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Action Research and Critical Discourse Analysis: A Pathway to School Principals' Professional Development

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Abstract:
This article addresses the key leadership competencies of school principals and how these competencies can be mastered. We argue that combining Action Research with Critical Discourse Analysis can serve as a pathway to enhancing school principals' professional development. The paper presents an Action Research project conducted in a Junior High School in Crete, Greece. The primary research material collected included the transcriptions of principal-teachers' assemblies, analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis. Interesting findings emerged, shedding light on issues like who speaks, how much, the quality of turn-taking, narratives, the role of context, etc. Drawing on the Critical Discourse Analysis findings and his conversations with the research team, the principal's journal shows how his reflection deepens gradually while new theoretical perspectives open. We conclude that, under specific circumstances, Action Research enhanced with Critical Discourse Analysis can enable leadership changes, contributing to principals' professional development.

Keywords: School leadership, action research, critical discourse analysis, leadership as practice

1. Introduction

School leadership is an interesting yet sensitive field, which is crucial for school improvement (Cruz-González et al., 2021) and a key to sustaining change and improving educational outcomes (Aas et al., 2020). However, studying leadership practices in a school context can be challenging. As each school features complex networks of relations influenced by various factors (social, educational, cultural, financial, etc.), research on leadership issues requires alternative and innovative research methods, capturing simultaneous, collective, and dialogic leadership practices in schools, to examine leadership dynamics 'from within' (Raelin, 2020). Technocratic research focusing on the traits or behaviors of individuals (the leaders) cannot provide answers to complex yet crucial leadership issues (Crow et al., 2017), like in which practice leadership is exercised, how leadership emerges and develops through day-to-day experience, and how to change the trajectory of the leadership flow. However, such answers are necessary to empower school principals to face the complex challenges of the 21st century, like managing change, introducing innovations, implementing technological advances, and enhancing the learning procedure and outcomes for all members of the school community. In addition, there is increasing global concern about school principals' professional learning and development and the improvement of leadership capacity (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Aas et al., 2020). As a result, discussing the key skills of school principals and how to master these skills is gaining momentum.

The school principal participated actively in the Action Research (AR) project. He strove to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of leadership, its various meanings, and perceptions latent in his everyday practices and improve his practices as a principal. The project draws on Huber (2011), who argues that modes of professional learning, such as the provision of constant feedback, collegial exchange, and self-study, can lead principals to a reciprocal relationship with practice, effectively integrating theory and practice. The main research method used in this project to enhance the school principal's reflection was Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Although not so common in AR (Katsarou, 2013), this research choice was very fruitful. Field notes and journal entries were also used and analyzed.

This article aims to document and reflect on the processes that facilitated a school principal's shift, changing his perceptions about leadership and, therefore, his practice. Specifically, we aim to show how a school principal became empowered, managing to consciously distance him from espoused theories focusing on leadership characteristics and behavior towards theories highlighting social and material-discursive contingencies and collective actions shaped by mutual discursive patterns that emerge and develop among participants in the educational situation under study. We

consider this shift a prerequisite for improving his practice and a crucial step in his professional development. To achieve this objective, the article first discusses the key competencies of school principals and the processes through which these competencies can be mastered and then presents a one-year, two-cycle AR project utilizing CDA.

2. School Principals' Professional Development: Key Competencies to Master and Relevant Processes

Over the past decades, new approaches to principals' professional development have developed. In addition to the cognitive approach, which views principals as trainees who need to learn effective theoretical schemes focusing on leadership behavior, alternative approaches to principals' professional development have emerged (Aas et al., 2020), especially regarding in-service learning. These approaches, most of which draw on AR practices, are gaining momentum as they are viewed as more effective than traditional and cognitive approaches.

Relevant processes that can be developed in an AR framework are described here under three pillars: a) supportive and ongoing processes, b) learning through practice, and c) self-and collective reflection. These pillars are not independent; they interact dynamically and influence one another multi-directionally.

2.1. Supportive and Ongoing Processes

Action Research processes, such as constant communication, collaboration, discussion, and experimentation, can be utilized productively in the leadership framework (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Huber, 2011). It is essential for school principals to learn through such processes on the one hand and to listen to teachers and students on the other, allowing them space and time for dialogue while at the same time communicating with them clearly and purposefully (Moos, 2011). Beyond organizing the school as a learning community, creativity and innovation occur when leaders foster experimentation in their school communities (Sackney & Mitchell, 2008). To be successful, these processes need to be both supportive, through collaboration and communication, and ongoing (Aguerrondo & Vezub, 2011), an integral part of the school's culture.

