasizing “participation in decision-making, social relations, responsibility, planning of processes and projects, interdisciplinarity, individual and social reflection” (Illeris, 2011, p. 58). Publications from transnational organizations like the OECD, WEF, The European Commission, and regional and national governments are calling for educational reforms to equip learners at all levels with skills to operate in a world that does not yet exist (Smit *et al.*, 2020). Educational practices are shifting from the siloed disciplines approach of the traditional school model (OECD, 2013; Schleicher, 2015) and exploring ways of foregrounding transversal skills, entrepreneurial approaches, and the interdisciplinary work so that learners might extend their “capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life” (Senge, 2006, p. 13).

Although the notion of preparing students for “jobs which don’t yet exist” is a rallying cry for educators seeking to reform curricula and pedagogical practices to meet the needs of the future (Smit *et al.*, 2020). The fact is that educators are themselves operating in a present which few had been able to predict. The proliferation of technology and the easy access to information has already shifted the role of the educator away from the distributor of information. However, pedagogical practices have not always caught on (Bakhshi *et al.*, 2017). Educational leaders, therefore, must not only seek to develop curriculum and student learning, but they must also have viable strategies for leading change and developing staff and other educational professionals.

### **2.1.2 The Task: Leading Educational Change**

The reality for educational leaders is that the operating context is complex. The environment is ripe for enacting positive changes to enable educational organizations and professional educators to move closer to the vision for education outlined above and already well understood. The reality, of course, is that change

itself is complex and “often fails because individual change efforts are poorly designed” (Hargreaves, 2002, p. 189). Why is this change so difficult, and how might educational leaders prepare to embark on a change or development process?

Change initiatives, particularly at the level of systems, operate in several different dimensions simultaneously. Reimers (2020, p. 9) highlights five dimensions of educational initiatives *cultural, psychological, professional, institutional, and political*. Enacting educational change means understanding the context, drivers, and perspectives from each of these dimensions and how an individual change or policy development might be seen from the various actors. Reimers argues that this is rarely achieved by single change agents who must operate in a “five-dimensional chess-match” to navigate these successfully. Individual educational leaders need not be experts in all fields, and certainly that isn’t the point being made here, but they must be aware that the domains exist and must rally expertise to account for these perspectives in major change decisions. Educational change also fails in part because leaders fail to acknowledge the complexities inherent in change and fail to consider the drivers and impacts of the change initiatives from all sides.

The complexity described above provides clues about the role of leadership in change as facilitation for collective actions. Leading change in an educational context requires understanding and facilitating growth in a broader network (Fullan, 2007). Because the nature of change is multidimensional, as Reimers suggests, effective change only occurs through people working together towards a common aim. The first role of change leadership, then, is to make sense of the external environment to articulate a direction worth following for the future. This sense-making is not without risk (Burns and Köster, 2016). This task of navigating uncertainty is a distinguishing feature between leadership actions and actions of management. Educational leaders must manage ongoing tensions between stability on the one hand and developmental processes on the other (Jackson, 2000).

## 2.2 Leadership

Leadership is complex, and while models are abundant, they vary considerably and are often descriptive rather than instructional. Still, these models give insights about where, when, and why leadership actions are effective. Three contemporary leadership models discussed here (*exemplary*, *transformational*, and *authentic*) each seek to explain the characteristics and competencies of effective leadership styles while acknowledging the significance of the leader-follower dynamic and the broader social contexts in which leadership actions occur.

One leadership model described by Kouzes and Posner is the exemplary leadership model (Kouzes and Posner, 2009). The notion of leadership here is that the leader's actions and behaviors are effective when congruent with the leader's vision for the future. Exemplary leadership asks the leader to identify a change, improvement, or vision worth pursuing and then work to enable her followers to develop towards the shared goal. Kouzes and Posner offer five practices of exemplary leadership: *challenging the process*, *inspiring a shared vision*, *enabling others to act*, *modeling the way*, and *encouraging the heart*. These five practices suggest that effective leadership implies knowledge about the way forward and a focus on inspiring others by offering a compelling future vision.

The transformational leadership model (Bass, 1995; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999) extends the view of effective leadership to focus instead on the actions that help followers and organizations grow. Effective transformational leaders are able to "convert followers to disciples; they develop followers into leaders" (Bass, 1995, p. 467). Like the exemplary leadership model proposed by Kouzes and Posner, the transformational leader is one that can inspire followers to take collective actions in a way that they had been previously unable to do. Effective leaders develop the leadership capacities of their followers and thereby raise the overall effectiveness of the wider organization or social network through four key mechanisms: *idealized influence*, *inspirational motivation*, *intellectual stimulation*, and *individualized consideration* (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 185). The mechanisms of *intellectual stimulation* and *individualized consideration* relate specifically to the leaders' ability to know and understand the capabilities and interests

of the follower and highlight the types of social proficiencies and interpersonal skills required for successful leadership in the model.

In both of the above models of understanding leadership, there is an overt emphasis on *a way forward* or an articulated vision that is primarily leader-driven (De Vries, 1996). Even in the case of the transformational model, where effective leadership means developing followers, these both imply that the leader's role is centrally to chart the path worth following and the ways worth growing. In the "wicked problems" of contemporary education, a single, fixed strategic aim is not always possible.

For leaders who operate in contexts such as these, the authentic leadership model (George, 2007; George *et al.*, 2007; Grossman, 2019) suggests that the stability and direction that an effective leader provides within an organization comes from the leader's own integrity and transparency when interacting with others. Leaders are effective when they can articulate their own values and reliably act in accordance with those values. Fundamentally, leadership is about establishing and maintaining trust between leaders and followers in the organization, and the authentic leaders' ability to lead is built on the ways he can build trust with followers, and in turn, the degree of trust present inside the organization (George *et al.*, 2007). This explicit focus on trust is a central difference between authentic leadership and other contemporary models of leadership. Avolio and Gardner highlight the difference between the future vision-oriented leadership models and authentic leadership.

Authenticity does not guarantee accuracy of prediction, but it does over time provide the impetus for followers to be more engaged, aware and intelligent about the direction being set so that they can contribute their best views and questions about the desired future state (Avolio and Gardner, 2005, pp. 328–329).

In this way, the authentic model acknowledges the complex arenas and ambiguities present in organizations and underlines the leader's task as offering stability through mutual trust and transparency.

What sets the authentic leadership model apart from the other models presented above is that it offers a more explicit description of the process of leadership



development. Authentic leadership development means the ability to understand ones' own life story and values and how these can be integrated and put into action (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Leaders' actions resonate with followers because they are able to offer coherence and credibility mined from thorough self-understanding (Michie and Gooty, 2005). Each of the leadership models presented here offers perspectives on what effective leaders *do*; *the* authentic leadership model offers potential insights into the ways that leaders *become*. The authentic leadership model also suggests that leadership cannot be achieved unless the leader operates from a strong sense of personal values that guide actions and inspire others.

The above contemporary leadership models emphasize the role of the leader as one who can set and articulate a worthwhile vision of the future and inspire others to act. At its core, leadership is "meaning-making in a community of practice (Palus and Drath, 1995, p. 1). Although there are many ways of conceptualizing leadership, the above definition of leadership as "meaning-making" is an intriguing way of understanding the essential roles of educational leaders. For exemplary leadership and transformational leadership, making meaning is about understanding a broader vision and sharing this in a way that others can act together to accomplish more than previously thought possible. For the authentic leader, meaning-making is about making sense out of one's own journey and understanding how experiences have shaped one's own values. By understanding oneself, one's journey, and one's own values, the authentic leader can bring a model of integration and stability which brings trust and psychological safety to an organization. Leadership in this context requires the ability to deal with ambiguity, provide a credible way of containing, and the social knowledge necessary to facilitate the development of others.

### **2.3 Leadership for Change**

The section above highlighted contemporary models of leadership to highlight the character and capacities of leadership. For these models, leadership is about helping followers understand and drive toward the desired future. This section will

present conceptions about the specific actions to enact change inside organizations and the types of dispositions necessary for change leadership.

Changes in the educational setting are difficult and often fail “because individual change efforts are poorly designed” (Hargreaves, 2002, p. 189). As highlighted in the literature review above, many drivers necessitate ongoing organizational development and change management processes. Effective change leadership requires an understanding of how to navigate these changes. This means first being aware of the multidimensional drivers of educational policies and how these individuals impact organizations. It also means having a credible vision worth pursuing (Senge, 2006)(Kotter, Akhtar and Gupta, 2021). This requirement is not always well understood by educational leaders. Often goals of educational changes are “unrealistic or unclear so teachers cannot achieve what is expected of them” (Hargreaves, 2002, p. 189).

As Hargreaves (2002) further cautions, perceptions around the motives of educational changes can impede a successful change project. If a leader is seen to lack credibility, or if the change project is seen by others to be motivated through self-interest or career advancement, the change project is likely to fail. This need for credibility with the individual change task mirrors the views of successful authentic leadership, where leadership actions are driven primarily through a deeply held conviction and the leader’s own well-articulated values. Followers are unlikely to embrace a change process unless the desired outcome is well understood and mutually beneficial.

Successful change also requires a well-articulated change plan, including understanding what actions are being taken and how the leader believes these will lead to the desired outcome. One of the early demands of the change process “is to develop a shared understanding of the problem the change is designed to address” (Timperley and Parr, 2005, p. 246). Many change plans fail because others in the organization don’t fully understand what is being asked of them or because “leaders falsely assume that the ‘why’ is clear to the broader audience” (Basford and Schaninger, 2016, p. 3). For this reason, the rationale for the change and its benefits to all in the organization must be well understood and communicated throughout the change process. Therefore, the change leader must have a firm

understanding of how individual steps are meant to achieve the overall goal, and he must be able to articulate this to the rest of the organization. This view doesn't suggest the change leader have all the answers but instead be able to make sense of the process and manage the competing views inside the organization (Timperley and Parr, 2005).

There are many models of change (Green and Cameron, 2004). One such model proposed by Fullan et al. reflects many of the insights provided above, including understanding the moral purposes of the organization and developing the change initiative from these deeply held values. He places additional emphasis on the cultures which support capacity building and organizational learning.

### **Eight Forces of Leaders for Change**

1. Engaging people's moral purposes
2. Building capacity
3. Understanding the change process
4. Developing cultures for learning
5. Developing cultures for evaluation
6. Focusing on leadership for change
7. Fostering coherence making
8. Cultivating trilevel (systemic) development (Fullan, Cuttress and Kilcher, 2009, pp. 54–58)

Organizational learning refers to how leaders can help facilitate organizational development by establishing a culture oriented towards reflective action (Senge, 2006; Argyris, 2007; Hargreaves, 2010). There are compelling reasons to approach the task of change leadership within educational organizations with this perspective. For one, organizational learning aims to raise the capacities of members inside the organization to enable them to think through organizational problems and solutions on the level of systems. Since the needs and drivers of educational changes are multidimensional, there are benefits to understanding ways to facilitate a culture where members of the organization are better equipped to understand the complexities of organizational development. Senge suggests these organizations might be better able to adapt to changes and more competent in developing effective solutions (Senge, 2006).

Although the notion of a learning organization falls outside the scope of this research, developing an organizational culture that is more able to identify relevant questions, develop coherent responses, and has a “bias for reflective action” (Fullan, 2007, p. 32) are all common practice in change management. It is the change leader's role, then, to find ways of facilitating a culture that is better equipped to make sense of its problems and operating contexts. One such “sense-making” approach is the process of double-loop learning, which occurs when errors are corrected by changing the governing values and then the actions” (Argyris, 2002, p. 206). Double-loop learning involves a reflective examination of the structures and patterns of organizational work and the underlying beliefs and assumptions that govern behaviors and actions (Argyris, 2007). As above, the change leader's role is to facilitate the sense-making process in organizations and enable the organization's membership to understand the need for change, identify worthwhile actions, and be better able to evaluate the ways that cultural expectations are in play during the change process.

Fullan warns that knowledge of change theories alone is not enough. Change is possible when the change agents have “a deep knowledge of the dynamics of how the factors in question operate to get a particular result” (Fullan, 2007, p. 27). This deep knowledge infers an understanding of the multidimensional nature of change and the ways of discerning how it might be best applied. Fullan reminds us that “change knowledge is not a disembodied set of facts, but rather a deeply applied phenomenon in the minds of people” (Fullan, 2007, p. 38). We shall see how this view of a “deeply applied phenomenon” aligns with the social-constructivist framework with the MEL program and the conception of adult learning highlighted in this research paradigm.

## **2.4 Development**

The leadership and change leadership models above highlight potential learning targets for leadership development but do not yet adequately explain how these targets might be achieved. To understand how leadership is learned and developed, it is first necessary to articulate adult learning theories more generally. How do adult learners learn and develop competencies, and what are the drivers of

learning for adults? The sections below will first outline contemporary theories of adult learning, particularly adult professional learning, to provide a broader definition of adult learning and how adults learn. This section will additionally investigate how others have conceptualized leadership development in particular.

