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*Research Article*

# Current Challenges in School Leadership in Estonia and Finland: A Multiple-Case Study among Exemplary Principals

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The purpose of this study was to find out what current challenges successful principals in Estonia and Finland identify in developing their schools. The strategies used in dealing with these challenges were also analyzed within the framework of "growth-mindset pedagogy" as an educational approach to school leadership. The principals were interviewed, and the resulting data were analyzed by means of both inductive and deductive content analysis. The similarities among and differences between principals from Estonia and Finland were compared and discussed in the context of high-achievement-oriented but culturally different educational systems. According to the results, the challenges are similar in both countries, relating to the principals' professional development, as well as developments in the curriculum and the learning community. The Estonian principals identified more challenges related to developments in the learning community than their Finnish peers, although in both countries they tended to use strategies related to growth-mindset pedagogy in dealing with them. Preparation and development programs for principals should pay more attention to their mindset and their views on teaching and learning, which may have a strong impact on the whole school community.

## 1. Introduction

Schools all over the world nowadays need to respond to rapid societal changes, constantly analyzed contexts, and everyday challenges, as well as implementing new practices. Principals play an important role, creating an environment that facilitates teacher learning and school improvement [1–3].

Our aim in this study is to investigate the leadership challenges currently faced by four exemplary principals from Estonia and Finland. We know from previous research and policy documents that one such challenge relates to working in multicultural schools. Finland represents the OECD average in terms of the numbers of school pupils with an immigrant background (17%), whereas Estonia ranks lower with just one percent [4]. Previous research on current challenges in schools has focused mainly on teachers (cf. [5–8]). The new national curricula in Estonia and Finland emphasize the importance of learning communities and school autonomy, allowing the powerful role of leaders to emerge [9, 10]. Current leadership research focuses on different styles, emphasizing shared or learning-centered leadership, with an emphasis on the learning process [1, 11]. However, there has been little research on the personality traits of school leaders, or on their personal competence to engage in effective leadership [12]. Moreover, there is a lack of evidence regarding the mindset behind their thinking. In the following, therefore, we analyze the challenges principals experience in their everyday work and their learning-related mindsets that trigger their thinking while resolving them.

## 2. Theoretical Background

*2.1. Context of the Leadership in Estonia and Finland.* Estonia and Finland provide interesting contexts in order to study school leadership given that they are associated with

high academic performance and achievement in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) [13]. Historically, the two countries were in the same situation at the beginning of the twentieth century, when both started to develop as independent nation states and introduced compulsory educational systems. The Russianization of education (Soviet period) started in Estonia after the Second World War. Finland started to build its welfare state during this time, and education was decentralized in 1980. Estonia regained its independence in 1991. This led to the establishment of a national educational system and the decentralization of the school system as responsibility for local schools was devolved to the municipalities [14].

Principals in Estonia and Finland have considerable freedom in their work. They have the highest degree of autonomy in Europe [15], being responsible for supporting the professional development of teachers in their schools and developing the pedagogical concept. It is the responsibility of principals in Estonia to develop the teaching and learning process and to monitor the use of the school's resources, including the tasks assigned to teachers [16]. The duties of comprehensive school principals in Finland include administrative tasks, responsibilities related to the organization of school-level education, curriculum work, and supporting the development of the whole work community [17].

The municipalities in both countries are responsible for developing and maintaining the quality of general education. The educational-leadership structure and the degree of school autonomy vary between municipalities and sometimes even between schools within the same municipality. The management team in the municipality of Vantaa in Finland, for example, is responsible for the outcomes, the strategic decisions, and the annual action plans of the school. It coordinates the school's daily activities and is responsible for developing the school culture. The members of the management team are required to work together in transforming new ideas into action, taking into account the initiatives of members of the school community, to produce the best possible outcomes. The team is tasked with assessing and developing the operationalization of the curriculum. It should also focus on the development and utilization of the competences of the school's workforce [18].

Similarly, Estonian school principals have the authority to appoint and dismiss staff, negotiate working conditions, and make decisions about school finances, educational priorities, and development plans [16]. Both the *Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020* [19] and the *Estonian school leader's competence model* [20] emphasize the role of school leaders in improving the teaching and learning culture and adopting a pedagogical leadership style that supports the learning and development of students and teachers.