2.2. Learning Though Practice

A reciprocal relationship between theory and practice must be established for learning to affect practice. School principals' theoretical knowledge, experience, and practice are crucial for their professional development (Huber, 2011). The study, analysis, and elaboration of the principals' experience and its link with theory can bring about changes in the principals' daily practice, mainly when it involves their active participation (Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Aas et al., 2020). Learning through practice can also nurture a positive learning culture in schools, enhancing the quality of teaching and students' learning (Gu, 2011) and creating an environment where mainstream theories can be challenged. Learning by drawing on practice, experience, and its analysis and elaboration through theory can lead to new theoretical hypotheses to be tested in practice. By being active and involved in development processes in their own school (Schön, 1983), leaders can promote change and adopt transforming practices.

2.3. Self and Collective Reflection

Reflection may be one of the most effective strategies that can change schools; it is, therefore, crucial, both when implemented collectively, as part of the school's culture, and as an everyday self-reflection habit for each leader (Argyris & Schön, 1974.; Schön, 1983) (AR involves testing new practices, reflecting on them and then utilizing reflection to create new knowledge and develop new activities (Schön, 1983). Reflection should also consider the socio-cultural context of the school, identifying the key players' understandings of leadership (principal, leading teachers and/or students).

Such processes can nurture relevant leadership competencies, which are essential for school principals.

2.4. Awareness of the Significance of Context

Cross-national comparisons have shown that 'theory and practice in educational leadership and management are socially constructed and contextually bounded. Therefore successful leaders must be sensitive to their local and national contexts' (Jacobson & Johnson, 2011). By studying the school and broader socio-cultural context and striving for awareness regarding power relations, they can see how both context and power formulate meaning-making, understandings, and decision making; that is, what people do, think, and say, and how they relate to each other. Leadership practices are not only determined by individuals in a specific school or the relationships between them but also by other schools, teachers and students from other schools, the community, parents, the state, and legislation. Even the actions and words of individuals are influenced by 'others'; therefore, leadership is socially constructed (Huotari & Carroll, 2018). Realizing the context is critical for the leaders' professional development since they can see new perspectives and solutions by understanding the limits that stem from the context (Carr & Kemmis, 2005).

2.5. Awareness of Their Perceptions about Leadership

It is also necessary for principals to reflect on their understandings of leadership, to further their professional development. Participants in such reflection processes need a deeper understanding of leadership, its sources, and how it emerges and develops through day-to-day experience. Brotto (2011) suggests negotiating educational leadership that can reveal the whys and wherefores by developing critical cultural awareness regarding meaning-making. Leadership theories are neither fixed nor understood in the same way by all the participants. Participants need to share their understandings through productive dialogic reflection practices, be open to understanding others, and move toward new directions to bring about necessary change in educational settings.

- Ability to become 'leader-learners' who know how to learn from real experiences and thus transform through this practice (Raelin, 2016). It is essential for the principals' professional development to be aware of their own competencies and shortcomings and be able to identify how and why they think in specific ways.
- Ability to perceive leadership as a practice, that is, as processes shaped by the practices and relationships within which leadership is constructed as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Raelin, 2016). In this framework, leadership takes on a more cooperative character since participants share different roles (Chreim, 2015). Power can stem from different sources, which are not homogenous; power sources can be either individual or collective. Leadership as a practice is more of a coordinated effort by the actors in a school setting, who attempt to achieve their goals either individually or collectively in subgroups (Pickering, 1995). As a practice between individuals or groups, emphasis is placed on circumstances, engagement, and commitment. Thus, meaning cannot be determined by an individual leader. Each individual or group determines meaning under specific circumstances, and this meaning can be reproduced or changed. The reproduction or change of meaning is a political and socio-cultural act; it is crucial for principals to understand this.

This final competency (the perception and knowledge of leadership as practice) is vital for school principals' professional development. It draws on a recently developed theoretical framework, compatible with the AR processes mentioned above, called leadership as practice (LAP). Research, based on this framework, investigates: a) the practices and relationships within which power is constructed, which actually make leadership an emerging and socially constructed phenomenon, and b) how leadership roles are allocated to the participants since this affects the collective leadership traits (Chreim, 2015).

3. The Action Research Project

3.1. Context and Participants

The AR project took place in the Experimental Junior High School in Rethymno, Crete, Greece, from September 2019 to September 2020. The first cycle lasted from September 2019 to January 2020 and the second from February to September 2020. The participants were: the school principal as the research initiator, a school teacher–researcher as a facilitator, the teachers of the school as insiders, and an academic as a critical friend.

The role of a school principal in Greece differs from other countries. For instance, in US and Australia, where accountability plays a significant role, the principal enters the classroom and gives lessons so that teachers can learn new methods. The principal is also responsible for introducing and monitoring innovation (Hardy et al., 2020; Traga Philippakos, 2021). In Sweden, the first teacher, alongside the principal, is responsible for innovation (Rönnerman & Olin, 2014). In Greek, the principal is mostly responsible for bureaucratic and official administrative activities (managing mail, coordinating the exams, etc.). Innovation is not associated with the role of anyone in the school, principal or otherwise. The principal cannot enter a teacher's classroom without the teacher's permission.

