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Matilda Mettälä

Developing young leaders in a changing world

Young people's and their educators' perceptions of leadership and leadership development

Developing young leaders in a changing world

Developing young leaders in a changing world

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Malmö University, 2025
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To my grandchildren

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing scholarly interest and the growing number of youth leadership programmes, there is still little theoretical knowledge on how young people develop as leaders: this is knowledge that is necessary for improving and developing effective leadership education for young people. In order to move towards a better understanding, this exploratory case study explores how young people perceive leadership and their own leadership development. Furthermore, it explores how the educators who train and teach leadership to young people perceive leadership and their own leadership development, including how they design and implement their activities. Empirical data was collected through observations and interviews from two leadership programmes: one in a sport context and the other in higher education. Key insights include the importance of holistically studying young people's perceptions of leadership by integrating different theories that can provide better and more nuanced understanding of their views. Furthermore, even when leadership activities and programmes are well planned and implemented, leadership programmes tend to be fragmented and isolated from the real-life situations of young participants. It is fundamental that young people are offered space for dialogue and time to develop their ability to think reflectively and to train their minds towards deeper understanding of concepts, situations and insightful choices. This study emphasizes that it is not enough for young people to engage in leadership activities or have significant experience of formal leadership programmes, they also need to develop leader identity. This is a growth process that requires support and guidance from their social environment, such as educators, coaches and other adults engaged in young people's development who can acknowledge their efforts and leadership

capabilities. This dissertation presents model of *learning moments* that can be used as guidance when planning leadership activities, including elements of reflective thinking, dialogue and activities that are meaningful and relevant for young participants. Furthermore, an illustration of *a palette of leadership theories* that can be used as a guide for the many ways of understanding and perceiving leadership.

PREFACE

As an educator and musicologist I have often reflected and wondered over the years about how people and events are interconnected, and how relationships can profoundly affect and influence lives and situations in various contexts, especially when we behold the world from the eyes of others. In volume 5 (2000) of *In Search of lost time*, Marcel Proust wrote about listening for the first time to a work by the composer Vinteuil and that he found himself transported, not to a physical place, but to a wonderful, strange land of the composer's own making. He describes that the only true voyage of discovery would not be visiting strange lands but to behold the universe through the eyes of others and to perceive the hundred universes that each one beholds. Since each one of us carries within and perceives the world in numerous dimensions and layers of mental pictures from an enormous reservoir of continuous experiences, I believe that real discovery is getting a glimpse of the world from someone else's perspective.

When I started my PhD journey four years ago, I soon realized that writing a dissertation is more than a scholarly research process, it is also about learning how I know what I know, and that it is not just about knowing, but also about seeing with new eyes and knowing how to see (Saper Vedere). And in this process of knowing how to see lies thinking that involves not only facing challenges and solving problems but also maintain sensitivity and trust in one's own abilities despite all the various streams of demands and distractions we face. In this spirit, I hope that this dissertation will support engagement in the ongoing dialogue on how young people develop as leaders and how they can prepare for the road of life, a sort of education of the mind and of the habits of learning moments.