### **2.4.1 Professional Learning**

The section below aims to underline contemporary views of adult professional learning. This section is not meant as a comprehensive overview of adult learning theory, but instead to provide theoretical positions for understanding how and why the participants in the MEL program might go about learning new leadership competencies and provide a rationale for viewing learning as a change in one's way of experiencing the world. The literature review below seeks to underline components of adult learning relevant to the networked, socio-constructivist learning framework of the MEL program and the phenomenological paradigm.

The MEL approach to teaching and learning is centered on a “collaborative knowledge construction of learning” (Tampere University of Applied Sciences, no date) The notion of learning as constructing meaning is critical to MEL and is a process of fitting new information to the learner's existing schema in order to develop or act in new ways. Since the adult learner is equipped with experiences and a framework already in place, new information, knowledge, or understanding is integrated into what is already known. In this way, the adult learner builds on what is already known and reconstructs the ways that she views the world “when becoming aware of something [...] in fractions of a second are able to recall what we subjectively and usually unconsciously define as relevant knowledge, understanding, attitudes, reactions and the like.” (Illeris, 2018, p. 6). For Mezirow, learning is “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 11).

Learning is also situated within a social context and constructed through social interactions. Wegner elaborates how learning and the contents of learning are relevant in how they are socially situated (Wenger, 2018). He elaborates this view

suggesting knowledge is constituted as “a matter of competence” in the skills and talents that have value in social contexts. *Knowing* refers to “participation” and “active experiences” in those enterprises, and *meaning* is constituted of an individual’s ways of “experiencing” the social world (Wenger, 2018, p. 220). From this perspective, learning cannot be separated from the social realm because the process of learning infers an understanding of its social function and is therefore always situated in the social domain. Wenger uses the term “community of practice” to refer to contexts of learning or social performance. For Wenger, a practice in professional life refers to tasks of an occupation and the ways they are performed to have a “satisfying experience” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). He suggests that the communities provide the “social and historic context that gives structure and meaning to what we do” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47).

The notion of “networked” learning featured within the MEL program extends the realm of the social into the digital domain. Although there are many definitions of networked learning, the three key notions are on “human/inter-personal relationships, technology, and collaborative engagement in a valued activity (joint inquiry, knowledgeable action, etc.). (Networked Learning Editorial, 2021, p. 314).

Illeris suggests that both the constructivist and the socio-constructivist models are accurate but incomplete. They foreground either the individual (constructivist) or the social (socio-constructivist) processes as central to learning. For Illeris, these elements are simultaneously always at work. He suggests “there are different types of learning that are widely different in scope and that the whole field must always be in the picture” (Illeris, 2018, p. 172) and goes further to emphasize the importance of this model as it relates to workplace or professional learning.

One, for example, cannot understand cognitive-professional content learning without also considering what happens in the emotional and social-societal dimensions (Illeris, 2018, p. 172).

Likewise, Jarvis highlights the holistic development of adult learning. It is not simply a matter of gaining skill or competence, he argues, “it is the whole person who is consciously aware of the situation, i.e., it is the individual’s skills, attitudes, values, feelings, emotions, beliefs, as well as cognition” (Jarvis, 2004). The

individual, social and emotional realms are present within the domains of learning proposed by Illeris (Figure 1). These domains of learning highlight the complexities in learning, and in designing and evaluating learning programs.

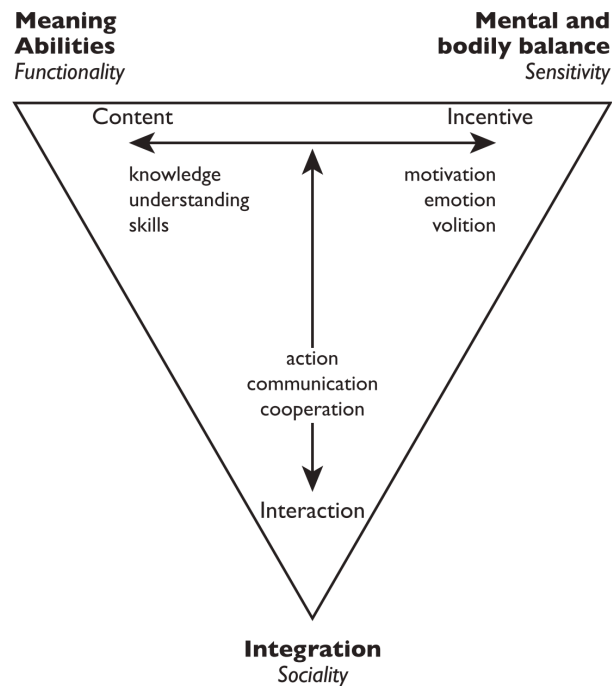


FIGURE 1. Three dimensions of learning (Illeris, 2011, p. 63)

This view of learning can help understand the relevant processes in learning about leadership development, for example. Learning in a professional environment requires the ability to act in some new way and understand the implications of those actions on the wider social environment. This view of learning can be explained with an example of change leadership. One might learn all the tools and theoretical knowledge of the processes related to change management, but without simultaneously learning about the social implications of those changes grounded in a specific context, the learning will not have any professional utility. Similarly, a leader who learns about change management and the condition inside an organization but is unable to manage his own emotions is unlikely to be able to facilitate stable and long-lasting change.

In the phenomenographic view, “professional learning is conceptualized as a matter of seeing something in a new way” (Pang, 2014, p. 595). There are similarities with the constructivist view of learning highlighted above in that learning implies a reconceptualization, but within the phenomenographic lens, the “new

way of experiencing or seeing something is constituted in the relationship between the experiencer and the experienced” (Pang, 2014, p. 595). The learner’s own way of experiencing the phenomenon differs markedly after learning. To learn something, or become aware, the participant must have encounters with a variety of examples of a phenomenon and must identify which elements are essential and which are not. Therefore, learning means developing an ability to *discern* or recognize what belongs within the conceptualization and what does not. For Pang, “the learner, after learning has taken place, has developed the capability of discerning those critical aspect that he or she could not discern before” (Pang, 2014, p. 607).

This discernment in understanding which structures or components are essential also assumes that the learner can apply this knowledge in novel situations. Pang further examines how professional learning is evidenced by the ability to understand and discern what ought to be brought into focus in a particular context. For example, professional learning about change management might include not only the ability to articulate a theory or an ability to identify which theory to apply in a given context but rather an increasingly nuanced ability to discern what approach works where and why. Put simply; professional learning is the ability to make sense out of complexity.

Central to the process of adult learning and development is the motivation for learning. This definition highlights the intentionality of the adult learner who approaches the learning task with some question or challenge which might be overcome as the result of learning. This intentional motivation of adult learning is key for Jarvis (2004) also. He underlines motivation as a critical component of adult learning and adult professional learning. This motivation can come in many forms. Jarvis, for example, calls this a *disjunction* (2004, p. 107) and suggests that the adult learner is motivated to learn when they are facing a problematic situation that needs a solution that the learner does not currently possess. He argues, “the more complex and rapidly changing our global society, the more frequently will we experience disjuncture and, therefore, lifelong learning” (Jarvis, 2004, p. 107). This experience of *disjunction* and the discomfort associated with it pushes adult learners to develop further. Mezirow refers to this disjunction as a *disorienting dilemma* that propels adult learners forward (1991, p. 98).



In these views, adult learning occurs in multiple domains, is evidenced by a new way of seeing or experiencing a phenomenon, and is constructed from an existing schema.

The endeavor of the learner is to construct *meaning* and *ability* to deal with the challenges of practical life and thereby develop an overall personal *functionality* (Illeris, 2006, p. 91).

Illeris' definition of adult learning emphasizes the critical component of motivation of the adult learners to "deal with the challenges of practical life" and suggests two primary means of overcoming these challenges: "constructing meaning" and developing "ability." These mechanisms are both central to understanding adult professional learning generally and leadership development in particular.

#### **2.4.2 Leadership Development**

As seen above, adult learning is situated in individual, social, and emotional domains and is motivated by a gap between the desired future and the current state. The section above underlines how individuals confront and overcome this gap, but this same process operates on the organizational level. Schein and Schein suggest "learning occurs when something expected is not happening, and the individual or the group feels hungry, hurt, disappointed, or in some other way "disconfirmed" (2016, p. 14). It is the role of the leader to facilitate group learning. How might individuals gain and develop these competencies?

One of the challenges in understanding leadership development is that the models of leadership are abundant, complex, and heavily context-dependent. Still, the discussion of adult professional learning above provides a general framework to understand the processes of leadership development. In broadest terms, leadership is learned by first noticing and defining a gap between the desired state and the current reality, then building capacities to bridge that gap.

There are critical links between the social-constructivist views of general adult learning and leadership development. For Palus and Drath, leadership refers to

“*meaning-making in a community of practice*” (1995, p. 1). This reference to Wegner’s social view of learning is not accidental. They propose a leadership development model that emphasizes adaptation or reorientation of the *meaning structures* around the ways that leadership is conceptualized and enacted in a social setting (Palus and Drath, 1995). Therefore, the outcome of leadership development involves new ways of understanding the concept of leadership and its roles inside an organization. The leadership development model proposed by Palus and Drath (Figure 2) is useful in articulating leadership development components in congruence with models of adult learning proposed by Illeris. Development is situated in a social environment and aims to bridge the gap between what is expected and what is happening.

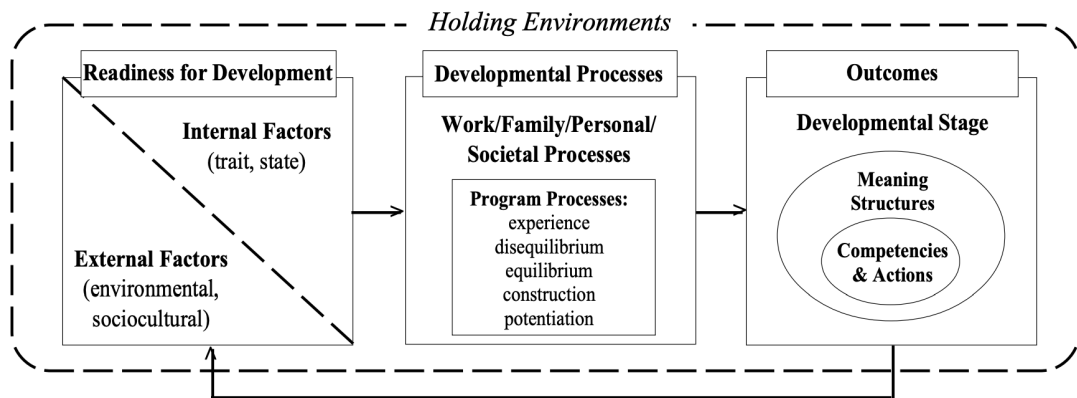


FIGURE 2. Leadership development model (Palus and Drath, 1995, p. 4)

The leadership development model also emphasizes the role of an individual’s motivations and emotional orientation towards learning. This “readiness for development” reflects the type of motivational “disjunction” referenced by Jarvis and Mezirow. The holding environment of the leadership development process refers to the learning context and the supporting structures that enable learning to take place, either inside an organization or within a learning community. Finally, the model suggests that learning outcomes of leadership development reflect new competencies and leadership actions. Critically, these competencies are enabled by new meaning structures within the learner. Throughout the development process, the adult learner reconstructs an understanding of what leadership means and how leadership is experienced. It is seen and understood in a fundamentally new way.

Leadership development means a raised awareness in the new ways that learners come to understand the role of leadership and their own experiences enacting that role. Competencies and tools to lead are important, but they are only useful if they are employed with a holistic understanding of the role, the relevant social contexts, and of oneself. Klinck writes about this view of leadership development as a raised awareness and contextualizes it with broader trends of organizational development “the idea of artistry, imagination, and innovation in business has taken on a stronger position. Writers have reflected the awareness, which was growing stronger in the concept that learning is central to humanity. We are all learners” (2007, p. 17). The complexities around the role and responsibilities of leaders demand self-awareness so that leaders themselves are capable, lifelong learners are able to negotiate Jarvis’ *disjunction*.

The authentic leadership model provides a window into the ways that individuals can develop new meaning structures around leadership. The authentic leadership model focuses on the integrity between values, behavior, and actions of a leader. Leadership credibility comes from consistency and transparency. With this view, leadership development can be observed in the ways that leaders are able to make sense of their own stories and the stories of others. In other words, the leader’s own understanding of her “personal history and key trigger events [are] antecedents for authentic leadership development” (Gardner *et al.*, 2005, p. 347).

The life-story view of leadership development is central to the authentic leadership model and holds significant value for this study. In this view, emerging leaders are able to develop effectiveness and credibility by gaining clarity into their own self-concept and leadership identity (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Klinck, 2007). This approach “suggests that self-knowledge, self-concept clarity, and the internalization of the leader’s role into the self-concept are achieved through the construction of life-stories” (Shamir and Eilam, 2005, p. 409).