Participants	Principal: Research Initiator	School Teacher-Researcher: Facilitator	25 School Teachers	Academic
Insider/Outsider	Insider	Insider	Insider	Outsider
Experience in AR	Action Researcher	Action Researcher	35% have participated in AR projects	Action Researcher
Role in the AR	Collecting and analyzing data / Reflecting on findings	Collecting and analyzing data / Enhancing the principal's reflection	Providing data and reflection	Enhancing critical thinking and reflection

Table 1

Author 3, the school principal, initiated the AR project by asking questions about how he could change his role since he was facing difficulties as a new principal in a school with a long and strong tradition. He features a complex professional theory and promotes innovative practices. He holds a Ph.D. in Physics Education Research (PER) and an MA in Educational Leadership. He has also worked as a counselor at the Institute of Educational Policy and has strong connections with universities and academics. He is an active member of the Greek Physics Association and well known among educational communities, both locally and nationally.

Author 1, the teacher–researcher, holds a Ph.D. in Educational Linguistics and Participatory Research Methodologies and a master's degree in Linguistics. He is an AR expert and teaches in the same school. He arrived at the school in 2018, simultaneously with the principal.

Author 2 is an experienced academic and AR expert who acted as a critical friend. She has participated in several national and international projects. Her main role was to ensure the academic quality of the project and enhance reflection through discussions among the participants.

Approximately 35% of the teachers had previously participated in other AR projects. The school is experimental, so teachers are highly qualified compared to their colleagues from other schools. Many have master's degrees and are familiar with research projects and educational innovation practices. Before the principal arrived in 2018, most of the

teachers had worked in the school for many years, ranging from 6 to 20, while one teacher had been in the school since it was founded in 1998.

3.2. Data Sources, Methods of Analysis, and Processes Followed

The primary data source consisted of the dialogue exchanges during the principal-teachers' assemblies, which were recorded and transcribed. The six assemblies (app. 120 minutes each) were chosen because they allow the principal and teachers to interact and discuss school issues in depth. In addition, they reflect daily practice where incidents of leadership emerge systematically. Data was also collected from the notes kept by the facilitator during the assemblies and from the principal's journal.

The data was analyzed using CDA for the recorded assemblies and thematic analysis for the principal's journal (see next section for details). We chose to utilize various data sources and combine different methods of analysis to produce multiple prospects and enhance the participants' understanding. The CDA findings, produced by the facilitator, provided the principal with micro-level understanding and a basis for collective reflection. In addition, the thematic analysis of his journal provided information about the role of CDA in the principal's reflection. At this point, the critical friend deepened the reflection by posing open-ended questions (e.g., *Why do you think the teachers did this*?).

3.3. Conducted Analysis

The participants were anonymized (Principal or P, Teacher 1 or T1, Teacher 2 or T2). For the purposes of this paper, excerpts were translated into English. The facilitator analyzed the transcribed data using Critical Discourse Analysis based on Rymes (2021), a multidimensional approach that integrates different Discourse Analysis approaches into a coherent methodology, specifically,

- Identification of turn-taking and sequence between the principal and the teachers. The main questions in this phase were: Who speaks more? Which is the sequence? (e.g., Principal – Teacher 3 – Principal or Teacher 1 – Teacher 2 – Teacher 3. For each assembly, the sequence was recorded, noting which participant speaks more, who speaks less, and who is silenced.
- Identification of contextualized cues such as intonation and special words/phrases (e.g. 'as senior in this school'). These cues have a special meaning in a specific context and can reveal the participants' relationships.
- Focus on the narrative sources. Narratives are stories told by the participants. For instance, a teacher could narrate how she has been in this school for many years. This narration is important since it indicates the teachers' and principals' roles. In this case, important questions include: Whose experiences are narrated? Were special conditions created for the narration? What had been told prior to the narration? Is the story co-narrated by someone else?
- Examination of linguistic repertoires. Which kind of vocabulary and language did the principal and teachers use? Was it friendly or official? This analysis was based on a specific framework (Goffman 1981, 1984) whereby what is said can be analyzed in three different dimensions: a) the animator, the one who produces the speech, b) the author, the one who is responsible for how the speech was presented and c) the principal, the person/institution whose stances and attitudes are presented.

The principal's journal was analyzed using thematic analysis based on the principal's different educational leadership theories. Specifically, he immersed himself in his journal data and identified common emerging ideas or themes based on the three educational leadership theories he espoused. In addition, he conducted basic thematic analysis (emic, etic, and in vivo coding) (Peterson, 2017).