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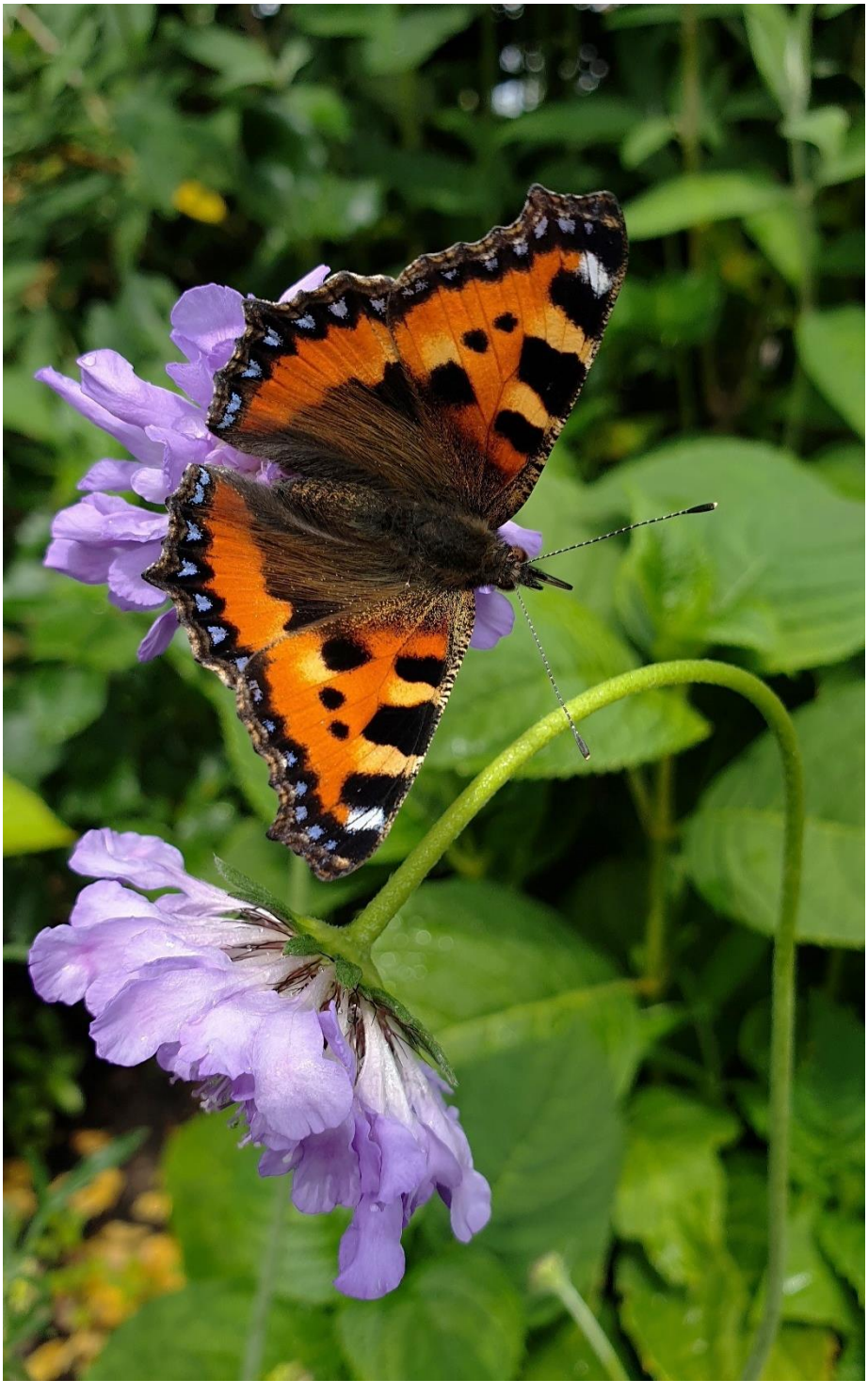


1 INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I met a leadership educator (who works with sport) who shared a concern that their past experiences had shown how little understanding they as educators have about young people's views and beliefs about leadership. They also noted how difficult it is to know if the activities in leadership training programmes support the development of young participants' leadership; some approaches did not seem to work, and the educator was unsure how to continue with the programmes. One explanation the educator gave me was that in today's world, young people face new kinds of challenges, and that this may require new ways of tackling the issues of leadership. The starting point of this dissertation is this concern of the educator that they did not have adequate understanding of how young people view leadership, and how activities and training programmes could support them in developing leadership skills. This relates to an issue that has been increasingly addressed by scholars in the past thirty years, but not yet sufficiently: how do young people develop as leaders? (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2018; Lorencová et al., 2024; Mortensen et al., 2014; Murphy, 2018; Raudoniute & Beresford-Dey, 2024; Walker et al., 2024).

Previous research shows that developing as a leader is an ongoing process, a development that starts in childhood and covers the entire life span. However, although on-the-job experiences are increasingly being acknowledged by scholars as part of a person's leadership development, the issue of how a person develops as a leader from an early age has been overlooked (Liu et al., 2020; Murphy, 2019; Tackett et al., 2022). Despite the increasing scholarly interest and the growing number of youth leadership programmes, there is still little theoretical knowledge on how young people develop as leaders (et al, 2011; Karagianni & Montgomery, 2018; Murphy & Reichard, 2012). Knowledge that is necessary in the process of improving and developing effective leadership education for young people (Karagianni et al., 2023).