In both countries, the principals are the main actors designing the school curriculum, which is based on the national framework, and supporting the professional development of the teachers who implement the changes. The most recent reform of the national curriculum in Estonia was in 2014, and it now emphasizes cross-curricular themes, the integration of subjects, and the development of general competences. General competences are developed through all subjects as well as in extracurricular and out-of-school activities and is monitored and directed by teachers in mutual collaboration as well as in cooperation between school and home [9]. Finland's latest curriculum reform was also in 2014: it emphasized the importance of sharing pedagogical leadership among school principals and teachers in the implementation of the phenomenon-based curriculum, to empower students in all phases of their learning to develop their transversal competences [10]. The findings from a survey conducted among key Finnish actors revealed a trend of deepening and expanding distributed leadership in curriculum work in recent decades [21]: it seems that principals take their curriculum work seriously and share the responsibility with teachers.

*2.2. Leadership in Schools.* Comparative studies show that strong leadership is among the crucial qualities for managing change and achieving excellent academic results [22]. Bush and Glover [23] define leadership as a process of influence culminating in the achievement of a desired purpose. Research evidence supports the widely accepted view that leadership quality is a critical factor in creating a positive school climate and improving learner outcomes and that leaders have direct and indirect effects on student learning [24, 25]. Direct influence is exerted through the building of organizational learning and encouraging the professional development of teachers, and this indirectly affects student motivation, engagement, learning, and achievement.

It has been shown in recent research that regardless of the cultural, policy, and schooling contexts, there are more similarities than differences in the values, qualities, strategies, skills, and actions of successful school leaders [26]. It is suggested that the most powerful core leadership practices are building a vision and setting directions, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning programs [24]. Similarly, Bush and Glover [27] identify three dimensions of leadership, influence, vision, and values, which we discuss further in terms of how they are manifested in the work of leaders.

*2.2.1. Leadership as Influence.* Although within this category practices make a significant contribution to motivation, they are primarily intended to build not only the knowledge and skills that teachers and other staff need to accomplish organizational goals but also the disposition (commitment, capacity, and resilience) to persist in their application [24]. School principals are expected to provide individual support to and foster the development of teachers through the modelling of appropriate values and behaviors. Leithwood et al. [24] conclude in their overview of the research on leadership that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influencer of pupil learning and that leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions. Lahtero et al. [18] suggest that it is more important to emphasize the holistic and

integrative nature of educational leadership than to concentrate on individual tasks or skills related to the principal's work. Thus, the humanistic aspect of the leader's work is highly important and has a strong impact on the creation of a teachers' community at school.

*2.2.2. Leadership and Vision.* Successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values. They articulate this vision and influence the staff, structures, and activities of the school in an effort to move towards the achievement of this shared vision [23]. Creating a clear vision has development potential in schools, but the empirical evidence of its effectiveness remains mixed [27]. Educational systems differ in the level of autonomy allowed to develop a school vision in the framework of the given national curricula. Principals with the autonomy to make decisions on the school level need to understand the wider system and gather different information to build up a better picture of the context [28]. Research results in the Estonian context reveal that principals understand the importance of directing the learning process and that those who have a clear vision of school development and goals act as pedagogical leaders and use strategies that make the school culture more collaborative [29]. A thoroughly discussed and clearly articulated vision is part of an inspiring school culture in educational systems in which leader autonomy is high (e.g., Estonia and Finland), and principals play a crucial role in this.

*2.2.3. Leadership and Values.* It is broadly acknowledged that leadership is linked with values. Leaders with high levels of morality have greater awareness of political and social issues, and they are more responsive to societal needs and expectations. They tend to have an optimistic mindset, a coherent set of goals, and supportive relationships, all of which help them to identify situations as moral issues [30, 31]. According to the work in [32], the morality of its principal crucially reflects a school's ethos: moral values such as tolerance, care, and equality guided the principals in their work with teachers, students, and families. As we report in our earlier study [33], principals demonstrate the virtues of wisdom and knowledge in creating long-term visions for their schools and building them up for future generations. Other leadership virtues include humanity, courage, and justice, indicating caring and honesty, and the involvement of teachers and parents in decision-making. It, thus, seems that such virtues motivate principals to achieve their desired goals and to resolve challenging situations in morally sustainable ways [33]. It is further shown in an Estonian study, however, that principals rarely create a shared-value context and that shared leadership is unlikely to be adopted in the development of a more systematic and analytical approach to personnel and organizational development [29].

From these earlier studies on leadership, we are able to identify a lack of research on the mindset of principals related to learning and pedagogy that might have an influence on the strategies they use to deal with current challenges in schools. In the present study, therefore, we assess the impact of principals' views about teaching and learning on the whole school community and how they are reflected in the strategies used to resolve current challenges in schools.