4. Findings

The findings are presented in two subsections. The first section presents the CDA findings, which enhanced the principal's reflection. The second section provides evidence from the principal's journal to show his change during the AR.

4.1. CDA of Principal-Teachers' Assemblies

4.1.1. Turn-Taking, Sequence, and Questions

Concerning turn-taking, the principal seems to be talking 43% of the entire time of the first assembly. However, this is not always the case; in some cases, teachers can talk a lot too. In Figure 2, the percentage of Teacher 4 is almost the same as that of the Principal in Figure 1. This shows that other school members can also act as leaders without being official school leaders, like the principal.
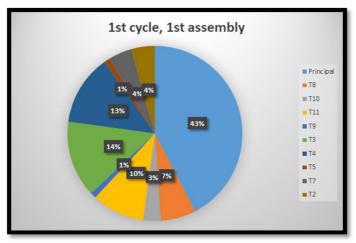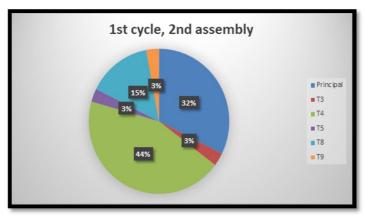
Figure 1

Figure 2

Another important finding, in this case, is that some teachers do not participate actively in the assemblies; their contribution is limited. Therefore, in the second AR cycle, the Principal changed his approach so that more teachers would start participating, as shown in Figure 3. Nevertheless, he still represents a high percentage (42%) of the total talking time.
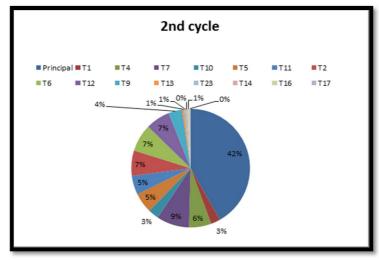

Figure 3

Regarding sequence, teachers only interact with the principal in both cycles, while interactions between teachers are very rare (see table 3). The assemblies reflect the binary relationship between the principal and specific teachers. Productive dialogue and exchange of ideas among the teachers is neither part of this specific school culture nor promoted by the principal. In the second cycle (table 4), we note some teacher-teacher exchanges in the sequence (noted in bold). Nevertheless, there is no radical change, as the principal–teachers' sequences remain more frequent.

P-T8-P-T10-P-T10-P-T10-P-T11-P-T11-PT-11-P-T8-T11-T8-T11-P-T11-P-T11-P-T11-P-T11-
P-T9-P-T3-P-T4-T5-P-T3-P-T4-P-T4-P-talks-P-T3-T8-T3-T4-P-T4-P-T4-P-T4-P-T4-P-T4-T3-
T4-P-T4-P-T3-P-T3-P-T8-P-T3-T4-P-T3-P-T3-P-T3-P-T4-P-T3-P-talks-P-T8-T4-T7-T3-T7-T2-
P-T7-P-T7-T8-T2-P-T6-T2-P

Table 2: Indicative Sequence of the 1st Cycle, 1st Assembly

P-T2-P-T4-P-T7-P-T7-T4-T10-P-T7-P-T7-P-T7-P-T7-P-T5-P-T11-P-T4-P-T1-P-T7-P-T7 P-T7-
P-T7-P-T2-P-T2-P-T2-P-T7-P-T6-P-T6-T12-P-T12-P-T7-P-T6-T12-T6-P-T12-P-T12-T6-T12-
T6-T12-P-T12-T5-T12-P-T12-P-T6-T12-P-T12-P-T12-P-T12-P-T12-T6-P-T9-T6-P-T6-P-T6-P-
T6-

Table 3: Indicative Sequence Excerpt of 2nd Cycle, 3rd Assembly

4.1.2. Contextualized Cues

In the first cycle, there is a series of conflicts between principal and teacher leaders, while participants do not listen to each other but insist on their initial position. No idea exchange takes place. In the following excerpt from the first cycle, teachers discuss the organization of excursions. Specifically, they talk about the parents' signed consent form to be submitted before the excursion. The teacher wants students to submit some days in advance, excluding students who do not bring the consent form in time. The principal insists that consent should be granted through the parents' mobile phone, a new and more effective way since they can send it immediately. Teacher 4 insists on written forms.