Taking steps towards understanding how young people develop as leaders

Previous studies propose that there are two significant steps towards understanding how young people develop as leaders. The first step is to recognize how young people perceive leadership (Dempster et al., 2010; Murphy, 2018) and their own leadership development (Carroll & Firth, 2021; Eva & Sendjaya, 2013) as it is knowledge that can provide educators insights when preparing and performing leadership activities and programmes (Haber, 2012; Karnes & McGinnis, 1995; Kumar et al., 2024)

The second step is to gain a better understanding of the educators who train and teach leadership to young people, for example, which knowledge base do they use to prepare and perform activities and leadership programmes? (Friesen et al., 2024; Jenkins & Owen, 2016). Also important is how their perceptions of leadership and leadership development influence their practices when teaching leadership to young people (Griffith et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2024; Seemiller & Priest, 2017; Součková, 2020). Studies demonstrate how educators play a significant role in teaching and cultivating leadership learning through theoretical and practical activities (Jenkins & Owen, 2016; Kroll, 2022), including being role models through their own personal stories during activities and trainings (Karagianni et al., 2023; Priest & Seemiller, 2018). However, it is notable how limited our knowledge is on leadership educators, since they are often the intended audience within leadership education literature rather than being the subject of research (Seemiller & Priest, 2017).

Young people in a "liquid" world

To recognize the significance of understanding how young people develop as leaders there is a need to view the issue from a societal perspective. We live in a world of rapid changes, with webs of relationships stretching around the world and with global interconnectedness as part of our daily lives. Yet, there are many ways of understanding how people experience the current social world. One way is by via the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's metaphor of "liquid" modernity (2012). Bauman offers a nuanced layer of interpretation of how the modern world is fluid and changeable,[1] like the features of liquids that cannot easily hold their shape and cannot fix space nor bind time. A metaphor describing how identities and perceptions are far from being set but are rather in constant transformation,

[1] This can refer to Heraclitus, the ancient Greek philosopher, ca 500 BC: "Panta rhe", which means everything is in a constant flow (Nationalencyklopedin, n.d.). This is based on the belief that no person can ever step into the same river twice, for it is not the same river and the person is no longer the same person (Marc-Wogau, 2003).

where updating one's identity has become a way of living, constantly forcing people to change as they try to make sense of their existence (Bauman, 2012, p. 85). Though life may differ in different parts of the world, everyone is still affected by the changes of uncertainty, which can result in feelings of fear, ignorance and indifference, and leading to an inability to take actions or even recognize one's feelings.

Focusing on young people and based on the Annual Generation Report 2024 in Sweden (Ungdomsbarometern, 2024), which is a nationwide survey with 15,000 respondents aged 15–24, comprising a representation of insights, which include various thematic topics concerning Swedish youth, we learn how the recent years of global challenges and uncertainty have affected them, with a wide range of changing attitudes, values and behaviours. One clear change is that young people are shifting focus and leaving the big questions in favour of what matters in the here-and-now. This results in a shift from a collective to an individual focus, driven by individual interests rather than values, and is expressed through consumption and fleeting trends, rather than belonging to traditional subcultures. It also shows how young people are substantially influenced by current social issues and uncertain times, without finding any visible solutions, which leads to a sense of resignation that things are not improving (Ungdomsbarometern, 2024).

Furthermore, recent studies highlight how an economic downturn that reduces job security can create obstacles and feelings of insecurity in young people's development (Hong & Chung, 2024). Though the future has never been certain anywhere in the world, today there is a much greater pace of financial and technical change and uncertainty as well as climate changes and conflicts that pose existential threats, and growing connectedness. These are all changes that are reshaping what it means to be a young person (Ansell et al., 2022).

According to Bauman (2012) being in the world means a process of learning that involves copying or modelling the ways of the world, and creating patterns of behaviours in a routine manner, as well as adapting and acquiring abilities to pursue one's own interests. This process of continuous transformation suggests that in order to "survive in the world", people must yield to its rules, while, at the same time, search for their own ways of gaining understanding. In the prevailing world, this has led to the increasing tendency of viewing education as a product instead of a process (Bauman, 2003). At one time, knowledge was valued and it was hoped that it would endure, regardless of whether education was seen as something to be acquired and be over and done with or as a lifelong process. Nowadays knowledge is viewed as something that must be ready to be instantly

used and which can be instantly thrown away when not needed (Bauman, 2009). According to Bauman (2012) this includes knowledge that was once valued for its correct way of representing the world that is now questioned as regard to what truth actually is. Implying that people's frames of reference that shows what is true (or good) is restated repeatedly, since how one perceives what is true (or good) is merely a subjective truth, and is accompanied by a constant alteration of established patterns of habits, solid cognitive frames, and value preferences. Meanwhile technology has become an integral part of young people's lives, an interconnectivity that enables young people to have and gain broader perspectives on local and global issues with their various impacts on people's lives (Allen-Handy et al., 2021).