Shamir and Eilam provide four developmental pathways for the authentic leader:

- “Development of a leader identified as a central component of the person’s self-concept.

- Development of self-knowledge and self-concept clarity, including clarity about values and convictions.
- Development of goals that are concordant with the self-concept.
- Increasing self-expressive behavior, namely consistency between leader behaviors and the leader's self-concept" (Shamir and Eilam, 2005, p. 399)

These developmental pathways listed above provide insights into ways that emerging leaders begin to make sense of their own life stories in order to lead from a position of authenticity. The increasing awareness of one's own identity as a leader is congruent with an increase in a general sense of self-awareness and the ability to construct meaning from one's history. The authentic leader's task is to articulate a credible vision for the future which is truthful, consistent, and transparent. These actions are not possible without thorough and consistent self-knowledge, so that these leadership actions are derived from clarity of one's own values and beliefs. Developing as a leader means understanding why one is seeking to lead in the first place. Critically for this study, it means integrating the notion of oneself as a leader within the self-concept.

We have seen above that leadership in educational contexts is a challenging, complex, and sometimes ambiguous process. For leaders who seek to enact change in this environment, they must offer followers a viable way forward with stability and integrity. These are only possible when the leader has developed a strong sense of self and a rationale for leading.

When this private inner world is open to us, we can see how individuals create and live the role of leadership. It is stating the obvious, but there is no one way to lead. Leaders need to find and tell their stories just as their role models have (Klinck, 2007, p. 14).

## **2.5 Measuring Impact**

Leadership development is complex. Since leadership is not a discreet skill but rather a set of competencies, dispositions, and awareness of the social field, leadership development is also not easily measured. There have been several attempts proposed to understand the effects of development programs on

leadership behaviors and organizational impacts. In a twenty-five year longitudinal study, researchers identified three such clusters of leadership skills for effective leadership development: *emotional intelligence [adaptability, emotional self-control, emotional self-awareness, positive outlook, achievement orientation]*, *cognitive intelligence [systems thinking, pattern recognition]*, and *social intelligence [empathy, organizational awareness, inspirational leadership, coaching and mentoring, conflict management and teamwork]* (Passarelli, Boyatzis and Wei, 2018, p. 58). The researchers used a baseline cohort, interviews, and yearly assessment data to understand the impacts of the leadership development program inside an MBA degree. The focus of this study was to assess the impacts of the program over time.

In a qualitative impact study, Sturges et al. (2003) used a career competency framework proposed by Defillippi and Arthur (1994, p. 310) “*knowing how [knowledge, skills, abilities], knowing why [identity, values, interests], knowing whom [networking]*” to investigate the impacts of participation in an MBA program. This study interviewed working professionals to understand the extent to which experiences in an MBA program developed their competencies within the framework. An additional study focused on understanding the impacts of an MBA program from the user side. Hay (2006) interviewed twenty-five working professionals who had graduated from MBA programs in the UK to understand how the experience in the programs helped them develop competencies in their post-graduate careers. The study suggested that MBA “learning adds value to management practice and facilitates seeing differently regarding self, others, and organization” (Hay, 2006, p. 292). These studies each provide an essential framework for the research here because they establish validity for understanding learning impacts through qualitative user-side data and point to competencies relevant for leadership development.

The impact studies above offer ways that leadership development can be understood and measured. Seen alongside the theories of adult professional learning and authentic leadership development, there is strong evidence for the validity in measuring leadership impacts through the phenomenological approach. The link between the phenomenological approach and leadership development is an important one. For the leadership frameworks highlighted above, to lead means to

understand the complex stories which are shared and understood by the individual. Leadership requires an ability to make sense of one's own story. Leadership development means the ability to discern elements of effective leadership that had previously been unseen, and it requires a reframing of one's own identity to include the leadership construct.

The impact of the MEL program, therefore, will be identifiable in changes in the ways that participants are able to conceptualize and articulate leadership and their own leadership journey.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODS

The strategy and design of research should be coherent with the research questions and object of study (Giorgi, 2005). This research uses a qualitative approach to understanding leadership development for studying leadership development as it provides means of illuminating and discussing the complexities of leadership as well as the “social processes that form leadership within a particular context” (Kempster, 2009, p. 47). Moreover, I argue that a qualitative approach that investigates the participants’ experiences within the MEL program offers a potentially rich source of information about learning impacts and the scope of real-world needs of educational leaders operating in a wide range of contexts. This research, therefore, prioritizes emergent data in lieu of experimental or confirmational studies.

I would say that that decision depends upon the question being asked...This is especially true if it does turn out, as I suspect, that experiential dimensions of phenomena do not have a quantitative structure that will support quantitative methods (Giorgi, 2005, p. 80).

As explored in the theoretical framework outlined above, a critical piece of leadership development refers to the restructuring and reorientating the mental constructs related to leadership, one’s own leadership capacity, and the socially constructed context of leadership action. Therefore, the relevant object of investigation is the study participants’ own conceptions about leadership and whether these conceptions have changed as a result of participation in the MEL program.

#### 3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology involves the study of the subjective experience of a phenomenon to identify the essential features of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 1997; Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology reduces “individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the essence of the experience for all individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). The objective, therefore, “is to describe the

meaning of this experience—both in terms of *what* was experienced and *how* it was experienced” (Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio, 2019, p. 91).

Since the object of study relates to the mental constructions of leadership and the experiences of leadership development within the MEL program, the phenomenological philosophical paradigm and research design are well suited for investigating impact in the MEL program. Phenomenology is congruent with the socio-constructivist framework of the MEL program as well as the conceptions of leadership development offered in the literature review above. For the phenomenologist, “meaning is constructed in the dialectic between the world and the person, and does not reside within an individual, a culture or a particular object” (Webster-Wright, 2010a, p. 66). Leadership development can be understood by investigating the qualitative changes in the meaning constructions about models of leadership and the participant’s own conception of themselves as a leader. Likewise, phenomenological interpretation involves “a meaningful construal of experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 11).

The phenomenological approach can also provide important insights into the impacts of a learning and development program in the way that it accounts for emerging data from program participants. In leadership development, where impacts are observed in participants’ changes in meaning structures and ways that participants successfully construct and communicate their own leadership practices, phenomenology is well-suited. In the phenomenological interview, participants, as co-researchers of the phenomenon, are reflecting on their own leadership journeys and are sense-making in real-time.

In this phenomenological lens, the impact of the MEL program will be evident in the ways that participants will be able to discern the notion of leadership and the ways that leadership functions in organizations. Learning means the ability to discern and articulate their own story as it relates to leadership and the ways they are able to enact changes in their own organization. Since leadership is about meaning-making, both for oneself and for others, then leadership development will be observable in the changes to the ways that a participant is able to articulate a changed understanding of the notion of leadership and the way the MEL program has impacted the participants’ experiences of leadership.



## 3.2 Methodology

“The intent of phenomenology is to uncover the taken-for-granted nature of everyday experience and look with fresh eyes at the world” (Webster-Wright, 2010, p. 60).

Although “there is no one correct way to do phenomenology” (Finlay, 2014a, p. 137), the aim of phenomenological explication is to approach the data in a systematic way to uncover the essential meanings of a phenomenon. My overall approach for this study was to choose common procedures from the research literature that offered transparent and delineated approaches at each stage. As a novice researcher, the focus of my research design was to employ strategies that appeared often in the research literature with a wide range of applications in social sciences. The sections below highlight the research design as well as the rationale for the decisions at each stage.

## 3.3 Participants

The participants in the study were invited during an open MEL alumni meeting on Zoom and subsequently on the shared alumni social media platforms. All were told the nature of the study, the research questions, and the format as a video recorded interview. Interested participants replied to the message and were contacted to schedule the interviews. My aim was to select the first ten participants who responded. However, the MEL 2019 group was overrepresented, so I selected the first ten respondents representing at least two participants from each cohort year group (2017, 2018, 2019). The final ten participants were invited to a 45–60-minute conversation about their experiences in the MEL program. They were told beforehand that the research was about leadership development within the MEL program, and the goal of the research was to explore the experiences of program participants, but they were not provided with specific questions in advance of the interviews. The participants below (Table 1) were all given pseudonyms to keep responses anonymous. The participants in this study represented

a wide range of working and cultural contexts (Finland [2], Belgium, Czechia, Columbia, England, Germany, Italy, Slovakia, and Thailand).

TABLE 1. Study participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>
Camilla	Teacher, Secondary Education
Anne	Business Coordinator, Higher Education
Ida	Course Developer, IT
Marta	Senior Leadership, Higher Education
Nina	Senior Leadership, Secondary Education
Marius	Senior Leadership, Primary/Secondary Education
Sanna	Middle Leadership, Secondary Education
Lena	Co-Founder, Education
Marit	Senior Leadership, Primary Education
Ole	Middle Leadership, Higher Education

### 3.4 Data Collection

The interviews took place over Zoom, were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes in total. The interviews were semi-structured with three planned questions for each participant:

1. Why did you decide to join the MEL program?
2. What were your impressions during the first intensive week?
3. How would you describe a MEL graduate?

These questions were intended to provide a reference point for the expectations and needs of the participants, why they chose MEL, and whether the initial impressions of the MEL program matched expectations. The final question was meant as an opportunity for participants to reflect on the holistic experience of MEL after the reflective co-researching within the interviews themselves. The set questions also provided an opportunity to reflect on the entirety of the MEL experience during the interview. These predetermined questions at the beginning,

middle, and end of the MEL experience also provided a framework where I was able to develop a loose structure with the emerging themes.

### **3.5 Analysis and Interpretation**

Although there are many ways of approaching phenomenological analysis, Applebaum (2016) reminds phenomenologists that a clearly defined procedure is necessary for research findings to be of use to the wider scientific community. For this reason, I used Moustakas' adaptation of the (1994) Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method outlined in Creswell (2007, p. 159). The rationale here was that this method provided clarity and a reproducible analytic procedure which also provided coherence to the large data set of ten transcribed interviews. The headings which follow reflect the stages in the analytic method as given by Creswell.

#### **3.5.1 Bracketing**

Bracketing is a critical part of the phenomenological process, both in conducting interviews and particularly in stages of data analysis (Tufford and Newman, 2012). Although the process of bracketing varies among phenomenological approaches, the aim is to provide a mental space for the researcher to separate his own already formed expectations of the subject of research in order to approach the phenomenon with an eye for discovery. There are many approaches to bracketing (Webster-Wright, 2010), but my process, described below, was to write informal reflection notes at the beginning of each analytic pass.

#### **3.5.2 Personal Experiences**

I began the analytic process by first listening to a reflection of my own leadership journey, which I had previously audio recorded as part of an assignment for the MEL course. In the recording, I detailed my own experiences as a leader and how the MEL program reshaped my own understanding of myself and my capacities for leadership. I chose to begin by listening to this recording because it was an

artifact of a significant story on my own leadership journey and had been one of the first instances that I felt able to articulate this story - even to myself. I then wrote reflective notes about my own experiences within the MEL program. These procedures were part of the bracketing process meant to separate my own expectations of the data by first making them explicit. This reflective process was especially important in the early stages of the analysis because, as written previously, my own experiences in the MEL program have been influential. The process of bracketing allowed me to make my own expectations about the data conscious and explicit. At each stage of analysis, I began with a few minutes of reflection, which typically involved written comments about what I had already seen in my analysis, what I expected to find, as well as the tensions that were present in the work (Finlay, 2014).

### **3.5.3 Significant Statements**

After proofing the text transcriptions, I used Atlas.ti to locate important quotations in each of the individual statements by highlighting quotations without assigning a code. After the first pass, I reviewed the list of quotations, and each in each transcript I identified both the holistic ideas emerging about the MEL experience as well as themes or patterns of ideas within that interview transcript and made general notes about the holistic experience described in each of the participant interviews. The purpose here was not to define thematic descriptions but to note places where the participants were particularly illustrative or especially when it seemed that the participant was articulating something for the first time. This process of searching for relevant meanings within the interview texts was not linear, and I repeatedly returned to the raw data throughout the analytical process to review and refine selected statements.

### **3.5.4 Emerging Themes**

After the first holistic pass, I reviewed my notes in each section to create broad categories for further thematic analysis. I found seven themes: *leadership models*, *shifts in understanding*, *sense of self*, *networks*, *reflections on education*,

*credibility, change management*. After coding the data into these initial themes, I had a sense that I had “found” but not entirely “seen” the experiences described in the data. In other words, the themes provided useful segments of data but were insufficient in capturing the essence of participant experience. One of the central challenges in the process was the ambiguity in trying to capture the essential elements of each participants’ statements as well as the overall ideas emerging in the text. Working through ambiguity is an important part of the analytical process (Tufford and Newman, 2012, p. 84; Finlay, 2014). As mentioned above, I returned to this stage to refine my thematic statements throughout the analytical procedure and found “things become clearer as they are considered again and again” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78).

