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“It’s like a growth story” Career development of principals in the Finnish dance education institutes

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research was to analyze the career paths of principals working in dance education institutes and to increase understanding of the different careers of the managers and principals working in arts organizations. Very few studies have explored principals’ career paths in art schools in Finland or abroad. The following research questions were answered: (1) What are the pertinent characteristics of the careers of Finnish principals of dance education institutions?

and (2) What factors advance their careers? A total of 25 principals from across Finland participated in this narrative research study. The thematic findings of career choice and opportunities, meaningful career experiences, and three types of career narratives emerged from the analysis. These findings provide new viewpoints on and understanding of educational leadership in the field of art education.

Introduction

The aim of this study is to describe the career paths and advancements of principals of dance education institutes operating in the basic education in the arts. While the principals' role in arts education faces constant changes and has become increasingly challenging, their careers in art education are less studied. At the time of increased emphasis on the sciences in compulsory education, new perspectives to attractive artistic careers are needed to maintain also the appreciation of art education. The current time and its economic challenges may not give enough appreciation to art. Appreciation also increases resources directed to the arts and, thus, its further development. Furthermore, skilled leaders are necessary for the development of the art field.

The topic is linked to the broader education policy debate in Finland and internationally, with the OECD and the European Union prioritizing lifelong learning themes, as well as different views on future prospects for education and working life (European Commission, 2019; OECD, 2021). The cultural policy strategy published by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland states, "Education and training in the field of arts and culture, including basic education in the arts, as part of the education system, produces the competences required by actors in the arts and culture sector and increases the ability to receive and understand art and culture" (2017, p. 11). The strategy's aim is not only to produce future competence in the field of the arts but also to educate children, young people, and adults who have a broad understanding of art and culture in the context of art education.

In view of such goals, it is important to highlight and describe the career paths, advancements, transitions, and life-long art experiences of the principals working in basic education in the arts institutes, and thus increase understanding and knowledge of the different careers of the principals. Making the educational process, career guidance, and development among principals more visible can be beneficial for students, educators, policy makers, and human resource professionals. It also increases understanding of different opportunities in the arts and education. This research is describing how principals understand their career paths expanding research on professional development and education in dance and the arts. This kind of career research is scarce in Finland and abroad.

Theory

Contextual Background

The study of specialized organizations, including arts organizations, from the perspective of their staff and managers has gained wider interest over the past 20 years (Ropo & Sauer, 2008). Principals who work in basic education in the arts serve both as experts in the creative field and as heads of specialized creative organizations. In such organizations, staff members are committed, innovative, and creative, and united by a love for an art form. This feature of the organization sets specific demands for leadership, and thus, leaders of arts organizations (orchestra, dance, or theater) often share a similar professional background and life-long passion for art (Köngäs et al., 2022). For example, the leader of an orchestra is often a musician, or, in the case of this study, the principal of a dance education institute has much experience of dance either as a hobby or as the focus of their education or work experience (see Köngäs et al., 2022).

This study examines the impact of career choices and development opportunities on those moving from a teaching position to a principal's position. The interest is in the particular implications for educational leadership in the arts and education. The research, which focuses on career development and belongs to the field of educational leadership, aims to enrich knowledge by exploring career paths for arts organization directors, particularly in dance.

In Finland, basic education in the arts has its own special status as an independent form of education. It is important to locate the principals' careers in this unique environment. Basic education in the arts is provided in dance, music, circus, and theatre; in visual arts, such as architecture, media art, and handicrafts; and in the art of words, according to a general and advanced syllabus. There are approximately 128,000 pupils and 365 educational institutions including over 70 dance education institutions across Finland (Luoma, 2020).

Educational Leadership

We understand principals' career paths as a part of educational leadership studies. Educational leadership can be defined through institutional backgrounds, such as schools, universities, and institutions, including a large scale of different approaches to leadership in educational organizations. According to Bush's (2007) definition, leadership research has increasingly shifted from "educational administration" to "educational management" and, more recently, to "educational leadership" (see also Bush, 2008; Chris et al., 2020; Gunter, 2004). The Finnish education system requires the principals to have teaching qualifications and pedagogical skills and in addition to leadership capabilities (Lahtero & Salonen, 2022).