*2.3. The Mindsets of Principals Related to Learning.* On the evidence of a vast body of literature on leadership, Hallinger and colleagues [11] define learning-centered leadership as "intentional efforts to inspire, guide, direct, support, and participate in teacher learning with the goal of increasing professional knowledge and promoting school effectiveness." Moreover, "learning-centered leadership and its conceptual cousins make the normative assumption that "learning" should be the key outcome of leadership in schools." In other words, learning-centered leaders promote a vision that motivates learning in school. They are role models, supporting values such as openness, risk-taking, and collaboration. They also offer learning support, create an environment that encourages collaborative learning, and provide resources. In effect, they manage the learning program such that principals organize, participate in, manage, and monitor activities designed to foster teacher learning [1, 11]. All the abovementioned activities rely strongly on the principals' personal moral values.

According to findings from earlier research, Finnish and Estonian principals can demonstrate that they have internalized their moral role as a school leader and have found a purpose in the ethical nature of their work [32, 33]. In critical and challenging situations, principals need a mindset that promotes human development and learning opportunities in school communities. "A growth-mindset pedagogy" has been suggested as an educational strategy to promote learning in schools in the egalitarian Finnish educational system [34]. This kind of pedagogy builds on the widely applied theory [35] of implicit belief in the nature of basic human qualities related to learning. According to this theory, principals with a fixed mindset (entity theory) believe that the basic qualities of teachers and families in their schools are stable and unchangeable, whereas those with a growth mindset (incremental theory) believe that such qualities are changeable and can be developed. Principals in Estonia and Finland are expected to advance learning among diverse learners in multicultural settings, and they are challenged in terms of finding educational strategies to promote school development in changing circumstances. Growth-mindset pedagogy focuses on educational principles and concrete strategies that can be used in resolving current challenges in school leadership. The framework comprises four main educational principles: supporting individual learning processes, promoting mastery orientation, persistence, and fostering-process-focused thinking [34]. We have shown that successful teachers use these strategies to promote learning and development in their schools [34, 36]. The main characteristic of growth-mindset pedagogy is process-focused thinking, meaning that the principal does not give up on his or her teachers and students when they make mistakes or fail in their learning tasks, but rather provide constructive feedback. In practice, this means one-on-one

interaction and help for those with learning difficulties through the differentiation of teaching and pedagogical strategies, which requires persistency from the principal, the teachers, and the students. Mistakes and failures are seen as learning opportunities, and learning to face them prepares students for life-long learning. Principals aiming to foster teachers' and students' incremental beliefs and situational attributions should ensure in their feedback practices that all teachers and students experience success in their work and studies. This also applies to promoting mastery orientation in learning. By means of formative assessment and the avoidance of comparisons with others on the part of teachers and students, principals can promote the achievement of learning goals over good grades. Developing strategies within growth-mindset pedagogy will foster the resiliency that is needed in learning.

In sum, the concepts of learning-centered leadership and growth-mindset pedagogy are complementary in that learning-centered leaders give direction to teachers in their learning to improve their competence in terms of fostering student learning, whereas growth-mindset pedagogy reflects the leader's beliefs about universal learning. Thus, leaders who engage in learning-centered leadership and have incremental beliefs regarding teacher learning create a favorable learning environment for all, both students and teachers.

Thus, we address the following questions in this study:

(1) What current challenges do principals from Estonia and Finland identify in developing their schools?

(2) How is growth-mindset pedagogy actualized in the strategies principals adopt in dealing with these challenges?

## 3. Materials and Methods

We conducted a qualitative multiple-case study involving four principals (two from Estonia and two from Finland) who had demonstrated successful leadership skills in managing schools in challenging areas. The four principals were deliberately chosen to represent respected leaders in schools who also collaborate with universities and are committed to developing themselves and their schools. They had studied various aspects of leadership and promoted in-service training for the teachers in their schools. Table 1 gives detailed background information about the principals (pseudonyms are used) and their schools. Our aim is to identify the challenges they have faced and the strategies they have used to resolve them. These cases constitute examples of current challenges and their resolution.

The qualitative thematic interviews were conducted in the principals' schools. Four topics were covered: the interviewee as a principal, pedagogical interaction at school, curriculum development, and pedagogical leadership. The principals were informed about the themes beforehand, which were discussed in the same order in all four interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

The Estonian and Finnish researchers conducted and analyzed the interviews with the Estonian and Finnish principals, respectively. The qualitative content analysis [37] was utilized *inductively* in finding the current challenges (research question 1) and *deductively* in identifying how growth-mindset pedagogy is actualized facing these challenges (research question 2). The unit of analysis was a meaning unit that contained one or more sentences that answered one of the research questions. In inductive analysis, meaning units were compared and abstracted into three main categories, each with several subcategories (see Table 2). The main categories were the professional development of the principals, curriculum development, and the development of the learning community (LC). The analysis related to principals' strategies to solve challenges was carried out deductively [37] with the help of a classification framework created in earlier research on growth-mindset pedagogy for Finnish schools [34]. The framework comprises four main categories: supporting individual learning processes, promoting mastery orientation, persistence, and the fostering of process-focused thinking. The researchers coded the principals' strategies within these four categories and analyzed the extent to which they represented a growth or a fixed mindset.