I returned to the individual interviews and again reviewed them holistically and coded in-vivo to identify the concepts which appeared as central to the individual participant’s experience within the MEL program. These in-vivo codes, when analyzed alongside the wider thematic codes from the entire data set, offered a more nuanced description of each of the participant’s experience. With these, I expanded the coding into fifteen themes. I found that the original themes left common ideas untouched but was reassured by Finlay’s reminder, “Know that you are likely to engage lots of iterations” (Finlay, 2014, p. 136). The rationale at this stage was to avoid being reductive. The expanded themes were *trust/open environment, the Finnish model, unlike traditional programs, research, knowledge and understanding, poor leadership models, values, and missing pieces*. These themes were significant as they provided a better articulation of *how* the MEL experience was impactful for the participants. Again, the focus was on finding meaningful categories to make sense of the data, not producing the final thematic statements needed to capture the essence of the participants’ experience.

### **3.5.5 Textural Description**

In phenomenological reduction, the task is to describe in textural language just what one sees, not only in terms of the external object but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self. The qualities of the experience become the focus (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 76–77).

The textural description in a phenomenological analysis refers to the *what* of an experience (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). The researcher aims to review the data and develop descriptions that identify the essence of the phenomenon. For this study, I wrote short individual descriptions of each participant's interview focusing on the holistic ideas expressed about leadership and leadership development. For this stage, I re-read the entirety of each participant's interview, wrote general notes, and then reviewed the coded quotations for the participant before writing the individual textural descriptions. After completing this process for all participants, I had a short holistic description and the coded data. With these, I developed the composite textural descriptions of the data set.

This analysis which examines the interactions between parts of the text and the whole is the hermeneutic circle. For phenomenologists, the hermeneutic circle provides a philosophical framework for approaching and analyzing texts. As Grondin suggests, "we understand because we are guided by anticipations, expectations, and questions" (2015), and therefore this analytical process where the text is interpreted by repeatedly triangulating parts to the whole and to the researchers own questioning and insights provides coherence to the process of sense-making within the data.

The hermeneutical circle signifies that, in interpretive experience, a new understanding is achieved not on the basis of already securely founded beliefs. Instead, a new understanding is achieved through renewed interpretive attention to further possible meanings of those presuppositions which, sometimes tacitly, inform the understanding that we already have (George, 2020).

This hermeneutic circle, where understanding comes through the interactions of parts to the whole, is congruent with the wider philosophies guiding this research, namely, the theory of learning and adult development articulated above. In the developmental models explored in the theoretical background, "new understanding" is possible when old presuppositions are reinterpreted or reconstrued.

### 3.5.6 Structural Description

While the textural description in a phenomenological analysis refers to the *what* of a phenomenon, the structural descriptions seek to identify *how* the phenomenon came to be. For this stage, the second set of codes were especially useful as they offered a better picture of the aspects of the MEL program that participants reflected on in-depth. In these sections, there were far richer examples about the processes of reflection and understanding. As above, I employed the hermeneutic circle of looking first at the text in its entirety to create thorough notes and then used these holistic observations to approach the meaning segments captured in the coded data. As before, I used the individual descriptions to then create a composite picture of the MEL experience for the participants as it related to leadership development and change capacities.

### 3.5.7 Synthesis

The last stage of the phenomenological analysis involves synthesizing the *what* and the *how* to understand the essence of the phenomenon of study. The essence of the phenomenon refers to the essential structures or defining features that, if left out, would leave an incomplete picture of the phenomenon described (Finlay, 2014b, pp. 125–126). At this stage, I used the holistic descriptions of each participant as well as the thematic statements to work systematically and capture the essence of the experience as accurately as possible. Giorgi suggests the researcher in this stage of the process is attuned to the data and “lets one’s professional sensitivity and spontaneity function so that relevant meanings can be intuited” (Giorgi, 1997).

At this final stage of the analysis, I had spent several months with the data working first to proof the transcriptions and provide holistic descriptions of each participant’s interview. I then worked through several stages of coding and horizontalizing the significant statements to reformulate codes. By this final stage, I felt that the thematic statements used to articulate the categories were useful for making sense of the data but insufficient in describing the essence of the leadership experience. Perhaps because of my familiarity with the data and the

confidence from working closely with several rounds of analysis, I decided to use the themes as evidence to fit within the final categories of *questioning the model*, *becoming aware*, and *reconstruction*. These final phenomenological categories more directly captured the meaningful essence of the MEL experience and allowed for a fuller description related to the research question. Finlay (2014) suggests novice researchers remind themselves of the research question to avoid getting lost in the data. As they appear below, the final categories best represent the scope of the interview data and provide relevant evidence as it relates to the object of study in this research.



## 4 RESULTS

In this study, the impact of the MEL program can be identified and understood in the ways that participants conceptualize and see the constructs of leadership and change leadership before, during, and after the MEL program. Since the phenomenological study aimed to understand the essence of the experiences in the participants, this section below will outline how the experiences described in the interviews can be synthesized into a common narrative which might explain the ways that MEL participants conceptualize MEL. Understanding the impact of the MEL program here means looking for ways that the participants see the constructs of leadership, change management, and themselves as actors in educational leadership. The sections below highlight emergent themes of the MEL experience.

In the participants of this study, three essential themes of *questioning the model*, *becoming aware*, and *reconstruction* are discussed below. Within these essential themes, the narrative below will seek to describe how each of these essential themes impacts the participants' constructs of leadership and change leadership, as well as the impacts on how participants view themselves and their role as actors in the field of education.

### 4.1 Questioning the Model

This section will explore the essential theme of *questioning the model*. The results below reflect the ways in which the participants of this study discussed the questions which motivated participants to join the MEL program and as well as questions that emerged during MEL. *Questioning the model* refers to the multiple ways that participants described questions, considerations, or dilemmas about education, leadership, and the participants' own capacity to work as actors in educational change. Many of the participants in the study described how they joined the MEL program already with questions about the models of leadership that they had encountered in the past.

### 4.1.1 Leadership

*Questioning the model* about leadership refers to the uncertainties and dilemmas that many described. These questions about leadership models they had previously encountered, researched, or enacted emerged in the early stages of the interviews and were already in play for participants when enrolling in the program. Many joined the MEL program because they realized that the leadership examples they had seen in the past were not sufficient for enabling change. Ida spoke at length about the ways she felt discouraged and frustrated with the models of leadership in her profession.

Managers and leaders I've seen - just wow. How is it possible somebody pays you to do that? You're playing people for a living. (Ida)

It's almost like bullying. You know, if you're strong and you can handle it, you're fine. But if you are sensitive and a little bit more timid or quiet, they will stomp all over you. I mean, I've seen some horrible leaders. It's like the whole hierarchy. And the idea of being someone's manager or in a position like that is like having the power over people. And I just don't think that's the way to do it. (Ida)

These encounters, and her observation of how these leadership actions impacted Ida's colleagues, made Ida curious to understand whether there were other models of leadership worth exploring. She pointed to this as the primary reason for joining MEL in the first place. Ole shared a similar frustration when reflecting on how leadership in his working context had been limiting how new ideas are generated and implemented. This observation came after reflecting on the changing conditions of the public education sector where he works and the tension between the need for new ideas and the ways that the organizational culture and leadership styles are impeding innovation in his department.

A lot of leaders, in my context, don't give a shit about that because it's a hierarchical system. They don't care because they, you know, they can be. It's a very traditional notion of power. And I think that that's not really the way it should be. (Ole)

Ole's frustration- that the style of leadership he had witnessed was insufficient for leading positive changes in the educational sector- mirrored Ida and many others.

Below Marit described an experience that others had also identified. For many in the program, leadership models or examples of others did not quite work for the study participants when they began to assume leadership roles. Even in cases where the study participants had a compelling or effective leadership model to draw from, these models or examples were insufficient or incomplete when the participants tried these roles themselves. Marit spoke about a common question: she wondered whether she could lead since her own personality and style was much different than some of the leaders she admired. This assumption that leaders have common characteristics or inborn traits meant that the study participants were confused when they found themselves in leadership roles even without the traits they had previously ascribed to leadership.

I even had a really good relationship with my previous principal and I kind of pictured her as the kind of person I would like to be as well when I took over the position...And then when I got there, I had especially the first year, it gave me a lot of challenges that I wasn't expecting because I wasn't I was just kind of going with the flow, I wasn't planning myself moving up or how it [was] going to affect me. [Or] what kind of leader I was going to be. (Marit)

The motivation for many of the participants in the study came from a gap between the models of leadership they had seen or enacted and the impacts they desired for their own organizations.

#### **4.1.2 The Educational Landscape**

Like Ole described above, Many MEL participants joined the program with well-formulated questions about the shifting educational landscape. They recognized that educational needs had changed, and they had questions about how to move forward. The personal values and professional observations of participants often contrasted with the ways that educational systems and leadership structures were organized. Many came to MEL looking for ways to address these questions. Camilla described her frustrations about the disparity between what she perceived as student needs and the policy decisions being made in her country's educational system.

There are loads of things that are making absolutely no sense whatsoever. But that's where we got to because no one's challenging it. There is no critical thinking behind it. (Camilla)

These types of questions were abundant, even when the source of the disparity was not immediately clear. Descriptions such as the one below highlight the essential questions that many of the study's participants came to the program already formulated.

I saw some things happening, and I thought, is this the best way to get things done in education? Do we need to be to think more out of the box, or when are people going to start to think out of the box? Because we see classrooms with the teacher in front of pupils are students sitting and listening. And I was thinking and questioning when is this going to change? Not that it should disappear, but there has to be another way to tackle this. (Nina)

Nina's presented her question about the educational practices in her context with a sense of frustration. She, like and many others in the study, recognized the need for changes to the way education was done but also felt uncertain or even discouraged when she saw leadership unable to address these issues. Some participants had already formulated specific questions which arose from their own professional experience. Anne describes a common theme in the data, which outlines the complexities and rapidly changing context that educators worldwide are operating in. Many participants commented on this challenge of meeting the changing needs of learners and came to the MEL program searching for tools to operate in this shifting context.

What I was struggling with, you know, just kind of keeping up. The students are not the same that they used to be like 10, 20 years ago. And also, I think we are in this huge, rapidly changing - education has, or the work-life has never changed as fast as it is changing right now. Keeping it up to date to respond to the work-life needs, that's kind of a common challenge. At least I see everyone is struggling with that. How do we prepare people for professions that we don't know about? What do we need in 10 years in the higher education sector? (Anne)

*Questioning the model* meant that participants wondered whether the examples they had seen or experienced from the past were indeed the best way of leading others or enacting change. They had already formulated questions about

leadership and the changing needs in education. This questioning and critical reflection were also supported deliberately within the MEL program itself. Participants of the study described ways in which the MEL program established the way of critical questioning as a means of furthering one's understanding and expectations about what should be in an educational landscape. Camilla describes the ways in which the program encouraged participants to reflect and take a critical lens regarding how policies and practices in the field of education are enacted.

What I wasn't expecting was the fact that they are pushing you to be critical, to be reflective, or to have a proper insight into the subject. ... What's going on with it? Where is the future? Where is this leading to? So, it is making this critical analysis that they're pushing it towards. And that's that was a quite a surprise because normally in management, just like this is how we do it and this is how it's going to be? (Camilla)

Rather than Mark standing up there and saying a lot of stuff to us, he just sort of lit the touch paper and let us go up in flames ourselves talking about all these different things. (Marta)

## 4.2 Becoming Aware

The section below explores the ways that the participants of the study *became aware* of previously unrealized aspects of constructs, capacities, or relationships. The phrase *becoming aware* here is used in favor of learning or growing as these responses suggest the process of reflective realization or noticing what had previously gone unnoticed. This theme of *becoming aware* signifies the ways in which the participants described the MEL program as a gradual unfolding of understanding about educational practices, leadership, and themselves.

### 4.2.1 Of Self

One of the key themes that emerged from the research was how participants *became aware* of what had previously been hidden or poorly understood about themselves. Participants described the ways in which the program facilitated a greater sense of self-awareness and the contexts in which they operated. This

awareness is related to both the personal and professional domains. In the early and middle stages of the program, in particular, the participants in the study spoke about recognizing something in themselves or their own contexts that they had never considered before.

For me, it was like a personal discovery. And I know that sounds quite a grand thing to say, but. It made me think about learning and education in a completely different way from how I had done previously. It made me engage with a lot of literature that I wouldn't have looked at before. (Marta)

For Camilla, a course in the program encouraged her to develop her research and publish her findings. This experience shifted her sense of professional identity and helped her become aware of her capacities and limitations in her work life. She spoke about how a course that asked her to research educational policies and their impacts helped her recognize her own voice as credible.