Principals act as administrative and financial managers, pedagogical experts, human resources leaders, and leaders for development and networks. Therefore, leadership research has expanded to various scientific fields and has a different purpose for different people, especially when it is not only viewed as hierarchical decision making (Ladkin, 2010; Northouse, 2021). In recent studies, Finnish educational leadership has moved more toward a vision of shared leadership with the emphasis on situational interaction between individual teachers rather than on particular administrative activities in schools (Lahtero & Salonen, 2022).

Research on the Careers of Principals of Dance Education Institutes

A career can be defined as the growth of competence, which is manifested in an increase in skills and expertise and the development of a network of interactions. A career can include different stages, changes, and transitions, and it consists of a temporal and long-term continuum that, in more traditional career research, was seen as a linearly progressing series of work tasks in one or two organizations (Inkson et al., 2012).

According to Hall (1976), a career is understood not only as working in a profession but also as engaging in activities and experiences in different areas of life. An individual's own choices play an important role, and self-realization is perceived as important (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 1976; Inkson et al., 2012). Savickas's (2005) theory corresponds to today's picture of career selection in that a career is considered to consist of individualized interpretations of reality in social interaction. An individual's own perceptions of life experiences that are meaningful to them influence their decision making (Savickas, 2005).

Savickas (2005, 2012) has become known in particular for the study of career transitions, which is useful when analyzing the principals' careers in this study. According to Savickas's (2005) theory, careers are built on professional personality, career adaptability, and life themes. Professional personality includes career-related abilities, interests, and values

(Savickas, 2005). Career adaptability refers to adaptation at different stages of a career. This adaptation is described through various stages of developmental tasks, including growth, exploration, consolidation, management, and abandonment. A professional career starts at the first stage of development, grows and matures into a career choice, and ends with retirement. No longer do careers need to be long; they can consist of several jobs over periods of different lengths, which means that these stages of development can occur more than once. The nature and interests of an individual may also vary over time (Savickas, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009; see also McMahon & Patton, 2018).

Traditionally, the art education leaders' or principals' role has been examined as the enabler for other artists to learn and build their careers (Efland, 1990) while their own careers have not been on focus. However, perspectives on the careers of principals can be captured by examining the research on dance artists' careers. Jeffri and Throsby (2006) described the diverse career transitions of dancers following a professional career by referring to an extensive survey conducted in Switzerland, Australia, and the USA in the early 2000s. The most important considerations related to this study were the abilities, skills, and future expectations of dancers following a professional career in the performing arts. Dancers' commitment, self-discipline, teamwork skills, and perseverance were perceived as resources while they also need tolerance of uncertainty, continuous training, flexibility, and active practice (see also Baumol et al., 2004; Jeffri, 2005; Pohjola, 2014). Jackson (1996) highlighted that dance professionals act as trendsetters with regard to the limitless concept of careers through changes in working life. The concept of a borderless career refers to career options beyond one specific occupation that takes place in a single profession (see also Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall & Chandler, 2005).

In several studies, professional dancers are noticed as “hybrids” during their careers (Vincs, 2004). They act as choreographers, teachers, and entrepreneurs, or move to completely different contexts, such as cafés and stores, working as employees, producers, or costume designers (see also Bennett, 2009; Jackson, 1996; Jeffri & Throsby, 2006)—and even in leadership positions in education institutions (Köngäs et al., 2022). According to Bennett (2009), dancers learn to manage their careers by working in a range of working conditions. The principal's career is rarely mentioned in the previous research, while in the field of dance education, it appears as a relevant leadership career path in which the aforementioned characteristics may be advantageous.

Methods

Research Questions

This study focuses on the careers of principals in Finnish dance education institutes. The main research questions are as follows:

- (1) What are the pertinent characteristics of the careers of Finnish principals of dance education institutions?
- (2) What factors advance their careers?