As the world becomes oversaturated with information, we are now faced with unknown challenges about how people learn and develop (Bauman, 2012). Here, the game of domination in the era of a "liquid" society is not played between the "larger and the smaller, but between the faster and the slower" (2012, p. 188). And, in the absence of long-term security, instant gratification seems like a reasonable strategy since whatever life may offer, let it be offered right away (Bauman, 2012).

Acting within these rapid changes and complex challenges, educators are expected to be agents of educational change (Juvonen & Toom, 2023; Manalu et al., 2024), to teach young people soft skills (Jan, 2017), to think critically, and to be adaptable and flexible. They are also expected to support, motivate and serve the needs of every young learner (Juvonen & Toom, 2023; Stuchlikova, 2016), while at the same time integrating their teaching with technology and creating learning environments according to individual needs (Jan, 2017; Manalu et al., 2024; Stuchlikova, 2016). These expectations have left educators torn between diverse and sometimes conflicting external demands on the one hand, and their own internal tensions and needs, on the other (Ben-Peretz, 2001).

Furthermore, in this uncertain world where identity is continuously being updated (Palese, 2013), people are more organized in social networks, communicating and interacting on various global issues through modern techniques, while at the same time, feeling an increased sense of disconnectedness with feelings of loneliness and exclusion among young people (Hemberg et al., 2024). A large-scale study of ten countries, for example, included 10,000 young people (aged 16–25 years) and demonstrates that the respondents were anxious and distressed about climate change across all countries. This concern was connected to feelings of betrayal, due to inadequate governmental responses (Hickman et al., 2021). However, scholars have also

linked issues of agency, choice and control, showing that uncertainties are no longer seen as being determined by outside forces, but rather that this has shifted onto the responsibility of the individual. Thus, young people are expected to make own choices in the absence of traditional structures. Though this may create optimism, it can also create greater insecurity (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018). Studies show that when their feelings are understood by supporting adults, this has a very positive impact on the wellbeing, mental health and help-seeking behaviour of young people. Equally, feeling misunderstood has the opposite effect, and makes young people less likely to seek further support (Cunningham et al., 2024). Insecurity can motivate most people to seek stability, security and belonging (Matera & Matera, 2022), and to identify with groups that have clear examples of people leading the way, thus offering a sense of meaning (Lord, 2019).

In his book, *The Anxious Generation* (2024), which draws on *iGen* (2018) by Jean Twenge, the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt describes how at the turn of the Millennium, during the fast-growing internet era, a set of world-changing technological products were developed. These products made life easier and more fun, such as connecting and communicating with people around the world. Yet, at the same time, there was little understanding of the negative effects this would have on the lives of young people. Although there is growing evidence of the downsides of such technological products, the tech industry keeps denying or refusing these indications (Haidt, 2024). Thus, during their vulnerable developmental stages, young people continue clicking through various social media platforms, while their brains rapidly rewire in responses to this stimulation that enters through the portable device in their pockets. Young people are distancing themselves from the people around them and moving into alternative universes, which are more exciting, addictive and easier to understand. They are spending less time on essential, embodied social behaviours such as dialogue, playing and making eye-contact with family and friends (Haidt, 2024).

The new annual report from the Swedish Internet foundation, an independent non-profit, private organization that conducts annual surveys on Swedish people's habits and use of the internet, provides further data (Andersson et al., 2025). It shows that among the 625 young participants aged 8–19 (selected from a randomized sample of parents that were included in the study), there is a clear indication that 57 percent use AI tools, such as ChatGPT, and that considerably many more young people do this compared with 20 percent of adults. Although most users are of lower-secondary and upper-secondary school age, there is a clear increase of the use of AI tools among lower-secondary school students, from

2024 (62%) to 2025 (76%). Young people use AI when they have questions relating to health, school assignments, and everyday choices such as what to wear and do during leisure. Most significantly, the youngest users perceive AI as a friend whom they can share thoughts with, ask for advice and have fun with. Furthermore, there is an increasing tendency among younger lower-secondary school children (every fifth) for using new gaming platforms (such as Roblox) and engaging in social groups with whom they otherwise do not "hang out" with in real life, a tendency that was also found among primary school children. The report also shows that social media platforms influence young people's self-image, including how online bullying has increased, especially among girls.