I would have never, ever tried before to write a paper. I would be too ashamed, you know, like you always look at your writing, and you go to this terrible I am so ashamed. And it's fine. I can write a paper; I can get my view across. (Camilla)

The network of support within the program was one of the enabling factors. Camilla recognized that her colleagues and instructors also saw her as a credible voice.

And I know I know there are other people who don't think I write too poorly. So, it's OK. I can write. I'm also more aware of my weaknesses when it comes to leadership. (Camilla)

For Marta, the international aspect of the course enabled her to reflect on the ways that her own experiences and understanding of education were rooted in her own context. This realization came during the first intensive week of the program when she was confronted with ways of seeing that she had not been exposed to.

I didn't realize how English I was until I went somewhere that was not England. And it made me stop and think. (Marta)

This type of discovery where participants were able to understand and *discern* their own identity in contrast to others was a common part of the experience in

the MEL program. Marta's example highlights the ways in which this awareness impacted her working life. Her experience as a student in an international context gave her an understanding of what it means to study in a foreign country and made her own conceptions about education salient for the first time. This *becoming aware* of her context enabled Marta to understand the experiences of the international students at her university.

It made me think a lot more about the experiences of international students in a way that I hadn't before and about how we do transnational education. (Marta)

Marta expresses a sense of surprise when becoming aware of this previously unseen aspect of her identity. For her, this awareness meant an ability to discern the ways contexts and identity influence her personal and professional decision-making.

And I thought, my God, I never even thought about this because it's so normal to me. (Marta)

For Ida, the experience in the group setting contextualized her own questions about changing jobs for the first time. She spoke about her observation that many of her colleagues in the MEL program had been living and working in countries far from home.

OK, if these people have the guts to just. Pick up and just go into an entirely different country and different culture, surely, I can just switch the work, I mean, my workplace, it's like the whole example of like the amazing people and their experiences, like, OK, switching a job, that's not the end of the world. And OK, I'm going to have to try it. If I don't right now, I'm not going to do it ever. (Ida)

Before this observation, Ida spoke first about how impressed and intimidated she had been when beginning the program. Within the first few days of the intensive week, she became aware that she also had relevant contributions valued in her group. She became aware of herself as a peer to the MEL colleagues she admired. Since her colleagues- her peers- had moved and changed jobs, Ida became aware of her own ability to do the same. This recognition of her own affinity with the group gave Ida the confidence to change professions during the MEL program.

#### 4.2.2 Of Others

*“I wanted to expand my perspective, I wanted to be exposed to different stories. I didn’t want to listen to one single story.” (Marius)*

*Becoming aware* of what was “so normal” that it had been previously unseen is another experience that emerged from the data. This emerging awareness was true about the ways contexts shaped identity and how others’ values were in play during the negotiation of group tasks. Through the group work and the frustrations which accompanied some of the small group negotiations, Ole began to recognize his operating assumptions were not the same as everyone else’s

It was a very interesting insight for me, something that I have realized for a long time. But with me, it was like, well, everyone is the way I am, and everyone loves doing their thing. They’re very similar to me, and no, they’re not. It’s very naive to think that everyone else is operating on the same kind of set of values as I do. And I realized that aspect of our program made me realize, oh, no, it’s very different. (Ole)

Ole emphasized that the group dynamics, including vulnerability and trust, enabled them to discuss values and ways of working more openly, especially when these conflicted. Others in the study spoke about the nature of the small group work and the intentional, collaborative work as simultaneously an essential part of the learning and one of the central sources of friction. The level of trust and accountability within the study teams enabled participants to learn about themselves and others in a way that had not been possible in teams they had been part of in the past. Several participants spoke about the ways that the work within the study teams enabled them to understand the needs of others as credible and worth addressing – sometimes for the first time in professional life.

We learned that we are different. And we have also talked about it, but the thing is we were able to express how we [thought] and what kind of set of values or goals we operate [from]. You know we were able to express that. We talked about it, and we had discussions about it. And then we’re like, yeah, well, I’m this way. So be aware. That can happen, and you are very different than I am, so how can we make this work? (Ole)



Marius also spoke about how the program and the interactions within the program changed his understanding of others, others' understanding of leadership, and unexpected ways that he might learn from others. He spoke about his desire to learn from the stories of others and how these stories from others helped him to formulate his own understanding of leadership and learning,

You know, I also know that a lot about leadership depends on the stories of the people. You know, I didn't have any stories to rely upon. I was not part of a big network. I never knew about the mistakes that our leaders in my same position had made in the past. So I didn't have any mistakes to learn from, you know, being part of a big community of people and learners also allowed me to learn from other people's stories and other people's mistakes. (Marius)

*Becoming aware* of one's own stories and understanding, appreciating, and integrating the stories of others is an essential component of the MEL program. For the participants in the study, recognizing the social field and one's place emerges as a common learning experience. Marius was somewhat shocked at his former perspective when he recounted how he might not have recognized kindergarten teachers as colleagues before the MEL experience.

You know, probably like two or three years ago, if I had been put in it in a group of people with some kindergarten teachers, that would have said, well, I'm in the wrong place. (Marius)

Marius' recognition that the network of educational professionals extends beyond those whose work most closely resembles his own is common in the study. *Becoming aware* means understanding first how one's own identity and perspectives are shared. *Becoming aware* of others means recognizing the value and perspectives offered through the network, even in previously unseen places.

### **4.2.3 Shapes of Leadership**

*Becoming aware* of the shapes of leadership refers to the essential ways that participants encountered new ways of seeing leadership. Like an object taking shape as it is cast in light, the MEL program enabled participants to discern aspects of leadership that had previously been hidden. For some, this meant understanding that effective leadership is not a trait that one is born with. For others

in the study, they could discern or understand the functions of leadership that had previously been unclear. For others in, *becoming aware* of the shapes of leadership meant becoming more aware of tools for effective leadership. The MEL program allowed participants in this study to understand that the concept of leadership involved more than they had previously known.

Most of the participants in the study already had formal leadership roles within their own organizations prior to joining the MEL program. Still, the participants spoke of uncertainties in the ways that they led or inspired changes. Marit described her initial year as a school principal and her difficulties when trying to lead as she expected others wanted. Here she speaks about trying to emulate this vision of a leader she had seen in the past, even as these traits or characteristics did not fit her own persona.

In the beginning, I tried to meet those expectations, and I wasn't looking for myself. I tried to always meet what they expected me to be and not following really who I am and what my principles are. (Marit)

She spoke about the ways that the MEL program gave her examples of a wide range of leadership styles and personality types. In the interview, Marit reflected on her previous beliefs about leadership and her uncertainties about herself. During the program, she was exposed to more versions of leadership through the coursework and in conversations with other MEL participants. She spoke of a shift in the way she viewed herself and her role as a leader.

The program helped me define myself or find myself as a leader and helped me in this learning process to reflect on where I was. I remember Päivi's course, the leadership course, and I remember one of the assignments we were asked to reflect back on what we read and about ourselves. And in that time, in that stage of my life, I remember I had a thought that a leader has only one style, or you are born [with] a style in a way, and I was always not sure whether I was born as a leader at all. (Marit)

Like many in the study with formal leadership roles, Marit spoke about her own leadership journey and the uncertainties she felt as she "tried on" the role of the leader. The leadership model she had seen in others did not fit her. At first, this signaled to Marit that she was not a suitable leader. Throughout the program, she became aware of the many styles of leadership. She spoke about the coursework

and the readings and the models of leaders in the program – both the instructors and colleagues. For Marit, this her awareness of the different leadership styles helped her begin to see her own leadership style and actions as valid and credible. This recognition that the field of education and educational leadership is not without challenges is a prominent notion that came through in many of the participants' conversations. *Becoming aware* in many cases meant seeing the potential challenges and obstacles inherent in leadership roles.

This awareness of one's own limitations as a leader- even when the cause of those limitations was not entirely clear- was commonly discussed during the interviews. Another leader early in his formal leadership role, Marius, spoke about the frustrations he felt when he recognized that his intentions as a leader were not impacting his organization. He spoke about his first year in a role he unexpectedly inherited. During the first year, he tried to support his staff in the ways he felt had been neglected by the previous senior leaders in his organization, but this knowledge of what he wanted contrasted with the results he was getting. This emergent awareness, even before he joined MEL, was a significant reason why he decided to join the program.

And I felt that I was lacking the skills to help them grow. And I felt a little bit guilty. I felt the need to go back to school and learn a lot more about being a leader. And that made a huge difference. (Marius)

Like Marit, Marius speaks about "trying on" the role of leadership. Marius had previously spoken about how he inherited his formal leadership position unexpectedly and felt the need to step in and correct the top-down leadership that had been prevalent in the organization. Although he knew the previous leadership style had not been effective and knew he wanted a different approach, he was also frustrated with his lack of knowledge about leadership before joining MEL.

I kind of tried to promote participation. But I did it in a very, how can I say that? Like, naive way. You know, I tried that was like my best try. And I failed because I didn't know how to do that. I mean, people were like, we understand your good intentions, but it's just not working. It's not working. This is not the right way. It's not working. I mean, we don't need your good heart. You need a lot more than a good heart to be a school leader or to be a leader in general. (Marius)

Throughout the program, Marius gained an awareness of the ways that leadership works. Marius spoke about concrete tools that were part of the program, but he also reflected on how he learned from the structure and processes in the program itself. Marius, like many others, identified the framework of the program, its participants, methods, and values as central to the development of his own awareness about leadership and the roles that leaders play in setting, modeling, and communicating values to the rest of the organization. He spoke about the heads of the program.

They put a lot of effort into sharing expectations, sharing values. And that was something that struck my attention. I was like, well, why are they doing it? Why are they spending so much time revising and sharing expectations and sharing ideas on making sure that everybody understands the core values of the program? (Marius)

Marius attributed the culture of learning and development inside MEL with the shared values espoused in the program leadership. This culture building was critical for him to see the type of learning environment needed to confront the personal and professional challenges inherent in adult learning. The culture inside the MEL program gave Marius the space and confidence to reflect honestly about his strengths and weaknesses as a leader, which he felt was essential in his own development. Critically, this experience gave him the tools and space to reflect on the ways he would be able to take these experiences back to his own organization.

You feel that you are making progress with a group of people who are learning with you and sharing their vulnerability, then you realize that you can do it also in your context and that if it works in one context, it works in the other context. (Marius)

I learned a lot about the importance of a leader to show his or her own weaknesses. There's nothing wrong with it. But one thing is to read such things in a book. It is a completely different thing to experience that with a group of people. When you show and you share your vulnerability, that becomes a real thing. If you feel that you are making progress with a group of people who are learning with you and sharing their vulnerability, then you realize that you can do it also in your context and that if it works in one context, it works in the other context. That's the connection I can make. Yeah, that's for sure. (Marius)

For Marius, the MEL program provided the space, culture, and experiences that altered his views about leadership and his role inside his own organization. His work within the small group study team and the leadership models he observed within the program gave him a better understanding of the type of culture he was trying to create inside his own organization. He spoke about the deliberate culture-building inside of the MEL program and felt that this culture made it possible for him to be vulnerable in a way that he had not previously. For him, this experience reshaped his own conceptions of the leader and the types of leadership actions he felt necessary for his own organization. Marius identified *that becoming aware* of leadership's shapes meant understanding the habits or ways of thinking that had not previously served him. Marius' story here is not unique among the participants in the study.

I was more aware of the road, and I was more aware of where I was and what I was supposed to be doing for the people I was working with. So it was a watershed experience in my life, in my personal and my professional career. (Marius)

*Becoming aware* refers to the ways that study participants were able to begin to see or understand themselves, others, and the shapes of leadership in ways that had previously been hidden or unclear. This recognition and awareness refer to an essential experience with the MEL study program where participants began to recognize and understand alternatives and ways of answering the questions they came into the program asking. This stage is distinct from the questioning stage above in that this essential element refers to viable alternatives that had not previously been visible to the participants. *Becoming aware* is also distinct from the section below, *reconstruction*, which refers to the ways that participants have internalized or integrated new understandings.

### 4.3 Reconstruction

In phenomenology, professional learning is seen as a qualitative change in one's way of experiencing or seeing. It is thus the process in which the learner reconstitutes the world which he or she has already constituted (Pang, 2014, p. 594).

The key learnings from the MEL program and this study below explore the ways that participants of this study described new ways of seeing, experiencing, or acting, which they attribute to the work within the MEL program. *Reconstruction* refers to the ways participants described fundamentally new ways of experiencing leadership, leadership roles, or themselves. This section highlights the critical learning experiences of the MEL program. Here, participants in the study move beyond an awareness of an alternative. They have now integrated these learnings for themselves. The distinction here is essential. The section below highlights ways that the participants see, perform and act from a new vantage point.