The research aim is to provide information about how the principals of dance education institutes describe their careers, what inspired them to choose a career in dance education, what such a career involved, and what role the arts and education played throughout their career processes. The more general objective is to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and attractiveness of a leadership career in the field of dance education.

Research Approach

The purpose of this study was to understand the career paths through narratives provided by principals of dance education institutes. Narrative research is a form of qualitative research in which the stories themselves become data. Stories are always contextual, localized, and situational (McAllum et al., 2019; Riessman, 2015). Unlike, for example, phenomenographic and phenomenological approaches, which focus on lived experiences and perceptions, the narrative approach is interested in what the research participants describe as meaningful career events and experiences during their life courses. Narrative research is a form of interpretive qualitative research in which the interpretation arises from constructive interactions between people (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

In this study, the narrative approach introduces narrative storytelling, a method to construct research data, and a process of analyzing data (Polkinghorne, 1995). According to Bruner (1991), individuals understand their experiences and memories through narratives, and narratives are culturally mediated. This means that during interviews, not only are past events remembered and described, but they are also actively interpreted. The narrative approach was used in both the data collection and analysis (Pinnegar & Danes, 2007). Polkinghorne (1995) described narrative in the context of research as referring to both the process itself and the end result (see also Heikkinen, 2002).

Data Collection and Participants

The interviews were conducted in November 2019 and June–July 2020 with a total of 25

principals from across Finland. The interviews consisted of a focus group interview with six principals and personal interviews with 19 principals. All interviews were recorded, and the material was transcribed. The duration of each interview ranged from 30–60 minutes. Requests to participate in the study were sent by e-mail to the principals of dance education institutes. The principals had experience as principals, ranging from one year to more than 50 years. The principals were given codes from R1 to R25.

As preliminary questions in the interviews, principals were asked to provide basic information, such as how long they had worked in their position, the size of their educational institution, and the number of their subordinates. The next question concerned the principals' own paths to becoming leaders. The aim was to give the principals the opportunity to lead the discussion and freely describe their careers. Some described their relationships with the arts, while others talked more about their own job responsibilities. Finally, they were given the opportunity to add to and complement their stories.

Data Analysis

The interviews involved learning about the principals' experiences by listening to their stories rather than asking them direct questions about their career choices. Their narratives were analyzed using narrative thematic analysis. This allowed the analysis to focus on the most relevant themes about the phenomenon, in this case career progress and choices, and highlight the meaningful experiences that emerge from the data (Riessman, 2015).

NVivo software was used as a reading aid to identify questions about how and why career choices for principals evolved over time. Meaningful experiences were highlighted, including those from childhood or adolescence, entering the field through education or work experience, the standout moments of everyday life, and the challenges encountered in the principals' work. Further, features that connected the different career histories were sought. One unifying factor was the shift from a childhood and adolescent interest in dance to a lifelong professional interest in it.

The thematic analysis resulted in three main themes: career choice, advancement, and everyday work experiences. These themes are introduced in the Results section, with quotations taken from the material. The quotations were translated from Finnish into English for this article by the author. In the end, three types of meta-narratives emerged as a synthesis of the principals' career narratives, and these are introduced as the study's findings.

Results

The principals' career choices, progress, and factors enhancing their careers are introduced first, followed by meta-narratives typifying their careers.

Career Choice

A common factor was that the principals' careers began as a result of their longstanding love of dance. All participants in the interviews formed a relationship with dance in childhood or adolescence. The importance of their interest in dance was described as a driving force, even during their later careers as dance teachers and principals. Interest in and enthusiasm for the art form, as well as its long-term practice, were also cited as justifications for the subjects' perseverance.