> Principal: (1) Why will the students come at the last moment? (2) I do not understand you, Maria
> T4: (3) Why? How many does it at the last moment? (4) a few students come and say (5) Miss, I have not brought it; I will have it tomorrow morning before entering the bus ((indignant accelerated talking))
> Principal: (6) Yes, but– in this way, we cancel all previous efforts (7) they have already learned to
> T4: Let's begin with the deadline and by not accepting consent forms after the deadline

Excerpt 1 from 1st Cycle, 1st Assembly 1

In point (1), the principal posed an open question, asking the teachers to explain the problem. T4 brings her experience in the assembly regarding the organization of excursions. She starts with a rhetorical question (the answer is implied), and a narrative begins. Her speech is accelerated, showing how indignant she is because explanations had already been given prior to this dialogue. She shows that the principal's question is unnecessary and possibly interpreted as persistence in his own opinion.

The principal in point (6) restates his opinion using discourse markers. Discourse marker *'yes'* shows that the principal considers the proposal of Teacher 4. However, the discourse marker '*but'* shows that the principal disagrees and does not consider T4's opinion about the students' habits of being late while entering the bus. The conversation is not co-constructive; participants remain in their original position.

> T6: [I want] to say something at this point. Instead of compensatory teaching for some students, we can do what Dimitris proposed.
> P: Of course, and we can insert ((this innovation)), and we could also insert ((this innovation)) in other subjects
> T6: Co-teaching not only for L1 language arts
> P: We can also have this with other courses, can't we?
> T12: Yes, ok, but my proposal is written only for L1 language arts

Excerpt 2 from 2nd cycle, 3rd assembly

In the 2nd AR cycle, the assemblies have obvious changes (see excerpt 2). First, innovation is not introduced by the principal but by a teacher (T12) and then taken up by Teacher 6. The principal, in this case, supports the idea ('of course', 'and we can...') and expands on it. Nevertheless, the principal also promotes dialogue by posing a question to continue the conversation ('we can also...', 'can't we?').

4.1.3. Narratives

Regarding narratives, the stories told in the assemblies are those of the principal and the teachers who have been in the school longer. There was only one narrative involving two teachers, not the principal, identifying a conflict between the teachers and the principal. These older teachers had worked in the school for 6-30 years before the principal came. In the second cycle, the principal did not add any narrative. Only the older teachers continued to produce stories. This shows the principal's change; he wanted to promote new narratives. Nevertheless, the teachers persisted in their narratives, showing that the teachers did not participate just as actively as the principal in this AR project, and therefore the change was not bilateral. The older teachers' narratives dominated the assemblies.

4.1.4. Linguistic Repertoires

The following example is taken from the 2nd assembly of the 1st cycle. It is a dialogue between the principal and two teachers. The principal insists that school excursions should include all students. On the other hand, the teachers state that only some students should participate in the excursions, those involved in relevant projects.

> T4: To take children on an excursion when they do not care about what is happening in the school, just to take them somewhere. I do not understand it.
> P: Actually, we will not make them go
> T4: This is what I am saying
> P: The students will be in a project to watch
> T4: NO, they should participate
> P: Take part
> T4: Take part, follow the project, do what should be done, and then go on an excursion
> T8: Watching is different from participating actively
> T4: So, all the children who want to, can be in projects
> P: Yes, but we should take as many as we can

Excerpt 3: 2nd Assembly – 1st cycle

The main difference between principals and teachers concerns the school policy regarding excursions. Greek schools feature special extracurricular programs called projects, where students produce artifacts and participate in various activities. By law, these projects allow the school to organize excursions, that is, educational outdoor activities. The principal suggests that all students should participate, even if it is only to watch, to allow students to participate in outdoor activities. However, some teachers believe that only the students who participate actively in the projects should participate in the excursion and outdoor activities.

One should analyze their perspectives to better understand the principal's and teachers' views. For the principal, outdoor activities are for everyone; in this case, he is the animator. This approach is promoted by official institutions like the National Educational Institution, where the specific principal has worked. To analyze it further, according to Goffman, the principal articulates a discourse of inclusion, promoted by the academia and official educational theory, and stresses the demand for equity and access for all. This academic theory neglects the teachers and their experience. They, in this case, believe that excursions for all do not serve pedagogical goals, but students should have to do something to go on excursions.

	Event	Animator	Author	Principal
Principal	Outdoor activities for all	Principal	Official organizations like the National Educational Institution	Adopts and tries to impose an academic theory of inclusion – neglects the teachers' understandings
Teachers	Outdoor activities for some students, after selection	Some teachers	Official theories that promote individual choice	Liberal and neoliberal discourse

Table 1: Analysis Based on Goffman (198: 144-145)

As shown in Table 1, on the one hand, the principal continues to produce a discourse close to official institutions, neglecting the teachers' perspective. On the other hand, the teachers lack critical thinking; they do not question why some students do not participate in projects. Some of the school projects are demanding and require commitment. Students from low socio-economic classes often cannot meet the requirements, even if they would 'choose' to do so. Teachers could have posed questions like: *Who participates in projects and who does not? Why these students and not others?* Such questions might have revealed severe problems in the school. Moreover, the analysis shows that the principal is in conflict with some teachers, while all parties seem unaware of the discourses they promote. As the two sides cannot listen to each other, there is no productive dialogue.