Regardless of how one views current times, time will always be in constant motion; this means that there is one thing that we can be sure of, and that is that time brings change, whether it be for good or bad. In this continuous change, there are studies that point out that there is a public perception of how young people have the tendency to be negative about the future, despite studies showing that young people hold positive attitudes for the future. For example, Lahusen and Kiess (2020) agree with previous research showing that public discourses are not objectively given but are subjective and relative since they are formed by a specific set of actors with different competing interests and aims. They question why public discourse and perceptions of young people are often viewed from a negative lens with issues such as social risks and problems being associated with deviant behaviours, nonconformity, and antisocial activities. The social world is an entangled world, where some questions are difficult to find explanations for. Still, the question of what assumptions and beliefs we hold about young people, and why, is crucial, since various inconsistent perspectives on today's young people's beliefs and attitudes influence how we approach and support them in their development as leaders. For example, studies show that despite the major global leadership shortage within many organizations (Murphy, 2019), there is an awareness that younger workers are different from workers from prior generations. Young people hold different expectations regarding the centrality of work in their lives and bring different personalities and attitudes to the workforce, posing unique challenges for organizational leaders (Anderson et al., 2017). Moreover, Deloitte's 2022 Gen Z and Millennial Survey, which included responses from 14,808 Gen Zs (born between 1995–2003) and 8,412 millennials (born between 1983–1994), covering 46 countries across Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North America, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia-Pacific, shows that young people are deeply worried about the state of the world and are struggling to resolve their desire for change with the demands and

limitations of everyday life. However, at the same time, they are not afraid to speak up and ask for change. They are critical, for example, towards employers and expect leaders (managers) listen "to their people" across all levels in the organizations, and to give feedback. Young people`s expectations for business leaders are high: they want to have a clear purpose and an opportunity to address societal issues through their work. Almost 40 percent of young respondents say they have turned down a workplace because it did not meet their values (Deloitte, 2022).

While young people are disrupting the workplace with demands for new working methods, and programmes that support individual needs, including personalized solutions, studies also show that recent changes have prompted leaders to think differently and to lead differently (Murphy, 2019). To adapt and meet today's challenges in the digital world (Bankewitz et al., 2016), such as the increasing incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into various aspects of organizational management, causing fundamental disturbances in leadership practices and altering traditional leadership practices (Madanchian et al., 2024). These changes raise questions such as who is sitting in the boardroom. For example, the PwC report from 2024 in Sweden highlights that among the 324 Swedish companies listed, only one has a board member under the age of 30 (PwC, 2024). Meanwhile, although young people are also developing essential skills by leading informal groups, sports teams, and peer networks, many of them lack interpersonal and face-to-face skills which are essential leadership skills (Murphy, 2019).

Moreover, a report from Generation Unlimited, in cooperation with PwC and UNICEF (Generation Unlimited, 2021), which is an organization that develops programmes to support young people (aged 15–24) in their path to successfully transition from education and training to employment, shows that young people are unable to identify the skills they need for future employment opportunities, or how to access relevant skills training. This underlines that millions of young people, who are struggling to find jobs, may be left behind because of the lack of understanding of employers about what future skills are required for new employees, and that these include leadership skills.

Learning leadership in a "liquid" world

The stated reports and studies highlight how young people are expected to develop and make choices despite lack of direction in this uncertain modern world. Although there is increasing global interconnectedness via various social media platforms, there is also a sense of disconnectedness and feelings of anxiety.

Yet, at the same time, many young people express feelings of betrayal and distrust towards governmental responses and the lack of action with regard to the many critical challenges the world is now facing. This implies that young people expect leaders to take positive action (Deloitte, 2022; Ungdomsbarometern, 2024). This prompts young people to seek out good examples who are not formally leaders; these are people who can show them what matters and how things are done. Bauman (2012 p.71) notes "after all, they are told daily that what is wrong with their own lives comes from their own mistakes, has been their own fault and ought to be repaired with their own tools and by their own efforts". Furthermore, educators face unknown challenges of approaching young learners with high and personalized needs and expectations (Brandmo & Gamlem, 2025; Lim et al., 2020) in a world of information overload where knowledge that once represented the world is now questioned according to issues of what truth actually is.