My background is that I started dancing at the age of 7, and I began teaching it at the age of 15. (R13)

... at the age of 7, I started dancing as a hobby ... My background is in ballet. In a way, I was a dancer first. (R12)

Well, I guess I have to start from, when I was dancing, and then it was my only professional dream to become a dancer or a dance teacher. (R6)

What had started as a hobby became a way of life, a job, and finally a profession. Some progressed from dancing as a hobby to having an education in the field, and they acquired their principal's qualifications alongside their arts studies. Some had trained in a different field before becoming principal of a dance education institute. Two principals mentioned that their career choices had initially been influenced by their parents' wish for them to enter a profession other than the arts.

My starting point was that my parents did not particularly support me in entering an artistic field, and they were planning a completely different profession for me. I followed their wishes quite faithfully up to a certain point, and I graduated from university ... I had danced as a hobby since I was little, but then I totally fell into dance, and it took me over completely. (R1)

I would have liked to continue, and I would probably have been able to continue as a dancer when I graduated high school ... but my parents wanted me to go to university. (R21)

One principal described how he had not started dancing until later in his youth, since there were no opportunities to engage in dancing as a hobby where he lived as a child. However, through his strong motivation, he managed to progress, making with dance his profession.

I was from such a remote place that there were no opportunities and no dance stuff until I was able to move to a place where I could engage in my hobby. (R18)

What the interviewees had in common was a long-term commitment to dancing. From its roots as their hobby, they maintained it and took it forward to different positions, and although some had their degrees obtained from other fields, dancing remained important in their lives and led to the subsequent shaping of their careers, often through becoming a teacher and then a principal.

Career Advancement

Advancing to the Position of Principal Through Different Routes

The principals ended up in their roles through a process of recruitment and headhunting, and some (in their own words) “inherited” the position. There were also principals who were the founding members of their institutes and some were self-employed. For few principals, their roles had taken shape over time, and their responsibilities had gradually increased.

This was not my choice. I did not want to be a principal, but there were no alternatives. (R3)

Different career paths were formed, for example, through entrepreneurship, a long-term hobby, and teaching work. The principal’s role had evolved due to the accumulation of duties, sometimes gradually or even surreptitiously, or as a result of the recruitment process. Finnish dance teacher training has recently developed, so a few of the principals began their teaching careers long before the emergence of vocational education and training.

My dream job was not to become the principal of a dance education institute, but I found myself in that position, even though I had my feet firmly in the world of the arts. Of course, I had been a teacher for a long time, but I was also working as a performing artist and choreographer. (R20)

I am no longer a teacher; I am now the principal who tries to give others the opportunities I had myself. Of course, I have tried to continue my own artistic work alongside this over the years. (R6)

Experience of Dance Teaching as Key to Leading a Dance Education Institute

Art teaching was perceived as a way to highlight the creative side of the principals' own art forms. All principals had experience teaching before becoming principals. Being familiar with arts education helped them to better understand how their institute operated.

It might be quite difficult to do this job if you do not have any experience in dance. With it, you are able to better understand the teachers and the situations in terms of their everyday work. On the other hand, you may also have a vision of what you hope for or how to develop things. You may not understand this if you come from outside. (R14)

Teaching was considered meaningful, but other tasks related to administration could be perceived as burdens. Planning lessons and teaching require time, as do tasks related to artistic work, such as development, implementation, and production. In addition, administrative work, which requires not only time but also different skills and management experience, sometimes seemed challenging.

Somehow, to come from being an artist to being an office worker, or something like that, I find it terribly challenging. (R20)

I can teach dance; I can do this, but I cannot handle everything involved in the principal's job. (R3)

The experience of producing artistic content and working as an arts teacher supported the principal's work and also helped manage other work tasks. The principals' career paths were also promoted in terms of the human values associated with teaching. Many had a desire to work with people and with arts education. In addition, the ability to do artistic work enhanced coping at work. Teaching and other artistic endeavors were seen as a counterbalance to other areas of principals' work.

Experiencing the Principal's Work

Enthusiasm for Dance as a Resource

The principals described their enthusiasm for dance on many occasions during the interviews. It was considered important to be enthusiastic about dance, as it also contributed to maintaining their motivation for other tasks.