Altogether, 90 meaning units were identified in relation to current challenges, 51 in relation to strategies (see Tables 2 and 3). At the end of the process, all four researchers discussed the categories together to add reliability to the analysis. The main categories remained the same, but some subcategories were modified slightly to fairly represent both countries.

## 4. Results

*4.1. Current Challenges Identified by the Principals.* The theme of the first research question concerned the current challenges that principals identified in developing their schools. As Table 2 shows, *development of the learning community* was the most frequently mentioned challenge among the principals in both Estonia ($f = 26$) and Finland ($f = 17$). Within this main category were challenges related to teacher collaboration, cooperation with families, student engagement, the well-being of LC members, and cooperation with external bodies. In the following case example from Estonia, Tartu, a female principal describes a challenge related to teacher collaboration: high-school teachers positioned themselves further up the teacher hierarchy than their peers working in elementary schools. This kind of thinking was reflected in their unwillingness to collaborate with each other and in a disrespectful attitude that was a barrier to community development in the school. The following quotation from the interview with the principal demonstrates that challenges such as this need the active involvement of the principal and the necessary strategies to change the situation:

At first, we had this hierarchical arrogance [...]: the teacher in a high school thought that teachers in elementary schools should be paid less, not to mention the other benefits. Also, the teachers in elementary schools said, well, it is easy to be a teacher in the first grades, think about how hard our work is [...]; now for four years, we have had these learning communities comprising teachers of different

subjects at different levels, who meet regularly twice a month [...]; after half a year, we asked the teachers what they thought and what we found [...], and there is much more respect for and trust in colleagues (Kadri, Tartu, EST).

Teacher collaboration was also the biggest subcategory among the challenges related to developing the learning community pointed out by the Finnish principals (see Table 2). Jaakko, who felt passionate about having a comprehensive school housing both elementary and secondary levels, identified a challenge related to his teachers. In his view, the separation of teachers at elementary and secondary school was still evident in the Finnish educational culture and discouraged community development in schools. He describes this challenge in his school.

The challenge of building a comprehensive school that started in 1996, the ideology of the comprehensive school, still divides teachers. Teachers at elementary schools and secondary schools are still too far from each other, and we cannot build our learning community with this kind of separation. We have worked on this challenge in this school more than in many other schools, and I have not given up on this ideology and development. I can discuss many issues and we take different ideas to the school board and discuss them, but this ideology of the comprehensive school is something on which I cannot compromise (Jaakko, Helsinki, FIN).

Only the Estonian principals were challenged by issues related to student engagement. Both of them talked about it in their interviews ($f = 4$), but the Finnish principals did not mention it at all. Raul, a male Estonian principal quoted below, describes student engagement as a challenge that parents expect, which is reflected in many new activities the school should offer to its students.

The expectation that the school should do something different today is high. Also, to some extent, parents want to know that there are several activities in the school in the sense that they are educationally related, the different parties see the school evolving and changing, and there are many [...]; we have designed a school day and have made these things more attractive: before this, the children had a very short day at school, but now it is active and exciting (Raul, Tallinn, EST).

The different cultural contexts in these countries' educational systems may explain this difference. Students' active role in learning has been acknowledged for a long time in Finland, and schools have adopted problem-based learning and other strategies to promote student engagement. Schools and teachers in Estonia, on the other hand, are encouraged to develop their knowledge regarding student-centered learning and in-service training is offered to engage students more actively in the learning process. The Estonian principals were also more concerned about the well-being of their LC members ($f = 6$), whereas only one of the Finnish principals, from a school with diverse members, acknowledged this issue ($f = 3$). Overall, the Estonian principals identified more challenges in the category of *development of the learning community*, which also reflects the differences in school development in these countries. Finnish schools are better prepared for and have more resources to deal with challenges arising from increased diversity among members of learning communities.

The second largest category among all the principals was *curriculum development*. The principals from both countries identified a similar number of challenges (Estonia, $f = 14$ and Finland, $f = 16$). New curricula for basic education were published in both countries in 2014 [9, 10], and the schools have been very busy implementing it. The female Estonian principal from Tartu in the following case example, while acknowledging that the current Estonian national curriculum is educationally on a high level, admits that there are problems with its implementation in schools, especially regarding the individualization of learning. According to her, Estonian teachers face major challenges in implementing the new curriculum to cater for different learners.

