

Institutionen för didaktik och pedagogisk profession

Rektorers arbete i osäkra tider

En aktör-nätverksstudie

Av

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AKADEMISK AVHANDLING

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Abstract

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This thesis explores how principals' scope of action is enacted and continually reshaped in times of unpredictable and uncertain societal changes. The large influx of newly arrived students in 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2019 are comparable examples of how global shifts reverberated at the local level and challenged principals' work, in smaller municipalities with limited resources. The aim of the study is to contribute in-depth knowledge about the possibilities and limitations of principals' leadership when faced with such far-reaching and uncertain challenges.

Drawing on actor-network theory (ANT) and practice ontology, the study examines how relations between humans and material entities—such as policies, buildings, budgets, and organizational arrangements—enact and reconfigure principals' leadership. The empirical material consists of interviews and documents. Inspired by Latour's (2005) methodological invitation to "follow the actors", empirical material is treated not as raw data but as the outcome of relational and situated practices.

The analysis traces how principals' leadership emerged through translations in networks around three nodes: the reception of newly arrived students, collaboration with the Swedish National Agency for Education, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Principals' agency was not predetermined but emerged as a network effect. Actors such as budgets, physical spaces, and digital tools enabled and constrained principals' scope of action. In practice, leadership became a fragile and situated position, dependent on the networks' durability and translations.

The main contribution is how principals' leadership is formed in relation to how networks are established and maintained in practice. Since principals' work is embedded in schools' pedagogical practice, it is vital to develop further knowledge of educational leadership. By tracing how materialities participate in leadership, the study contributes to a relational and practice-based understanding of principals' work—as conditional, situated, and fragile, but also as a site for new solutions when obligatory passage points destabilize and transform. The analysis illustrates how interviews, documents, both describe leadership and co-produce its realities. The study advances knowledge of leadership as a situated and fragile network effect and highlights the vulnerability of small municipalities.