#### 4.3.1 Reconstructing Leadership

The essential theme of reconstructing participant notions around leadership and leadership actions is presented. In the findings below, participants expressed how the MEL program helped them reconsider what is meant by effective leadership and enacting change within their own organization. This section focuses on the reflections that the participants shared in the ways they were able to make sense of leadership and how these new constructs helped them navigate their own work. The essential elements of the section refer to leadership constructions that were directly relevant for the participants as they described new ways of construing the issues of change leadership and the actions needed to overcome the challenges of leading change in educational organizations. The responses here reflect the ways that the participants discuss *new ways of experiencing or seeing* leadership that they have directly or indirectly attributed to the MEL program. Marta's reflection here highlights the ways that the program caused her to reflect on her assumptions about leadership and learning.

I had to rethink a lot of stuff, but I'm glad of it. And it means now I go into something and if at first, I don't like it or I don't think it's going to work, I don't write it off immediately. I might still write it off. But now I'm much better at thinking, well you know, learn more about it, give it a chance. This might be worth pursuing. (Marta)

Similarly, Sanna spoke about her time within the MEL program as an opportunity to reconsider what is possible in the field of education. She spoke about her frustration with what she perceived as the typical path of career advancement from

teacher to department head and later to principal or director. Prior to joining MEL, she had begun to explore other opportunities to take on leadership roles as an instructional coach. Her experiences in the MEL program reaffirmed her belief and provided concrete examples of alternative career paths within education and educational leadership.

There are so many other things that you can do to like, imagine what is exciting in education and what you can do to reimagine education.  
(Sanna)

Many of the participants spoke about the ways that culture and the cultural contexts -both social and organizational- play an important role in the ways that educational systems and change management operates. This new understanding now informs leadership actions. Sanna recollects her reflections on the Finnish educational system and the ways that many can oversimplify the successes of the Finnish educational system. This recognition that operating culture is a critical component for improving schools and school systems came from the work inside the MEL program and the frustrations she felt when realizing that the successes of any system cannot be simply reproduced with the same impact.

It's about the culture around what you want to do. And that is the primary reason why education systems are functional or dysfunctional and different within different cultures. (Sanna)

Participants emphasized the fuller understanding of the multidimensional ways that policies on a national and global scale shape education and drive reform initiatives. Ole was able to articulate this understanding to contextualize his new knowledge of where and how to operate to enact change and reflect on his own convictions.

It let me realize how much I love education and the potential of education. You know, really [...] That is something that is very interesting to me, how the nation-state socializes humans into the system through education, and that is a very political area. (Ole)

Ida spoke at length about her collaborative work experiences within the MEL program, both inside her study team and within the wider group. She spoke about how the program's structure and deliberate use of collaborative projects in the courses forced her to reconsider ways of working. For her, this experience was a

new way of experiencing the task of a leader as someone who shares and facilitates collaboration.

Somebody [in the MEL program would] ask something, and then a bunch of people [came] with completely different resources. And I saw this, and it was just amazing to see that people share. It is like, 'I'm not keeping this to myself. If I know something that might be of use to someone else, I'm just going to share it.' And that's probably the main point of teamwork. It's not making myself look good, but it's helping out someone else so that they can build from that. If I know something that might be of use to someone else, [now] I'm just going to share it. (Ida)

Collaboration. Trusting other people to help you. You can just ask for help. I think that's one of the biggest things, is that you don't have to go through this alone. I mean, trust the team. If you have a team that works, every member of that team has something to bring to the table like it's teamwork and collaboration is the biggest. And I have used that in my new job a lot. (Ida)

There were many examples from the interviews where participants discussed the ways in which self-knowledge has enabled them to act more effectively in leadership roles. Here Camila speaks about the ways that thinking and communicating her values throughout the length of the MEL program enabled her to articulate the ways her values were in play. She spoke about her engagement with research, her realization that she also had an important role in promoting her own views about education, and articulated how the program enabled her to *reconstruct* her view of leadership as an actor with clear values.

Educational leadership is really if you are being told to do something you disagree with, that you have to actually voice it out. And because at the end of the day, you are leading people, so you need to be able to stand for what your values are. (Camilla)

Like Camilla, many other participants spoke about the ways that their own values came into focus throughout the program. They recognized that leadership actions emerge firstly from a strong sense of personal values, not the other way around. This type of authentic recognition of the ways that one's values and convictions drive leadership actions was one of Camilla's most important takeaways from the program. We saw in the above sections how Camilla was able to understand her own credibility as a voice in education, here she highlighted the ways that this credibility and her sense of values gave her a rationale for leadership actions.



Nina began the MEL program as a first-year school principal, and by the end of the course, she had already been promoted to a senior leadership role as the head of her school district. Her story was particularly interesting in the ways that the MEL program, including the motivational profile, enabled her to recognize that she was more suited for the senior leadership role which more accurately matched her motivations. She reflected on the actions that she took and how, after reflection, these actions demonstrated her suitability for the new role. For many participants such as Nina, the MEL program helped them reconstruct themselves as competent actors who had a vision and the confidence to seek out compelling new solutions.

MEL made me gain confidence in my principal role. When you have more confidence, you dare to do something. So I pushed the idea to build a new school because I had the confidence. That's what I have seen in Finland, not only about infrastructure, but the idea I was confident enough to ask. Even I was only there for a year and a half. I dare to ask them. And that's what they [the school directors] needed for a new role, someone who dared to look further than the normal classic school infrastructure and organization. (Nina)

Marius provided the most extended discussion on leadership and the ways that his experiences within the MEL program helped him *reconstruct* his understanding of what a leader was and did. This type of *reconstruction* suggests a radical reorientation of his identity as a leader.

My perspective on leadership has radically changed in the last two years because of MEL. Originally, I thought the leader was a good organizer, was supposed to be good at organizing other people's lives. (Marius)

Perhaps more essentially, Marius recognized how his previous actions as a leader did not live up to the new conceptions about what a leader is and should do. Not only was Marius able to acknowledge his new understanding of leadership, but the MEL program also allowed him to reflect on the specific ways that he wanted to *be* as a leader. He spoke about the ways that his experiences in MEL gave him "radically" different insight. He described how he was able to move from abstract thought to specific action to help others within his organization.

I learned that I remember I used to be like a sort of a control freak in the past. I wanted to organize everything. Being a leader meant organizing everything perfectly. Being part of this program changed my perspective radically on this as well because I actually learned that you just need a framework. (Marius)

You need a plan. You need to involve people. You need to make people aware of their values. You need people to feel that they have a voice and make that change happen, that they are part of the change. (Marius)

These reflections resulted in a new way of seeing and performing leadership.

When you give instructions to people or give directions to people, you're there with them, and you learn with them. That's how I see leadership now. (Marius)

Marius' reflections most clearly illustrated the *reconstruction* of the concept of leadership that was prevalent throughout the data. His interview focused clearly on his own frustrations and his limited ability to enact the changes he wanted to see in his organization. Throughout the interview, he reflected on the various moments with the MEL program that allowed him to consider leadership in a new way. Finally, he *reconstructed* a view of leadership after his experiences in MEL. He was able to lead in a new way because of his ability to make sense of his own story and his own role through the MEL program.

#### **4.3.2 Frictions, Ambiguity, and Limitations**

Participants also spoke about a heightened awareness of the limitations and ambiguities inherent in leadership roles. This theme was explored by participants who discussed discomfort and uncertainties when completing coursework within the MEL program. Many recounted examples where key course assignments within the program required the participants to close the gap to apply the general criteria to their own working contexts. In many ways, this uncertainty was uncomfortable but also enabled the participants to gain proficiencies working in ambiguity.

Marius spoke at length about the ways that the course enabled him to *reconstruct* his ways of understanding his role as a leader and the nature of leading others in

general. He spoke about how he has been able to account for the ambiguities in his work and use the uncertainties and frictions that are naturally inherent in change and leadership work. Here he does not speak of being able to solve or “fix” these frictions; instead, he is more at peace with these frictions as part of the nature of his work as a leader. His *reconstruction* of the leadership model now accounts for these realities within the role.

I was very much afraid of disagreements in the past. I didn't like that. And I felt in the past that when people expressed their concerns, that was criticism towards me and my decisions. So I took it personally. Now I think, well, it's not easy to deal with criticism, but I think that criticism is an essential part of the learning journey, that every institution is flexible. It's like a living being like there's a life cycle. (Marius)

The living being is made of contradictions. Sometimes it's made of frictions. These are all-natural aspects, and from frictions, many times you can get something really positive. (Marius)

For the participants in the study, this recognition or acknowledgment of the ambiguities inherent in leadership work was made possible because of the culture and framework of the MEL program. They spoke about the support from knowledgeable experts, both the instructors and colleagues, as a supportive network that allowed them to recognize and contain the tensions surrounding leadership.

But just having people around you that like your ideas or build on your ideas is validating. Like if you just do everything on your own and never have anyone to say I like that or hadn't thought of that or have you thought of this, or, I'm doing this, what do you think? I think without that, like, then we can have self-doubt. We can have insecurities that aren't addressed. (Sanna)

Ida also spoke about how the course has enabled her to feel more comfortable when facing uncertainties in her professional life.

I'm OK with the fact that I don't know everything. I know something about this, and someone else knows a lot more about something else. And when we combine what we know, our customers get something great. (Ida)

Also for Lena, the program enabled her to view the path to her own ambitions more with more salience, even while acknowledging the remaining ambiguity.

I went through the MEL program with that dream and vision in life. I now have a road plan. Not really a road plan, but now the path to reaching my dream is a bit clearer than it was before. I understand [that because it's] clear doesn't mean that it's easier. It means that I have a better vision, and I know what sort of things should be done, what source of what sort of obstacles can I foresee (Lena)

There's a risk being a school leader. I was not aware of this risk, but now I'm well aware of that. There's always the risk for a school leader to make decisions for others. (Marius)

The *reconstruction* of the leadership model accounted for these uncertainties, tensions, and limitations.

It was a watershed. Yeah, there was a watershed for me. Before MEL, I just happened to be a school leader. But I didn't know what that meant. And I also felt that I lacked a lot of skills. After that, I was more aware of my limitations. (Marius)

Although it may seem contradictory, this notion that experiences in the MEL program made participants more aware of their own limitations as leaders or more aware of the challenges, ambiguities, and uncertainties inherent in leadership and change management roles is evidence of essential learning. In the previous sections, participants became aware of the new shapes of leadership. The *reconstruction* of these concepts now includes boundaries and limitations. These limitations are different than they were prior to the MEL experience- perhaps expanded or more realistic. The participants in the study have a better understanding of what is movable and why. They understand the realities of leading and ways that leadership can fail. This new way of seeing and experiencing leadership as having very real boundaries reflects a mature view of the phenomenon. It is also reflective of the impacts of learning within the MEL program.

### 4.3.3 Self-Concept

Authentic leaders are originals, not copies...The process through which they have arrived at these convictions and causes is not a process of imitation. Rather, they have internalized them on the basis of their own personal experiences (Shamir and Eilam, 2005, p. 399).

*Reconstruction* of self-understanding moves beyond the raised awareness of self in the previous section. In the previous section, participants described noticing

themselves or their own capacities in a different way. *Reconstruction* refers to the integration of these new conceptions. Every participant in the study had examples of how the MEL program helped them understand something about themselves that they had not previously recognized. This understanding, like Fullan's description of change knowledge, goes beyond a "disembodied set of facts" and is rather a "deeply applied phenomenon in the minds" (2007, p. 38) of the participants.

The program provided ways of reflecting, researching, and communicating topics that this study's participants identified as being meaningful to them. The impacts in this section refer to the ways that the MEL program helped the participants to see or recognize something about themselves that had not been previously well understood. Participants spoke about the collaborative work within the course and inside the study groups, the support from the program leadership, the interactions with a range of topics, and the ways that the program asked participants to act in their own contexts as a fundamental part of the course design. Participants of this study identified a personal development that gave them a new way of seeing and experiencing themselves as leaders and actors in the field of education.

Ole spoke about the ways that his participation in the program gave him a fuller sense of his own motivational drivers and helped nurture his sense of idealism. This *reconstruction* of his own self with a more complete picture of his motivators helped him recommit to his work with a greater sense of purpose.

It's very emotional for me too. It touches me deeply, but I think that's connected to this idealism that I had that I have and that the program nurtured that all those aspects. I feel like I've grown a lot during the course of those two and a half years. (Ole)

As Ole continued, he identified his motivational factors as a key driver that he might be able to draw upon. As noted in the sections above, Ole felt frustration with his perception of poor leadership models within his own working context. Throughout the MEL program and by working closely with his study group, who he respected but recognized as having different motivators, Ole was able to recontextualize the challenges he faced with his own bosses and had a greater sense of how others are operating with a different set of motivational variables. Rather than feelings of frustration or powerlessness, his work within the program

gave him experiences and tools for confronting these different motivational systems. His *reconstruction* of himself and the ways that he was operating in different ways than others gave him a renewed drive which he spoke about as seeing an internal “moral” that grew in him as the result of the program.