I think the Estonian curriculum is a very good curriculum; it gives a framework, it provides you with the basics, and only requires that you be precise about the learning outcomes [...]. It was very difficult for the teachers to start working on this [. . .]. They began to demand so much from the children that only few were able to reach that level, and then, we wrote down the learning outcomes in the school curriculum on three levels (Kadri, Tartu, EST).

The new curriculum promotes inclusive education and the use of information and communication technology in schools [9, 10]. The principals referred to challenges in meeting these new demands. It would seem that, in Finland, for example, it is very difficult for a teacher to have students with severe behavioral problems in the same classroom as students who would like to concentrate on learning new things. Phenomenon-based learning is another new trend in the curricula, which principals find difficult to actualize. Timo, the Finnish principal from Helsinki, even dismissed this as more of a media stunt about Finnish education than a real issue to be developed in schools. In the following case example, he describes this challenge related to curriculum development.

The media have advertised phenomenon-based learning in Finnish schools. This is not a new thing in Finnish education, only the media have turned it into something innovative. In my opinion, the things in the new curriculum that are the most innovative have not received as much attention as those that were invented back in the 1970s (Timo, Helsinki, FIN).

Developing a learning environment for diverse learners was seen as a challenge in both countries. In the following quotation, Estonian principal Kadri describes the options open to Estonia in meeting the individual needs of students in inclusive education.

We still have the obligation [. . .] we must try to consider as much as we can any special needs: offering individualized instruction, one-to-one teaching, taking the student out of the class, and switching classes because, sometimes, the teacher and the student are simply not compatible in terms of personality. Also, we have changed classes and things will resolve by themselves [. . .] (Kadri, Tartu, EST).

Finnish principal Jaakko, from a highly multicultural school in Helsinki, addressed challenges related to inclusive education in terms of language issues. Challenges related to

Table 1: Background information about the principals and their schools.

| | Raul | Kadri | Jaakko | Timo |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nationality | Estonian | Estonian | Finnish | Finnish |
| School location | Tallinn | Tartu | Helsinki | Helsinki |
| Gender | Male | Female | Male | Male |
| Age | 40 | 44 | 52 | 49 |
| Education | 2 MA degrees: MA (teacher education); MA (educational management) | PhD in education; part-time work in a university teacher-training program | MA (education) | PhD in education, work in university, and docent |
| Work experience as a principal | 9 | 7 | 11 (earlier 14 years as a vice-principal) | 23 |
| Educational level of the school the principal was heading | Basic education (grades 1–9) and general upper-secondary education (grades 10–12) | Basic education (grades 1–9) | Basic education (grades 1–9) | Basic education (grades 1–9) and general upper-secondary education (grades 10–12) |
| School size and context | ca 900 students in a multicultural and low SES area | ca 908 students in an average SES area | ca 1,000 students in a multicultural and low SES area | ca 1,500 students in an average and high SES area |

Table 2: Categories of current challenges by the principal.

| Themes of the categories | Raul, Tallinn, EST $f$ | Kadri, Tartu, EST $f$ | Jaakko, Helsinki, FIN $f$ | Timo, Helsinki, FIN $f$ | In total, EST/FIN $f$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Principals' professional development | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 8/9 |
| *Curriculum development* | 4 | 10 | 8 | 10 | 14/16 |
| Inclusive education | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 | |
| ICT | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | |
| Assessment | 0 | 3 | 2 | 1 | |
| Phenomenon-based learning | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | |
| Learning environment | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | |
| *Learning community (LC) development:* | 12 | 13 | 13 | 4 | 26/17 |
| Teacher collaboration | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | |
| Cooperation with families | 2 | 4 | 2 | 2 | |
| Students' engagement | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | |
| Well-being of LC members | 3 | 3 | 3 | 0 | |
| Cooperation with external members | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | |
| Total | | | | | 48/42 |

curriculum development are also very different in Finnish schools in which native speakers of Finnish start to be in the minority. Jaakko describes this challenge as follows.

We are very close to a situation in which we do not have a Finnish-speaking population in our school. This means that learning about the Finnish language and culture is much slower and more difficult. The knowledge does not come from inside the learning community, it comes from outside. It is very important to maintain good co-operative relationships with actors from the different cultures and groups in order to help these multicultural students in their learning (Jaakko, Helsinki, FIN).