Viewing society from this perspective illustrates that there is a need to recognize young people's perceptions of leadership through their own voices (Sherif, 2018), as highlighted in a Swedish report about young people and their leadership development (Rydh, 2024) but also through the perceptions and practices of the educators involved in leadership activities and programmes for young people (Priest & Seemiller, 2018). These are issues that will be highlighted in this dissertation.

Research aim, and questions

The overall aim of this dissertation is twofold; first, to explore how young people perceive good leadership, and their own development as leaders. Second, to explore how educators involved in activities and leadership programmes for young people perceive good leadership and their own leadership development, including how they design and implement these practices, offering a better understanding of and contributing new knowledge on how young people develop as leaders in a "liquid" world.

This study examines the following research questions:

1. How do young people participating in leadership programmes perceive good leadership and their own development as leaders?
2. How do educators involved in youth leadership programmes perceive good leadership, and their own leadership development?

3. How do educators design and implement leadership activities and programmes for young people, and what pedagogical challenges do they face?
4. What practices and insights from this case study can inform future leadership education for young people in a fluid and changing world?
5. What is good leadership in a "liquid" world?

Based on the following research questions, this dissertation encompasses a qualitative descriptor of leaders, which is the word "good". The concept of "good" is a complex one, and not easy to define in terms of other properties (Moore, 2022), as it involves personal judgment (which will be discussed further). The word "good" will thus hereafter be in quotation marks, illustrating the way that "good" is defined depends on one's perspective.

To explore my research questions, this dissertation is developed from a theoretical lens that encompasses theories and concepts from leadership and educational studies. The combination of theoretical building blocks has served as a guide to my explorations in order to understand and interpret the perspectives of the young participants, the educators, and the complexities of understanding how young people develop as leaders. By so doing, this contributes with new knowledge on how young people and educators, involved in youth leadership activities and programmes, perceive leadership and leadership development, but also provides insights drawn from the leadership programmes in this case study.

Delimitation

The concept of leadership and leadership development is understood from multiple perspectives and involves various aspects (which is discussed in the following chapter). This study is delimited by focusing on how the phenomenon of leadership is perceived by young people and the educators who teach leadership to young people (definitions of how young people and educators are defined in this study are discussed in the methodology chapter). Additionally, I have delimited the study by focusing on young people who participate or have participated in leadership programmes within a specific geographical and social context, that of Sweden; this includes the educators as well. Although the participants in this study were all geographically "close", they represent different characteristics and backgrounds. However, this study does not explore demographic differences such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or other individual influences. Rather it delimitates by concentrating on young participants in the age group 18–30 and adults in the age group 30–65 (further

descriptions are given in the methodology chapter). Furthermore, although there are numerous studies that demonstrate the impact of leadership education on young people (Klau, 2006; Oyedare et al., 2025; Song & Hur, 2024) this dissertation does not evaluate the impact of the two leadership programmes involved in this case study, nor differentiates the two contexts; one in sports and the other in higher education, but rather, the two contexts represent two settings in which leadership programmes are commonly offered to young people.

Disposition

This dissertation is organized into eight chapters. This introductory chapter offers a brief outline of the research field and the research aim within the context of the study; the following chapter presents an overview on what leadership is, and how the idea of leadership has evolved in the last century by highlighting some concepts and theories of leadership. This demonstrates that there are numerous ways of understanding leadership. This is followed by an overview of what previous research and literature tells us about what "good" leadership is. Thereafter, I discuss what we already know about leadership development. The last part of the chapter addresses young people, showing how studies on youth leadership have focused mainly on two areas of interest: first, to understand the perceptions of young people, and second, to examine leadership programmes, activities and initiatives that promote leadership development and their impact on young people. The chapter concludes with what we already know, and what knowledge is lacking about young people and leadership, including this study's contribution to knowledge.

In chapter three I present and discuss my theoretical building blocks and philosophical beliefs that guide this dissertation. In chapter four I present and discuss my methodological choices, showing how the study was designed and conducted, including my own standpoint as a researcher and my philosophical assumptions about science, which are interconnected to the findings. In chapters five, six and seven I present, interpret and discuss the findings based on the analysis of the collected empirical data. In the last chapter I present and discuss key insights from the findings, and this is followed by recommendations for future studies, and the implications of the presented findings with conclusions.