The power of education and the social and sociocultural meaning of education. The need for education. That we do need education, we do need high-quality education. And we have to figure out what that you have to find common ground for and. Yeah, and that education is something that you can't grant. I think those are kind of more like a moral inside that the program has provided. (Ole)

For Marit, who had been unexpectedly promoted to principal before joining MEL, the program and the reflections within the leadership module helped her to understand her own leadership journey and understand the mistakes she made in her first year as a school principal. As highlighted in the sections above, Marit admired a previous leader and tried, unsuccessfully, to emulate the style of leadership of her predecessor. Marit has since been again unexpectedly promoted to a senior leadership role, and she credits the program and her reflections on her ability to not repeat her early mistakes as a leader. She highlights the ways that she has come to understand the many ways that she can be true to herself and her own personality as a leader.

[I learned] A lot about myself, and when I made a mistake during the year, it helped me a lot to kind of reflect back on things that were the challenges and how I could maybe do it better the next time. So it really, really helped. (Marit)

Sanna, like others in the study, has come to see herself in a different light. Some of these insights come from practical tools and strategies she has learned in the program.

I've learned loads about myself. I have learned to communicate better. I've learned to manage stress; I've learned to work with people who [I] wouldn't normally work with. (Sanna)

She also speaks about her legitimacy in her identity as an educational leader. Her experiences doing research and working closely with issues related to educational change helped her see herself in a new way. She speaks about her ability

to speak confidently on a range of issues related to educational leadership. The experience within the MEL program provided confidence in the ways that she was asked to negotiate meaning with others she respected and engage in research. This new knowledge, coupled with experience, gave her an updated sense of self.

I think it's more to do with confidence and. And I'm having a new set of knowledge has helped. It means that I can - I can have a voice in different spaces that I wouldn't have had a voice in before because I know what they're talking about. I know the research that's being referred to. I know the relationships between the ideas. And so I feel like I have a seat at that table legitimately. (Sanna)

Lena also talks about her experiences in the MEL program as giving her the “guts” to work towards her ambitions in educational leadership. Lena's *reconstruction* of her self-concept is not only about a renewed sense of confidence. She understood herself differently after the MEL program. Rather than someone with future dreams and ambitions, she is an actor in the present. She understands herself as having a credible role in designing and creating something that had not previously existed.

Most of the things that I'm really doing concerning some concerns, education, design, you know. I'm at a point where I'm designing a really large non-formal education program, and I don't think I would have had the guts to do that or to initiate that before. (Lena)

Nina's story below highlights the ways that personal and professional growth within the MEL program were closely linked together. Nina reflects on her own lack of confidence and what she perceived to be a flaw that might limit her own growth as a leader. Throughout the MEL program she was able to *reconstruct* and integrate this understanding as a motivational factor rather than a flaw.

It showed some issue issues. [Things] I thought were issues, like not having a high need for social contacts. [These] had always stopped me from taking the next step. But now, due to the Reiss motivation and talks with Päivi about it, now I know. OK, that's that is one of my motivators. And [I know] in which way I can use it. And now I use it for good. And it's not stopping me from going to the next step. So, yes, I gained confidence, a lot of confidence during the last one to one and a half years. (Nina)

If I was not in MEL, that confidence would never have been on that kind of level but stepping into the senior leadership role I'm going to take now, you do need some confidence; otherwise, you can't do anything at that level. It's crazy hearing myself saying it, but that is the way it went. (Nina)

She saw herself in a different way, understood her own characteristics not as a flaw but as neutral value traits which could be understood and utilized. This newly gained understanding helped her identify how her strengths and motivations were better aligned with the responsibilities of a senior leadership role which she applied for and has since been appointed. Nina described the program as life-changing.



## 5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study seeks to understand the impact of the MEL program on its participants and how the participants of the MEL program were able to develop leadership capacities and the abilities to lead change and influence their own organizations. Within the framework of this qualitative phenomenological study, learning and development means a new way of seeing, understanding, and approaching the constructs of leadership and change management (Webster-Wright, 2010a; Pang, 2014).

The literature review above provides clues regarding the important domains and competencies relevant for leadership development and helps to contextualize the experiences of the participants in this study by “translating” these experiences into the language and concepts relevant to leadership and change management (Giorgi, 1997). The sections below seek to synthesize the findings of the study, underline the essential themes which emerged, and link these participant experiences with existing frameworks of adult learning and professional leadership development.

### 5.1 Impacts on Leadership Capacities

Leaders are, and have to be, storytellers about themselves: from where they have come; who they are; what they stand for; what they believe in; what they want to achieve and how; and what they want to leave behind as a legacy (Veldsman and Johnson, 2016, p. 166)

Participation in the MEL program had a robust impact on the ways these participants conceptualized leadership, organizational change, and their own roles as actors in their working contexts. Each of the participants spoke about the changes in the ways that they conceptualized leadership, the role of the leader and expressed new ways that the role of the leader was reconstructed and integrated into their own self-concept.

The essence of the experiences highlighted here revealed a motivation from participants who came to the MEL program with questions about how to lead others, often with arriving with practical challenges in the ways that their own conception of leadership was insufficient. The interviews highlighted examples of newly appointed leaders whose visions of the role had fallen flat. Nearly all of the participants shared this type of professional or personal dilemma, which motivated them to pursue further education within the MEL program in order to gain the competencies necessary for leading others. This state of *disjunction* was uncomfortable for participants as they recognized a desire to lead others towards a more desirable vision in education.

In cases where the participants described questions they joined the program with, these questions were described as having been formulated over time during the program and were able to be fully articulated only upon reflection. For the participants of the study, the MEL program helped them to more precisely understand the questions that they had been considering in their own professional lives. The process of working through, the experience of sorting these questions during the courses, and negotiating meaning with the network of colleagues was a critical part of the course. Highlighted in this study are the ways that the participants can articulate their own stories through reflection and sensemaking.

For the participants of this study, the shapes of leadership changed as a result of the personal and professional development inside of the MEL program. Participants spoke about new understandings of the roles of the leader, including being present for others. There were numerous descriptions of the ways that participation in the program led to new roles, responsibilities, and capacities to lead and manage educational change. The interviews revealed the ways in which the program enabled the participants to understand themselves and their own motivations for leading educational change projects. The experience of the MEL participants in this study highlighted the various ways in which the program helped participants gain awareness of themselves and their own leadership stories and develop the capacities needed to lead and enact change in their own working contexts.

The developmental processes described by the participants in this study resemble the transformational learning model proposed by Mezirow (1991).

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a new course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 98–99)

The discussion of the transformational learning process is not intended here to map the study participants' development onto one model. Instead, the learning model gives further ways of understanding the significant impact of the MEL program participation in terms of "dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2006, p. 130).

## **5.2 Impacts on Organization**

The second research question aimed at understanding the impacts of MEL participation as a change agent within their own working organization. There were examples of the different ways that MEL program participants discussed an understanding of change leadership, including a stronger understanding of the theoretical change processes and the ways that organizational culture relates to change and development. Many of the participants in the study spoke about the ways they reconstructed the role of leadership for change, including sharing knowledge, working alongside and with others, and articulating a compelling vision for the future. There is clear evidence of the ways that participation in the MEL program provided a wider range of tools and a conceptual understanding of change for the participants in this study.

Regarding the impacts on the participants' own working organizations, the evidence is less clear and perhaps outside the scope of this study. There was strong evidence that participation in the MEL program led to new opportunities for the participants of the study, and several of these opportunities were the result of a proposed change or development project, but the research did not illuminate a change project in action. While the phenomenological approach provides strong indicators of learning and impacts of leadership development, the research approach is not best suited to understand this type of learning transfer in practice. There are opportunities here for further studies to more directly explore the evidence that the changes in the conceptualization of change leadership lead to direct impacts in the MEL participants' own organization. The theoretical background above suggests this type of transfer is likely, but empirical evidence from MEL participants' own organization is an area ripe for further investigation.

### **5.3 Phenomenology and Impact Studies**

The third aim of this study was to investigate the suitability of a phenomenological design to identify the impacts of leadership development in a higher education setting. The phenomenological approach seeks to understand how the participant has experienced a phenomenon and establishes the essence of the phenomenon by articulating the *how* and *why* in the ways that the participant experiences the phenomenon. The findings from the study demonstrate the value of the phenomenological approach to impact measurement for a wide variety of reasons.

#### **5.3.1 Evidence of Learning**

Given the framework for adult learning and leadership development, phenomenological studies can offer valuable insights into the learning process for adult professional learning. If learning refers to a new way of experiencing (Pang, 2014) or reconstructing a concept within the social and emotional domains (Illeris, 2006), then phenomenology is uniquely suited to understand the impact of these types of learning experiences.

### **5.3.2 Insights for Program Development**

The research provides strong emerging data for program development. One of the central benefits of the phenomenological approach is in the ways that it offers learner insights into the impacts of a learning and development program. The insights are not limited to the questions from the researcher but can emerge from the user in the way that it accounts for emerging data from program participants. In leadership development, where impacts are observed in participants' changes in meaning structures and ways that participants successfully construct and communicate their own leadership practices, phenomenology is well-suited. In the phenomenological interview, participants, as co-researchers of the phenomenon, are reflecting on their own leadership journeys and are sense-making in real-time.

### **5.3.3 Understanding the Target Phenomenon**

There are considerable benefits to this approach as it provides insights into the ways that learners can reconceptualize the constructs of leadership and change leadership. It provides insights into the ways that learners have developed their own self-concept as a leader and experience the role of leadership. From a methodological standpoint, the design of the study, which gathers data from a variety of practitioners in the field of educational leadership, also offers a way to better understand the concept of educational leadership in a wide range of contexts.

Although the design of this study was focused on the impacts of the MEL program on leadership development, there were a number of insights about the nature of educational leadership more broadly and the ways that leadership needs differ in the range of contexts represented by the MEL graduates. A phenomenological research approach that asks MEL graduates to describe their experiences of leadership within their own working contexts could reveal a number of valuable insights about how leadership is conceptualized and enacted in a wide range of educational contexts. This study suggests very clearly that the MEL program has impacted the leadership capacities of its participants. A follow-up study that

directly investigates what educational leadership actually *is* in those contexts would offer rich insights into the field. This future study could help further identify needs for the ongoing development of the program but also might provide a rich data set for understanding the target phenomenon of educational leadership more broadly. The MEL program participants work and operate in a wide range of geographic, cultural, and organizational contexts. The phenomenological research design can be used to investigate the target phenomenon of leadership development and can have similar value for a range of research questions related to the MEL program and leadership development. More broadly, there is evidence here that the phenomenological approach can be used to understand learning and impact in higher education more generally.

#### **5.3.4 Practical benefits**

The phenomenological approach can be used to understand the impacts of a learning program where there is no baseline measurement or where longitudinal studies are not feasible. It can thereby offer insights for program or curriculum development in a shorter time frame for a meaningful understanding of the impact of a program for ongoing development. The approach views study participants as “co-researchers,” and this type of reflective conversation can be a valuable part of the learning process itself.

There are, of course, limitations and challenges inherent in this approach. Conducting the phenomenological interviews is a time-consuming process, and the data analysis is even more so. The analytical procedure requires that the researchers have time and capacities to work through an analytical process that can be less than straightforward and have their own knowledge about the phenomenon of study. Without these, the research is unlikely to grasp the essence of the experience under study.

## 5.4 Critical Reflection

There were several conditions within the MEL program that made this research approach particularly suitable. The MEL program's overall design is "grounded in a socio-constructivist framework" (Curcher, 2017) which aligns with the epistemological beliefs of phenomenological work. In addition, this learning framework was salient and observable to the participants in this study. Participants spoke about their own understanding of the learning framework within the MEL program and were therefore able to articulate the ways that the program's taught curriculum was constructed and how these impacted their learning. These conditions provided a thorough theoretical rationale for this type of study. If the MEL program did not have such a clearly defined learning framework, understanding impact through the socio-constructivist lens would not have been possible.

My own participation in the MEL program also may have impacted the results of the study in both direct and indirect ways. The phenomenological approach allowed me to use my own experience as a way to provide a rationale for the study, and indeed this experience was especially beneficial in formulating the questions as I was able to pursue lines of questions about the program because of my own understanding of the program's structure and learning experiences. This experience was also relevant during the data analysis as I was able to understand connections between participant responses beyond the literal. This type of personal insight and familiarity with the research subject is valid in the phenomenological design as "it is the researcher's education and knowledge base that lead him to consider a phenomenon or experience worthy of investigation" (Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio, 2019, p. 95).

Still, my participation in the program and its influence on this study cannot be discounted. I have had a very positive experience with my own sense of leadership development throughout the program and have been rather public about my appreciation for MEL. Even though I opened invitations to all MEL graduates to take part in the research, prior knowledge of my views of the program may have discouraged participants with less positive experiences of MEL from participating. This shortcoming reflects a more general issue with the sampling of the study, which could have been more deliberately established before recruiting volunteers

for the interviews. In a similar way, this study could have benefitted from an additional demographic survey from respondents to get a better understanding of the backgrounds of each participant. Although a more nuanced analysis of the participants and the roles that demographics have played in their experiences of leadership development was beyond the scope of this study, this information could benefit other researchers who might wish to extend the research offered here. Perhaps the most important adjustment I would have made in this study was a follow-up interview to triangulate my synthesized findings with the participants of the study. This approach and would have added additional scientific validity to the research offered here.