Challenges related to the principals' professional development constitute the smallest category but are still evident in both countries. All the principals involved in the study were well prepared for the principal's position (two with PhD degrees), strongly committed, and active in the principals' community. However, they still addressed the importance to develop as human beings and professionals. They acknowledged their demanding role and that it is sometimes difficult to balance all the demands from different members of their learning communities.

*4.2. Principals' Strategies in Dealing with Challenges.* The second research question concerned how the principals implemented a growth-mindset pedagogy in their strategies for dealing with the challenges they had identified. Strategies related to growth-mindset pedagogy were generally used in *supporting the individual learning processes of students, teachers, and parents* (see Table 3).

These strategies were adopted mainly in dealing with challenges related to the *development of the learning community,* which was the most challenging topic among all the principals (see Table 2). Exemplar principals from Estonia

Table 3: Categories of growth-mindset pedagogy and their use by the principal.

| | Raul, Tallinn, EST *f* | Kadri, Tartu, EST *f* | Jaakko, Helsinki, FIN *f* | Timo, Helsinki, FIN *f* | In total, EST/FIN *f* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Supporting individual learning processes | | | | | |
| Growth mindset | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 5/7 = 12 |
| Fixed mindset | 2 | | 3 | | 2/3 = 5 |
| | | | | | Total: 17 |
| Persistence | | | | | |
| Growth mindset | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 6/6 = 12 |
| Fixed mindset | | | 3 | | 0/3 = 3 |
| | | | | | Total: 15 |
| Fostering-process-focused thinking | | | | | |
| Growth mindset | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 5/4 = 9 |
| Fixed mindset | | | 3 | | 0/3 = 3 |
| | | | | | Total: 12 |
| Promoting mastery orientation | | | | | |
| Growth mindset | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3/1 = 4 |
| Fixed mindset | | | 3 | | 0/3 = 3 |
| | | | | | Total: 7 |

and Finland did not give up in challenging situations but provided critical feedback in the form of "not yet" to support learning among their community members (Estonia, $f = 5$; Finland $f = 7$). In practice, they valued one-on-one interaction and provided help to those with learning difficulties by differentiating their teaching and adopting pedagogical strategies that have also been used by Finnish teachers [36]. The needs of students and teachers guided their leadership practices, and they found ways of supporting students in their learning and teachers in their professional development. In the following example, a female principal from Estonia describes how her school provided a learning center for the use of students who did not have a place to study in their homes.

If we think that some kids might not have a place to study at home, we have a learning center that is open longer in the evening, and they can go there to learn (Kadri, Tartu, EST).

Finnish principal Timo developed "Donald Duck therapy" for use with restless students [33]. In the following quotation, he describes a situation in which this therapy was used successfully.

I remember one kid. He was behaving so badly and violently that his school days always had to be shortened. Once, when his teacher was totally tired of him, I brought him to my office. I gave him a Kunto magazine and said "Read this. I have work to do now. I do not have time to talk to you." So, I went on working and suddenly realized that the kid had disappeared. I went looking for him and found him in his class. I said, "Why are you here?" He answered, "Well, I already calmed down. I can continue my studies." Then, we came up with Donald Duck therapy. I bought some Donald Duck magazines, and every time he felt he was losing it, he came to my office to read Donald Duck for a few moments and then he went back to the class. We no longer had to shorten his school days [...]. A harsh and strict principal did not solve the problem, Donald Duck therapy did (Timo, Helsinki, FIN).

However, even these exemplar principals sometimes displayed a fixed mindset as they let stereotypical thinking prevail in their strategies for dealing with families with a low socioeconomic background, for example. In the following, Estonian principal Raul from Tallinn expresses his frustration related to students from such a background and demonstrates fixed-mindset thinking that nothing can be done with these students to make them achieve good learning results.

It starts from the homes how they are guided and raised in childhood; a lot comes from home, and nothing can be done. We may try to inject an entrepreneurial spirit [...]. But, there must be a lot of good and talented students, and you just cannot do anything with some of them (Raul, Tallinn, EST).

Jaakko, the principal of a multicultural school in Helsinki, Finland, wanted to motivate students and their parents. However, it was easier for him to use growth-mindset-related strategies with the students than with the parents. In the following, he describes such situations in his school, acknowledging his fixed-mindset thinking related to individual learning strategies involving parents.

I have short interactions with students and teachers in which I try to point out what is good in the process and to get them to see it as well. The most difficult issue is with the parents. They come to the parents' meetings and we try to focus on the good in individuals, but in many cases, the parents are too remote, they do not have enough language skills to communicate with the school, and they are sometimes very suspicious of our motives in helping their children. So, this is the most difficult thing, to find a good strategy (Jaakko, Helsinki, FIN).