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON LEADERSHIP

Over thirty years ago, Joseph Rost (1993), a scholar in leadership studies, stated that it should not be any surprise that researchers and practitioners have not been able to clarify what leadership is, since what is often studied and written about leadership is about the peripheral aspects and content of leadership such as the ideas and information that leaders and followers in professions or organizations must know, elements and issues around teamwork, skills, goals and so on, without offering an understanding of the essence of leadership as a process interlinked with dynamic relationships. Thus, Rost maintained that scholars continue to explore leadership without coming to any agreement on how to define leadership in a way that includes all kinds of activities, processes, and people. He also pointed out that theories of leadership are often distinct and separated from one another as if leadership (a social phenomenon) could be studied in fragmented parts, without considering how these are interconnected. Rost argued that summaries of leadership theories and movements are ritualistically repeated by scholars, and, like other things, when repeated, people begin to accept them as facts. Yet, these stories are believed because they have been told by people of influence; in business schools, education, public administration and so on without considering that the "reality" is different and much more complex than how it is described in textbooks and articles.

Three decades later, scholars continue discussing what leadership is, without coming to any agreement. Some even question whether the theories and methods used to study leadership are broad enough to capture the complexities of leadership (Riggio, 2019; Yukl & Garnder, 2020).

When we view leadership from a historical perspective, starting at the turn of the 20th century, we note that the various central leadership theories and concepts tell us more about a certain period in the history of leadership than anything else.

As Joanne Ciulla (2020) points out, Rost's review of definitions illustrates how leaders were expected to "impress" their will on their followers in the 1920s. In the 1940s leaders aimed to "persuade" their followers; in the 1960s to "influence" them and in the 1990s, leaders and followers influenced each other. At the turn of the 21st century, leadership is viewed as a relationship that occurs within a context.

Yet, scholars (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Liden et al., 2025; Souba, 2014) continue to state Burn's (2003) claim that "leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (p.3). Or to put it differently, "leadership is one of the most important topics in the human sciences and historically one of the more poorly understood" (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005, p. 169).

The aim of the chapter

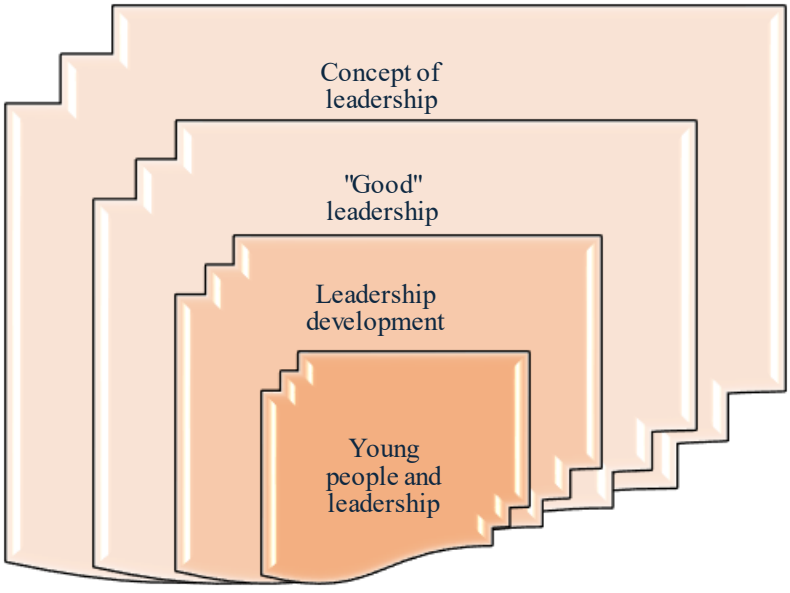
With the aim of offering a better theoretical understanding and background on leadership studies, in this chapter I will present and discuss selected previous studies and literature on leadership and leadership theories that I have based my understanding upon. The selection was made based on the criteria of peer-reviewed studies (articles) and literature (academic and non-academic textbooks) on the topic of leadership that relate to the research questions and purpose. Although gender-related issues and cultural differences in leadership will be indicated in this study, this will be done in a very limited manner.

The chapter is divided into four parts (Figure 1) and starts by a presentation of the idea of leadership viewed from a historical perspective and how it has evolved over the last century through various theories and concepts: followed by some definitions and clarifications on doing research on the topic of leadership.