4.2. Thematic Analysis of the Principal's Journal

4.2.1. Findings from the 1st Cycle: Dominance of Mainstream Leadership Theories

At the beginning of the AR project, the principal mentioned distributed leadership as the theory he was willing to follow. He rated the distributed theory highly, as activities are tied to the organization's core work that is designed by organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, or practices of other organizational members (Spillane, 2005). In this case, the principal acts as one of the leaders who inspire others, though some teachers can also play this role. In the 1st cycle, he drew on this leadership theory to categorize his actions during the thematic analysis of his journal:

One memorable distributed proposal was for a new colleague (with significant experience) to take a position regarding actions against bullying. Another colleague proposed distributed action regarding publishing a school newspaper (principal's notes during the 1st cycle).

By engaging in action research and the thematic analysis of his journal, the principal established a reciprocal relationship with his practice and experience and linked it to official theory. Although he was aware of educational theories about leadership, he only started to use them purposefully during the action research project.

My feeling is that, although I did not have any particular leadership theory during the assemblies, in my reflection during the thematic analysis, I realized that I followed specific leadership theories. This fact encouraged me to continue the research. Furthermore, it was obvious that my practice is based on my theoretical knowledge (principal's notes during the 1st cycle).

However, it was clear that official educational leadership theories, mainly distributed leadership, dominated and governed every action in the school. The principal strongly desired to do new things in school and involve his colleagues in these or other innovations. Nevertheless, this is analyzed through the lenses of these official theories (distributed proposal – distributed action).

Concerning the teachers' relations, the following figure depicts how the principal understands relations in the school. Naturally, the vice-principal and some teachers are on his side. However, there is a group of teachers always in contrast with the principal. Moreover, there are also other teachers that are scattered, sometimes discussing with him and others not.
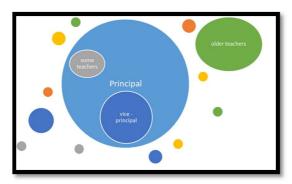

Figure 1: How the Principal Understands the Relations in His School in the 1st Cycle

4.2.2. The Contribution of Discourse Analysis: The Principal's Reflection After the 1st Cycle

After the 1st cycle, the principal started having doubts about the leadership theories he had espoused. He started to note the inconsistencies between the theories learned during his postgraduate studies and practice. He realizes and expresses these inconsistencies explicitly.

There is something about leadership I cannot understand. I am not satisfied with the different leadership styles I have studied. I have not thought about it before, but school culture is there (principal's notes, reflection after the 1st cycle).

Excerpt 4

The CDA played a catalytic role, as the principal acknowledges that the linguistic analysis sheds light on the processes that shape leadership during everyday practice. For example, one of the processes highlighted by the principal is 'space and time'.

I am constrained to specific leadership styles. The facilitator's role was catalytic due to the linguistic analysis he conducted. I thought of the processes... How leadership develops... I need to leave space and time for the teachers (principal's notes, reflection after the 1st cycle).

Excerpt 5

In the last of the principal's notes before the beginning of the 2nd cycle, he seems to have more questions than answers concerning leadership in the school:

a. I am thinking of the silence or low participation on the part of many teachers. In what are they not participating? Should I involve them individually? Or should I engage them by dividing them into groups? How can I motivate them? Is their perspective valuable?
b. Why do I, as principal, as an expert in distributed leadership theories, also put other leadership theories into practice?
c. Why do the teachers confuse me when they refer to legislation?

Excerpt 6

In this excerpt, the principal started to pose questions in his attempt to discover new ways to exercise leadership. Due to the feedback he got from the CDA, the principal noted that some teachers displayed silence or low participation. So, he tried to see how to enable them to speak and make others listen to their voices. Some of the solutions included personal motivation and/or grouping with others.

His second question refers to espoused leadership theories. At the beginning of the research, the principal strongly supported the distributed leadership theory. However, due to AR and CDA, he started to re-think all the theories he was familiar with and study current research. In this case, the principal challenged his previous knowledge and practice because he identified critical inconsistencies.

The last question refers to the legislation. In this case, the principal identified that external factors, like legislation, affect the teachers' discourse and behavior. For example, Turn-taking in the assemblies expresses individual opinions and more complex meaning-making constructions.

4.2.3. The Need for New Theories (After the 2nd Cycle)

After the 2nd cycle was completed, the principal started challenging the official theories he used to uphold, characterizing them as 'traditional'.