The principals from both countries were very *persistent* in their leadership strategies; the second largest category: both the Estonian ($f = 6$) and the Finnish ($f = 6$) principals wanted to develop themselves and their schools and not to give up on themselves, the students, or the teachers. As a

strategy, it related generally to the principals' professional development. A male Estonian principal describes his persistence related to new challenges in learning.

I am entrepreneurial in a sense. I think I have open eyes to anything that is exciting and I should take on such a challenge. We cannot ignore interesting things. It is rather a question of how to give up something. Also, for these things to succeed, that is what makes you work harder (Raul, Tallinn, EST).

Finnish principal Jaakko needed persistence in building a comprehensive school with a totally new learning environment, one that is open without walls or classrooms. The school was under construction at the time of the interviews, and both students and teachers were housed in temporary buildings. This situation caused both stress and excitement in the school. Jaakko describes his persistence in this challenging situation as follows.

We are building and expanding the learning environment in this school. Sometimes, I am asked about the pedagogical development here, and I have to say that we are putting our biggest effort into this rebuilding of our learning environment. I need to think about this building from a 30-year perspective and to create long-term pedagogical solutions. I cannot give up on it, and I need to consider everything else from this perspective (Jaakko, Helsinki, FIN).

We could see that these challenges were learning opportunities for our exemplar principals and that they were ready for life-long learning. However, one of the principals from Finland was close to burnout and too tired to adopt growth-mindset strategies related to his own future as a principal, although he still showed a growth mindset in relation to his school community. In the following quotation, he describes this difficult situation related to his own well-being.

I am devoted to my school, but at the same time, I feel that I am close to burnout and I need to take a break from this work. I am doing everything as well as I can, but I plan to take a leave of absence learning how to build wooden boats. When I retire, I will spend time with my boat, and I'll do some sailing (Jaakko, Helsinki, FIN).

The principals in both countries valued *fostering-process-focused thinking*, a strategy that was evident in their feedback to their teachers, students, and parents. All the principals used this strategy in tackling challenges related to the development of the learning community and to curriculum development. They found opportunities to praise members of the learning community for their efforts and encouraged parents to be active in the schools. Kadri, an Estonian principal, describes the strategies used in her school.

We have a student forum and a parent forum where we discuss throughout the school year, and if we have any new things to do, like in the fall when we wanted to change the grading system, we discuss their fears, what to do or not to do, and what they think [...]; it has proven to be extremely useful (Kadri, Tartu, EST).

To foster students' incremental beliefs and situational attributions, the same Estonian school leader changed the assessment system to ensure that all students could experience success in their studies. In the following example, she explains the Estonian grading system, which does not encourage students to work hard and the solutions she has implemented in her own school to encourage process-focused thinking.

Well, this national rating system is a bit out of date [...] if a boy or girl who gets a three (a 5-point grading system is common in Estonian schools) does a twelve-percent better job, but still gets a three, because the range of three is twenty-five percent; then, he has no hope ever of getting a four [...]. It does not inspire them to work hard. Well, we changed the grading system in our school and took the letters and the ten percent range [. . .], and already, teachers say that they can see changes in some children (Kadri, Tartu, EST).

Finnish principal Timo also talked about the new curriculum and the evaluation practices it demands. He acknowledged the dilemma of giving process-focused feedback and at the same time as having to give grades to students enabling them to proceed to their future studies.

The evaluation is a difficult issue. We know that it should be formative and process focused and interactive, but at the same time, we are using grades to select our students for upper-secondary school. We have good intentions and ideas, but we cannot put them all into practice. We also have international visitors in our school to observe the students who have succeeded in the PISA studies, and we are now talking about process-focused thinking (Timo, Helsinki, FIN).

Within the category *promoting mastery orientation,* the principals valued formative assessment and the avoidance of student comparisons with one another, strategies that were clearly used to resolve challenges related to curriculum development. Fostering the learning of special-education students, one Estonian school leader was making learning contracts with clear learning goals. In the following quotation, she explains how this is carried out in her school.

When we sit at the desk with a student, we agree that various things need to be done [. . .], and I just give a specific date when we will talk again [...]. This works; they do not want to say that they have not done anything (Kadri, Tartu, EST).

However, the principals in Finnish and Estonian schools with students from a low socioeconomic background demonstrated fixed-mindset strategies in some cases. The Estonian principal placed great importance on the role of the socioeconomic background in students' learning and describes his experiences as follows.