If I only did office work in a field that was not my passion, I would not be able to cope with it. The passion for dance carries the principal's work a long way, in my opinion. It gives you the strength and willpower to make an effort; there is a kind of desire for art and dancing—an enthusiasm for it. (R6)

The principals' enthusiasm had started during their childhood, and their choice of dance was a hobby. This enthusiasm pushed them forward in their career paths and became a meaningful part of their skills, knowledge, competence, and motivation.

Learning Responsibility and Becoming Responsible

Some principals mentioned that they had started as dance teachers and gradually gained more responsibilities. The increase in tasks and responsibilities led to growth, for example, through the definition of work roles. As dancers, their path progressed from teacher to principal, as one of the principals described.

Well, of course, it is a place of growth and a process that when you first think of yourself as a dancer at a young age, and then when you start teaching more, you think of yourself as a dance teacher. And then, when you get older, you lose your dancing skills, so the pain of no longer being a dancer disappears. Then the body deteriorates, and you cannot teach, and then the principal's job will take so much time that you will no longer be able to teach but for a few hours a week. And then you are sad about it. Okay, I am not a teacher anymore, but I am a principal who tries to give others the opportunities that I had earlier in my life. (R6)

Another principal described the confusion in the midst of work roles as a growth story. Their career had developed from being a performing artist through teaching to becoming a principal. The multifaceted roles led to an increase in the acceptance of responsibility, but simultaneously, it became confusing as the responsibilities increased.

It is like a growth story. I feel like I'm learning it all the time, and so on. - - But your role is so different when you have subordinates, and you have responsibility for the students and the working community. (R20)

For some principals, the position was appealing. They had applied for the role and wanted to advance their careers. Taking responsibility felt natural and also brought more content to their work compared, for example, to that of a dance teacher.

Until then, I had worked as a dance teacher. Then I started to get interested in [being a principal] because the tasks were so similar to managerial work. It was all the complexity of what all this was and how to cope with these things. (R25)

However, the principal's work was considered diverse, as different competencies were required in many aspects of the role. Many principals mentioned that they worked alone and

appreciated peer support. However, they pointed out that the field is highly competitive, and bringing intra-city principals to the same table could be difficult.

I would like to have more discussions, and - - a colloquial group where we could solve these situations together. (R18)

Meta-narratives of the Principals' Careers

Based on the narrative analysis, the three meta-narratives describe those principals who are forced to become principals but who long to dance and teach, those who evolve into the role of principal by taking on increasing responsibilities, and the narrative of dancers and teachers who become enablers. In addition, the principals' narratives included plenty of elements about how they found their work, which was considered one of the core elements in describing the careers of principals in the field of dance.

Those Who are Forced to Become Principals but Who Long to Dance and Teach

These principals are enthusiastic about teaching and find working with students and creating choreography to be meaningful tasks that lead to a feeling of success. However, these principals ended up in their roles under duress. Administrative tasks are stressful and resource-intensive, and the time left for teaching is ever decreasing. These principals yearned for more time for teaching and creative work. Changes in society and increasing obligations put a strain on everyday work. In the absence of a funding base, it is not possible to hire additional staff. Nevertheless, these principals persevere and try to cope at work. Movement and physical sensing, which is a part of dance, are lacking or absent in the principals' work, or are compensated for by devoting time to other tasks.

Those Who Evolve Into the Role of Principal by Taking On Increasing Responsibilities

These principals started dancing as a hobby during childhood or adolescence. After studying in the field, they worked as dance teachers, gaining more tasks and responsibilities over the years. In addition, they have actively tried to advance their careers, for example, through preparatory training for the position of principal. These principals applied either to their own or to other dance educational institutes and were selected for positions through the recruitment process.

Dancers and Teachers Who Become Enablers

These principals ended up in the position after a long-term career in dancing. They had worked for decades as dancers, teachers, and choreographers, after which they founded their own dance education institute. As the founder, they also worked in other positions and thus gained wide-ranging expertise over the years. Over time, these principals were chosen or

ended up in the principal's position. They no longer teach, but they enable different projects and duties for teachers and other staff members.