> *This traditional leadership approach (distributed) does not fit the school micro-level. Leadership should be examined at the moment when it is born. There are other elements crucial for the emergence of leadership that should be considered: space, time, collectivities, status, new vs. older teachers, assembly procedures, the voices of power that are heard, other voices of leadership, etc.* (principal's notes, after the 2nd cycle).

Excerpt 7

In excerpt 7, the principal realizes the crucial role of context. In it, he includes the space where assemblies take place, the teachers' background, mainly how long the teachers have been in the same school, and generally the processes within which real leadership (as opposed to typical/official) is exercised. He started perceiving leadership as processes and practices organized by the participants without considering what formal leaders do and think (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016). The principal created a new language, choosing specific CDA features for his new discourse, such as the context and practices through which processes take place. It seems that the distributed leadership theory, focusing on leaders and their characteristics, cannot interpret the practices that determine the actions and words of the teachers' assemblies. The identification and interpretation of context became a tool that helped him understand leadership; it was obvious to the principal that the educational leadership theories he had espoused earlier were not enough to interpret current assemblies.

A key indication of change is that the principal admits that learning is the most important factor in improving leadership.

> *Nothing happened concerning learning. We should move towards learning. We all have our own perspectives. We should turn to learning. The school must work as a learning community* (principal's notes, after the 2nd cycle).

Excerpt 8

After the second AR cycle, the leadership theories of the 1st cycle have been abandoned. Learning becomes the new pathway enhancing leadership, conceived based on collaborative practices. The principal was aware that new understandings and new approaches to improvement should be developed in this community. In the last assembly, the principal showed this change in practice by adopting more socio-cultural approaches to leadership, namely leadership as practice (Nelson, 2019; Raelin, 2016). This theory was unknown to him until then, but he discovered it during the self-study that became necessary in the context of action research. He presented 'leadership as practice' in the research group as a possible next step in his professional route.

5. Conclusions- Discussion

This two-cycle AR project proved that combining action research with CDA can contribute to school principals' professional development, creating opportunities for change in the school context. Though the principal was an expert with a postgraduate degree in educational leadership, he questioned the educational leadership theories he supported and challenged his espoused official theories. He finally changed his understanding of leadership, shifting towards more complex and socio-cultural thinking and taking a step towards transformation in practice.

5.1. The School Principal's Shift and Professional Development

According to the findings, the principal displayed new understandings and practices in four main areas:
- Awareness of the gap between the principal's theory and practice: Even though the principal strongly supported distributed educational theory, he soon realized that, in practice, he implemented other theories. In the 2nd cycle, the principal underwent a catalytic change and started to challenge the existing official educational leadership theories (mainly distributed leadership) and explore new ones. He concluded that leadership as practice (LAP) is more compatible with his values and understandings and can better interpret what was happening in school. His

shift may have occurred because CDA also focuses on practices (like dialogue, e.g., who speaks and how much) and highlights specific issues that arise (e.g., the principal and older teachers as main talkers), bearing in mind questions like why somebody speaks more than the others, etc.

- The emphasis on the significance of the context: As his journal showed, the principal identified the factors that affect everyday leadership practices in school, including institutional restrictions, teachers' relations, school culture, etc. He had the opportunity to identify the characteristics of the specific context and its power to shape leadership practices in the school under study. Specifically, he became aware of the deteriorating effect of context on his practices in terms of school tradition and the teachers invoking the authority of the law. Though he acknowledged the institutional context connected to national legislation and the Greek Ministry of Education, he did not focus on international fast-track policies that shape everyday school activities globally (Hardy et al., 2020; Peck & Theodore, 2015). The principal identified legislation and institutional context as an obstacle to his leadership practices. He also realized a contradiction that is crucial to his practice as a principal. Although principals are widely perceived as key factors in determining, introducing, and assessing innovation in school, teachers consider the role of the principal important (Rönnerman & Olin, 2014; Traga Philippakos, 2021). In fact, principals in the Greek educational system are limited to administrative duties. They cannot introduce innovation due to the highly centralized educational system and the strong presence of teachers' associations in each school. This contrasts with the profile and background of this specific principal, whose identity as a principal includes being an active member of the school and introducing innovation.

- Understanding the variety of sources of leadership: The principal gradually realized that leadership stems not only from individuals with official status (like himself) but also from collectivities (groups or/and communities). For instance, teachers who have been in the school for a long also play a leading role; 'older teachers' may also be a source of leadership. These various sources of leadership might include internal and external factors, such as students, parents, or even subgroups such as parents' associations or student councils. At the beginning of the AR project, the principal believed that leadership is constructed by a vision that the principal and/or teachers adopt and are inspired from. After the research, he became convinced that leadership is constructed through practices, such as narratives, type of turn-taking, and relationships among the participants (like the narration by two teachers). In this way, leadership is a collective phenomenon practiced by several participants.