## REFERENCES

- Applebaum, M. (2016) 'Phenomenological psychological research as science', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 47(1), pp. 36–72. doi: 10.1163/156916212X632952.
- Argyris, C. (2002) 'Double-Loop Learning, Teaching, and Research.', *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 1(2), pp. 206–218. doi: 10.5465/amle.2002.8509400.
- Argyris, C. (2007) *Double loop learning in organizations*, *Harvard business review*. Available at: <https://hbr.org/1977/09/double-loop-learning-in-organizations> (Accessed: 3 February 2021).
- Avolio, B. J. and Gardner, W. L. (2005) 'Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership', *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), pp. 315–338. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001.
- Bakhshi, H. et al. (2017) *The Future of skills: Employment in 2030*. London: Pearson and Nesta. Available at: [https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/the\\_future\\_of\\_skills\\_employment\\_in\\_2030\\_0.pdf](https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_future_of_skills_employment_in_2030_0.pdf).
- Basford, T. and Schaninger, B. (2016) *The four building blocks of change Four key actions influence employee mind-sets and behavior. Here's why they matter*.
- Bass, B. M. (1995) 'Theory of transformational leadership redux', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(4), pp. 463–478. doi: 10.1016/1048-9843(95)90021-7.
- Bass, B. M. and Steidlmeier, P. (1999) 'Ethics, character, and authentic transformational leadership behavior', *Leadership Quarterly*, 10(2), pp. 181–217. doi: 10.1016/S1048-9843(99)00016-8.
- Blanchenay, P. and Burns, T. (2016) 'Policy experimentation in complex education systems', in *Governing Education in a Complex World*, pp. 161–186. doi: 10.1787/9789264255364-10-en.
- Burns, T. and Köster, F. (2016) 'Modern governance challenges in education', in Burns, T. and Köster, F. (eds) *Governing Education in a Complex World*. Paris: OECD, pp. 17–37.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.
- Curcher, M. (2017) 'From Conception to Implementation: A New Educational Leadership Degree Program Designed to Increase Learning Flexibility and Internationalisation', in.
- Defillippi, R. J. and Arthur, M. B. (1994) 'The Boundaryless Career: A Competency-Based Perspective', *Source: Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15(4), pp. 307–324.
- De Vries, M. K. (1996) 'Leaders Who Make a Difference', *European Management*

*Journal*, 4(5), pp. 486–493.

Donahoe, T. (1993) 'Finding the way: Structure, time, and culture in school improvement', *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(4), pp. 298–305. Available at: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=EJ474290>.

Finlay, L. (2014a) 'Engaging Phenomenological Analysis', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(2), pp. 121–141. doi: 10.1080/14780887.2013.807899.

Finlay, L. (2014b) 'Engaging Phenomenological Analysis', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(2), pp. 121–141. doi: 10.1080/14780887.2013.807899.

Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (2010) *External Review of Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council Self Evaluation report*.

Finnish National Agency for Education (no date) *Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences*. Available at: <https://studyinfo.fi/wp2/en/higher-education/polytechnics-universities-of-applied-sciences/> (Accessed: 6 March 2021).

Fullan, M. (2007) 'Change Theory as a Force for School Improvement', in *Intelligent Leadership*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands (Studies in Educational Leadership), pp. 27–39.

Fullan, M., Cuttress, C. and Kilcher, A. (2009) '8 Forces for leaders of change', *The Challenge of Change: Start School Improvement Now!*, pp. 9–20. doi: 10.4135/9781452218991.n2.

Gardner, W. L. *et al.* (2005) "Can you see the real me?" A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development', *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), pp. 343–372. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.003.

George, B. *et al.* (2007) 'Discovering Your Authentic Leadership', *Harvard Business Review*, February, pp. 129–138. Available at: <https://web-s-ebsohost-com.libproxy.tuni.fi/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=8991a616-6d83-4c5d-8f30-bc5148e38fde%40redis> (Accessed: 17 November 2021).

George, B. (2007) *True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

George, T. (2020) *Hermeneutics*, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/#HermCirc> (Accessed: 12 October 2021).

Giorgi, A. (1997) 'The theory, practice, and evaluation of the phenomenological method as a qualitative research procedure', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 28(2), pp. 235–260. doi: 10.1163/156916297X00103.

Giorgi, A. (2005a) 'The Phenomenological Movement and Research in the Human Sciences'. doi: 10.1177/0894318404272112.

Giorgi, A. (2005b) 'The Phenomenological Movement and Research in the Human Sciences', *Nursing Science Quarterly*, 18(1), pp. 75–82. doi: 10.1177/0894318404272112.

Green, M. and Cameron, E. (2004) *Making Sense of Change Management*. London: Kogan Page. Available at: <https://link.gale.com/apps/pub/0WEY/GVRL?u=tampere&sid=bookmark-GVRL> [accessed 27 Nov 2021].

Grondin, J. (2015) 'The Hermeneutical Circle', *A Companion to Hermeneutics*, pp. 299–305. doi: 10.1002/9781118529812.CH34.

Grossman, J. (2019) *Vulnerability Is Not A Weakness, It's Core To Effective Leadership*, *Forbes Agency Council*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2019/03/11/vulnerability-is-not-a-weakness-its-core-to-effective-leadership/?sh=4ab57399503f> (Accessed: 17 November 2021).

Hargreaves, A. (2002) 'Sustainability of educational change: The role of social geographies', *Journal of Educational Change*, 3(3/4), pp. 189–214. doi: 10.1023/A:1021218711015.

Hargreaves, H. (2010) 'Leading a self - improving school system', *National college for school leadership*.

Hay, A. (2006) 'Putting MBA learning into practice 291 Seeing differently: putting MBA learning into practice', *International Journal of Training and Development*, 10, p. 4.

Illeris, K. (2006) 'A Comprehensive Understanding of Human Learning', in Jarvis, P. and Parker, S. (eds) *Human Learning: An Holistic Approach*. 2nd edn. New York, pp. 87–100.

Illeris, K. (2011) *Workplace Learning as Competence Development, The Fundamentals of Workplace Learning: Understanding How People Learn*. Taylor & Francis Group. doi: 10.4324/9781315620565-22.

Illeris, K. (2018) 'A Comprehensive Understanding of Human Learning', in Illeris, K. (ed.) *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists in Their Own Words*. Milton, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group. Available at: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tampere/detail.action?docID=5323092>.

Jackson, D. S. (2000) 'The school improvement journey: Perspectives on leadership', *School Leadership and Management*. Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 61–78. doi: 10.1080/13632430068888.

Jarvis, P. (2004) *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning*. 3rd edn. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

Kempster, S. (2009) *How Managers Have Learnt to Lead, How Managers Have Learnt to Lead*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan UK. doi: 10.1057/9780230234741.

Klinck, P. (2007) 'Observations on Leadership: Linking Theory, Practice and Lived Experience', in Burger, J. M., Webber, C. F., and Klinck, P. (eds) *Intelligent Leadership: Constructs for Thinking Education Leaders*. SpringerLink, pp. 13–25.

Kotter, J. P., Akhtar, V. and Gupta, G. (2021) *Change: How Organizations*

*Achieve Hard-to-Imagine Results in Uncertain and Volatile Times*. Edited by V. Akhtar and G. Gupta. Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

Kouzes, J. M. and Posner, B. Z. (2009) *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership*. 2nd ed., *Discovering Leadership*. 2nd ed. Edited by B. Z. Posner. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer (J-B Leadership Challenge: Kouzes/Posner ; v.241). doi: 10.1007/978-1-137-24203-7\_5.

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S. and Baumgartner, L. M. (2006) *Learning in Adulthood : A Comprehensive Guide*. Hoboken, UNITED STATES: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. Available at: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tampere/detail.action?docID=792611>.

Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. 1st edn. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Michie, S. and Gooty, J. (2005) 'Values, emotions, and authenticity: Will the real leader please stand up?', *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), pp. 441–457. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.006.

Moustakas, C. (1994a) 'Human Science Perspectives and Models In: Phenomenological research methods'. doi: 10.4135/9781412995658.

Moustakas, C. (1994b) *Phenomenological Research: Analyses and Examples, Phenomenological research methods*. doi: 10.4135/9781412995658.d9.

Moustakas, C. (1994c) *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

Networked Learning Editorial (2021) 'Networked Learning: Inviting Redefinition', *Postdigital Science and Education*, 3(2), pp. 312–325. doi: 10.1007/s42438-020-00167-8.

Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T. and Varpio, L. (2019) 'How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others', *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 8(2), pp. 90–97. doi: 10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2.

OECD (2013) *Leadership for 21st Century Learning, Educational Research and Innovation*. OECD Publishing, Paris. doi: 10.4324/9781315042329.

Palus, C. J. and Drath, W. H. (1995) *Evolving Leaders. A Model for Promoting Leadership Development in Programs*. Greensboro, UNITED STATES: Center for Creative Leadership. Available at: No.

Pang, M. F. (2014) 'A Phenomenographic Way of Seeing and Developing Professional Learning', in Billett, S., Harteis, C., and Gruber, H. (eds) *International Handbook of Research in Professional and Practice-based Learning*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, pp. 591–609. doi: 10.1007/978-94-017-8902-8\_22.

Passarelli, A. M., Boyatzis, R. E. and Wei, H. (2018) 'Assessing Leader Development: Lessons From a Historical Review of MBA Outcomes', *Journal of Management Education*, 42(1), pp. 55–79. doi: 10.1177/1052562917730105.

Reimers, F. M. (2020) *Audacious education purposes: How governments transform the goals of education systems*, *Audacious Education Purposes: How Governments Transform the Goals of Education Systems*. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-41882-3.

Schein, E. H. and Schein, P. (2016) 'Defining The Structure Of Culture', in *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, pp. 1–76. Available at: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tampere/detail.action?docID=4766585>.

Schleicher, A. (2015) *How can we equip the future workforce for technological change?*, *Weforum.org*. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/12/how-can-we-equip-the-future-workforce-for-technological-change/> (Accessed: 11 October 2021).

Senge, P. (2006) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. 2nd edn. London: Random House.

Shamir, B. and Eilam, G. (2005) "What's your story?" A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development', *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), pp. 395–417. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.005.

Smit, S. *et al.* (2020) 'The future of work in Europe: automation, workforce transitions, and the shifting geography of employment', (June), pp. iv, 44 p.-iv, 44 p. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-in-europe>.

Sturges, J., Simpson, R. and Altman, Y. (2003) 'Capitalising on learning: an exploration of the MBA as a vehicle for developing career competencies', *International Journal of Training and Development*, 7(1), pp. 53–66. doi: 10.1111/1468-2419.00170.

Tampere University of Applied Sciences (2021) *Master's Degree Programme in Educational Leadership, TAMK Curriculum*. Available at: <https://opinto-opas-ops.tamk.fi/index.php/en/171/en/163108> (Accessed: 23 November 2021).

Tampere University of Applied Sciences (no date) *Master's Degree Programme in Educational Leadership*. Available at: <https://opinto-opas-ops.tamk.fi/index.php/en/171/en/163108> (Accessed: 16 November 2021).

Timperley, H. S. and Parr, J. M. (2005) 'Theory competition and the process of change', *Journal of Educational Change*, 6(3), pp. 227–251. doi: 10.1007/s10833-005-5065-3.

Toutkoushian, R. K. and Webber, K. (2011) 'Measuring the Research Performance of Postsecondary Institutions', in Toutkoushian, R. and Teichler, U. (eds) *University Rankings. The Changing Academy – The Changing Academic Profession in International Comparative Perspective*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Tufford, L. and Newman, P. (2012) 'Bracketing in qualitative research', *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(1), pp. 80–96. doi: 10.1177/1473325010368316.

Veldsman, T. H. and Johnson, A. J. (2016) *Leadership: Perspectives From the Front Line*. Edited by T. H. Veldsman and A. J. Johnson. Randburg: KR Publishing.

Webster-Wright, A. (2010a) 'A Phenomenological Perspective', *Professional and Practice-based Learning*, 2, pp. 59–77. doi: 10.1007/978-90-481-3947-7\_3.

Webster-Wright, A. (2010b) 'Delving into Methodology', *Professional and Practice-based Learning*, 2, pp. 79–103. doi: 10.1007/978-90-481-3947-7\_4.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice*. Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511803932.

Wenger, E. (2018) 'A Social Theory of Learning', in Illeris, K. (ed.) *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists in Their Own Words*. Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 219–228. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tampere/detail.action?docID=5323092>.