Discussion

Based on the results, the principals' career paths appeared diverse but also included some similar elements. An enthusiasm for dancing was evident in all the narratives. The study also revealed three meta-narratives that introduce a variety of forces that can affect careers in the field of dance education. There are those who are forced to become principals, those who grow into their roles, and those who are founders and therefore leaders of new dance education institutes. The findings about the career paths and types, and factors enhancing the principals' careers draw a multidimensional picture that has not been researched previously among the principals of dance education institutes.

From the perspective of Savickas's (2005) theory, the analysis revealed that the principals' adaptation to their careers seemed to emerge from dancing as a hobby during childhood or adolescence and was drawn from their interest in dancing, even if they had studied for other professions. Their focus was on choosing an art form and, for many, on a wider range of artistic pursuits and teaching the arts. This orientation was emphasized, for example, by the fact that dance teaching and creative work, such as choreography, were perceived as meaningful.

Savickas's (2005) life themes referring to all changes, transitions, and trauma in life could also be found in the principals' narratives. These included the lack of opportunities to dance as a hobby during childhood, parents' strong guidance on education and work, and, later, when becoming a principal, the stress and demands of learning new administrative skills. Savickas (2005) also identified a professional personality. Not surprisingly, enthusiasm for and interest in dancing best described the principals' career motivations. However, their career narratives also included features such as being true to their values and passion, which directed their careers. When working as a principal, the social nature of the role was well represented, as they had learned responsible leadership and had a willingness to help others, making them enablers as principles. Particular tendencies, such as a passion for dance as an art form or physical characteristics, may also contribute to shaping the career path.

Limitations

Narrative orientation in this study enabled a multilevel research approach to principals' careers in the field of art education. Narratives work particularly well in the context of this study, which aims to achieve a more holistic and multidimensional understanding of the construction of principals' career paths in the context of basic education in the arts (Riessman, 2015; Vinkenburg & Weber, 2012). However, it is also relevant to question whether the narratives included all the elements in the principals' careers, and how truthful they were or how well we as researchers interpreted their narratives. During the analysis of the narratives, various paths were discovered, and some ups and downs were revealed; thus, the data appeared to present social reality as a multi-voiced discourse (Heikkinen et al., 2012; Salmela & Uusiautti, 2017). In addition, one of the authors is from the dance education field, which increased the reliability of the analysis because she was familiar with the context and understood the artistic nature of the principals' work.

Conclusion

The leaders of educational institutions that provide basic education in the arts in particular should be provided with additional management training through which they may receive support and reinforcement for their work. Using the task-oriented job descriptions of principals working in basic education in the arts, future studies could strive for a broader, more holistic systemic review of their roles (see Benoliel et al., 2019; Fullan, 2014). This calls for different approaches, such as the development of a network-like operation. The principals in this study suggested solutions for working together, such as informal meetings, peer sharing, and conversations. They mentioned that courses and education are beneficial and needed for updating skills but also time-consuming.

Networking within a wider crowd or smaller groups could enable the sharing of common experiences, best practices, and methods. The principals of dance education institutes are a unique group, and they are perhaps isolated and alone in finding solutions (Löytönen, 2008). They also face many challenges in their work, for which cooperation with colleagues can be an infinite resource (Heavey & Murphy, 2012).

For principals' career development, enhanced feedback systems may be important. Improved ways to collect feedback from students, teachers, and parents would be important for supporting the continuous development of the principal's work, as well as that of the entire organization. Developing self-evaluation methods and facing changes also require maintaining and developing different kinds of feedback and evaluation systems (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). A mentoring system could also be developed in the field through which more experienced principals would act as guides and mentors for newcomers (Hansford &

Ehrich, 2006; Huizing, 2012). Increasing the amount of training available will not in itself reduce workload, but it can be used to influence the quality and level of managing work and raise management quality.

The findings of this study will help planning more specific training for leaders of art education institutions. Another contribution of the study is the sharing of stories about professional development opportunities, which provides a deeper understanding of career development in the field.

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