- Adoption of a more socio-cultural perspective of leadership and influence of the LAP theory: At the end of the project, the principal adopted a more socio-cultural perspective of leadership. He understood that institutional leaders do not seem to play a crucial role in the exercise of leadership (Pickering, 1995). The narratives, turn-taking, and the tension between new and older teachers showed that leadership is subject to and restricted by certain socio-cultural circumstances, such as school tradition (e.g., older teacher-new principal) and various frameworks (e.g., new principal vs. a group of teachers with strong friendship). Moreover, the principal understood that time and space is crucial in exercising leadership. Through CDA, the principal realized that he and certain older teachers dominate the talking time, leaving less time for the others. He also realized that some teachers were silent, reinforcing his reflection and the need to find solutions.

- Regarding space, the assemblies were strongly associated with their location, usually in ambiguous and indistinguishable spaces. Research is conducted at a specific time and place; these circumstances determine relevant (re)actions. If space and time change, the quality of relationships and actions will also change the kind of leadership practiced. (Carroll, 2016). Beyond space and time, specific routines play a crucial role. In this case, the findings from the CDA analysis revealed routines like who speaks, when speaks, how much speaks, and which narratives dominate the conversation. These routines reveal the dominant practices that determine relationships in the school. Finally, the research highlighted the symbolic power of objects (Nicolini et al., 2012) in leadership practices. For instance, the principal's suggestions were challenged by how excursions were organized before he came to the school; the narrative between the two teachers showed that this object (excursion consent form) became a symbolic source of power shared among a group of teachers. Narratives can reveal the objects each teacher or group of teachers has created, showing how these objects generate power and challenge institutionalized and/or the principal's power.

Although the principal's change was obvious, certain limitations constrained the prospects created for his professional development. The principal's awareness of the linguistic features of the assemblies led him to new meaning-making, understandings, and different decisions concerning leadership. However, although his understandings changed, his practices did not.

Of course, the new framework of understanding and how these new understandings relate to his daily practice are necessary for transformation in practice (Aas et al., 2020). Moreover, although the principal had the opportunity to delve into his theories and practices when he identified inconsistencies, he turned to another educational theory, namely LAP. Instead of looking for a new theory in the literature to rely on, the principal adopted more creative and reflective solutions: he focused on the practices he saw that were missing, such as leadership outside the assemblies (e.g., in classrooms) or the dialogic deficit of the assembly practices. Even though the distributed leadership theory offers other solutions, such as promoting middle leader teachers (Nehez et al., 2021), he was unwilling to test it in practice. In a future AR cycle or project, the principal may be empowered to create his own leadership theory by merging selective elements from different theories instead of following a particular one, usually favored by current research and literature, like LAP.

However, the main restrictions stemmed from the fact that the AR project focused on changing the principal, not the school as a community. In addition, time limitations, the school staff's heavy workloads, the teachers' unwillingness to

engage in demanding action research again, and research methodology complexities led to this specific research choice. Though it may not be the best, it can produce interesting primary findings.

5.2. Processes That Enabled the Principal's Shift

AR processes (thematic analysis of his journal and reflection on the findings), combined with CDA, affected the principal's understandings and practices. Although it is not usual to combine AR and CDA in projects, we consider it very promising, as meanings and actions are better understood in an AR project when participants focus on their linguistic and interpretive turns and the subjects of communication. Furthermore, through CDA, participants, like the principal, can gain a deeper understanding of the learning processes occurring during AR and their professional development (Katsarou, 2013).

The principal's reflection gained depth through the discussions with the other two research team members, the facilitator, and the critical friend. By questioning his interpretations, they helped him gain a deeper understanding and acknowledge that everyday practices, dialogic exchanges, time, and space are practices that determine leadership. It should be mentioned that the principal realizes how CDA contributed to deepening his reflection, yet he mentions nothing (neither orally nor in his journal) about these discussions. This may be because they did not form part of a fixed research plan. However, this could be very difficult because of the administrative burden for the principal and the risk of potential burnout.

Furthermore, the principal referred to literature throughout the project to check existing theories and find new ones. This continuous search reinforced an AR project's dialectic relationship between theory and practice, which inspired his self-study.

It seems that the combination of Action Research and Critical Discourse Analysis can be productive in the professional development of principals under certain circumstances. This combination demands a new understanding of school leadership and may bring about a shift from traditional managerial approaches to socio-cultural approaches of leadership and theories that emphasize processes and practices rather than leadership traits and behaviors. Implementing this combination can empower school principals, as reflecting on context, relations, and power issues reveal important aspects of the school community and enable new frameworks for understanding school leadership, which can support real change.

5.3. Acknowledgements

6. References

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