Socioeconomic background is important, that is it; the home environment, at least the so-called "happy parenting," matters. Maybe there is a dead cycle when parents are not able to speak, educated, or entrepreneurial, their socioeconomic background is weaker, and they are not happy with their lives, and this affects students [...]. This is the area we are working on (Raul, Tallinn, EST).

Finnish principal Jaakko similarly referred to the influence of parental socioeconomic background, and his views are reflected in this quotation from his interview.

The problems in our school area are so big that they cannot be solved here in the school. Some students do not have any limits or rules when they begin schooling, and it is

too late to provide these in school. The problems begin when they are born; this is a hard thing to say, but it is my experience (Jaakko, Helsinki, FIN).

## 5. Discussion

This multiple-case study involving four exemplar principals from different locations and schools in academically high-achieving countries, Estonia and Finland, reports on how excellent leadership is actualized in facing challenges in school development. We identified the most common challenges and found that they are quite similar in both countries. Principals in high-performing educational systems focus on their own professional development, curriculum development, and building learning communities. *The development of the learning community* was the most frequently mentioned challenge for the principals in both countries. Interestingly, teacher collaboration was problematic in schools in Estonia and Finland, and the principals put a lot of effort into lowering the barriers between teachers at elementary and secondary schools. The most important goal for the principal in one of the Finnish schools was to build a comprehensive school without walls and classrooms to enhance collaboration among teachers and students. Our results are in line with previous findings concerning the impact of principals' activities on the professional learning of teachers through the creation of a trustful environment [1, 11]. Although trust did not translate directly into productive engagement in learning, it could be interpreted as a "necessary but insufficient precondition." Without it, teachers would be reluctant to join in the collaborative activities. Once a trusting environment has been established, teacher agency acts as a catalyst for teacher participation in learning [11].

The goal of developing the learning community is also established in the new curricula for both countries [9, 10] and this focus explains the dominance of the leadership challenges the principals identified. Their visions of building learning communities and their efforts to provide equal learning opportunities for diverse students and teachers explain their status in their countries as exemplary leaders. Although the new curricula in both countries also emphasize student engagement and agency in learning, only the Estonian principals identified challenges related to this area. This difference could be attributable to the longer history of active learning in Finnish schools and the better resources to engage students in their work. Curriculum development challenged the principals in both countries. The new curricula demanded inclusive education, phenomenon-based learning, and the integration of information technology into school subjects. Teachers were expected to differentiate their teaching for diverse learners, which was a great challenge, especially in schools with many students from immigrant families. Principals are expected to offer support and to foster teacher development through their influence on the teachers' motivation and working conditions. As the literature analysis shows, effective school leaders focus on the schools' core processes: curricula and instruction [12]. They create a vision for learning and encourage teachers to improve their practices accordingly.

The analysis also identified the strategies that principals used in promoting a growth-mindset approach to school leadership. The exemplar principals from both countries tended to adopt such strategies to resolve the various challenges in their schools. They believed in the possibility to change and develop their school communities. The study participants followed four main educational principles reflecting growth-mindset pedagogy identified in [32]. They supported the individual learning processes of students, teachers, and parents in their schools by means of differentiation in teaching and learning, which played a major role in their efforts to build learning communities in their schools. They also promoted a mastery orientation among students through the use of formative evaluation practices instead of emphasizing good grades, a strategy that was strongly evident in their efforts to develop the curriculum. All four principals showed persistence in their leadership and did not give up on their visions for their schools, as shown in their own professional-development plans and actions. They also used the strategy in tackling challenges related to the curriculum, especially on issues concerning inclusive education involving different families. They fostered process-focused thinking and believed that the basic qualities of teachers and students were changeable and could be developed. However, principals in multicultural schools in Estonia and Finland have to face the reality that some families have problems that are too severe for them to solve. They acknowledged that some socioeconomic circumstances affect children from birth and are reinforced at home, making it difficult for changes in children to be realised/noticed in their years at school.

The principals practiced process-focused thinking. In other words, they did not give up on teachers and students who made mistakes or failed in their learning tasks and instead provided constructive feedback [34]. In practice, this meant one-on-one interaction and help for those with learning difficulties by means of differentiated teaching and pedagogical strategies. All the strategies related to growth-mindset pedagogy aim to teach the resiliency that is needed in learning [34, 35]. The four principals in our study were all life-long learners (e.g., (19)) and role models in terms of resolving challenges in learning environments. Preparation and development programs for principals should pay more attention to their views and mindsets related to teaching and learning, which have an impact on the whole school community. The concrete examples of their experiences provided in the direct quotations from the interviews could serve as case studies in the education of future principals.

## Data Availability

The data are available from the first author on request.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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