To get a more in-depth understanding of the qualitative descriptor that encompasses this study, the second part of the chapter focuses on what "good" leadership is, and what it means to be a "good" leader, including the issue of ethics in leadership, based on previous research. Thereafter, we move into the third part, which focuses on leadership development and leadership education. This is a field that is important to view in relation to how young people are encouraged to develop as leaders, with issues such as learning leadership through theory, practice and experiences being at the core. This part deals also briefly with previous research on leadership educators. This is followed by the fourth part that focuses on research that highlights young people's perceptions of leadership and the many ways they develop as leaders. The chapter concludes with what we know, and what knowledge is lacking about young people and leadership development, and the knowledge contribution of this dissertation.

Figure1

Chapter outline divided into four parts that are interconnected



Understanding leadership depends on perspective

To get a better understanding of perceptions of leadership, I chose to go back a century and explore what leadership is and how it was perceived. However, ideas of leadership can be traced back to ancient times with writings from East and West, such as Plato (429–347 BCE) (Plato, 2015), Aristotle (384–322 BCE) (Bartlett & Collins, 2011) and Confucius (551–476 BCE) (Wei-Ming, 1997) continuing throughout history with various accounts by, to mention just a few, the writings of Marcus Aurelius (121–180) (2019), Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) (Machiavelli, 2008), and the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz's ideas on war and leadership (1780–1831) (Clausewitz, 1997).

However, it was not until 1840, when the Scottish historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle gave a series of lectures on the topic of how history has shaped

"great men" that the concept of leadership had its starting point. Carlyle's lectures on heroism were published in 1859, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, (Carlyle, 2013) focused on "great men" as leaders, and how they became role models for the masses of men. This was based on the belief that history is shaped by great leaders (heroes, kings and poets) since their actions shape the course of events: thus, Carlyle paved the way for the "great man" theory.

With the need "to select leaders during and after World War I, leadership research emerged in an effort to identify factors that predict good leaders" (Liden et al., 2025 p. 2); followed by decades of research on leadership focusing on the qualities and traits of the "great man" (1930s). The "great man" theory suggests that leaders have unique qualities that they are born with and have core traits that qualify them as leaders, including their appearance, height, age, gender and race. However, intelligence, alertness, insight, responsibility, initiative, persistence, self-confidence, and sociability are also traits and qualities that could predict whether an individual could become a leader or not, and how well a leader could perform in their role (King, 1990).

A decade later in the 1940s, the "great man" theory was followed by behavioural approaches that focused on the behaviours of leaders, that is, what leaders do rather than who the leaders are. This represented a belief that leaders are largely made, rather than born. Also, since certain behaviours can be learnt, effective leadership could be ensured (Liden et al., 2025). One central study that is often mentioned in leadership studies is Stogdill's first survey from 1948 (Northouse, 2022), which identified a group of important leadership traits linked to how people in various groups became leaders, showing that an average person in a leadership role is different from an average group member. It also showed that a person does not become a leader just because of certain traits, but the traits must be relevant in each given situation, including the followers within the field that the leader is operating in. Thus, the relationship between a leader and the followers/group became central. This insight led to a second survey focusing on leaders' behaviours and situational factors, validating at the same time the original trait idea, that is, a leader's characteristics are part of leadership (Northouse, 2022). In parallel, new theories emerged such as skills theory (1950s) that interconnected with behavioural theories. During this period, the focus changed towards the required skills for a leader to be efficient; the three basic personal skills of a leader were highlighted technical, human and conceptual. However, just a decade later, additional approaches emerged such as contingent and situational theories (1960–1970s) that raised questions relating to the

influence of situational factors and on the effectiveness of the traits and behaviours of the leaders (Liden et al. 2025).

Yet, according to John Storey (2016), when the first edition of leadership handbook was published in 1974, the original subtitle was *A Survey of Theory and Research* by Stogdill, 5000 abstracts were prepared, and Stogdill explicitly noted that he had purposely excluded "inspirational and advisory literature" (p. 18) and "charismatic leadership", because the literature was mainly based on countless biographical studies, offering rather little understanding of leadership.

It was not until 1978 when the field of leadership studies was founded by James MacGregor Burns that two types of leadership were introduced: transactional leadership – focusing on the relationship between the leader and follower – and transformational leadership – focusing on the beliefs, needs, and values of their followers (Northouse, 2022). Several theories of transformational leadership were also proposed by Bernard M. Bass (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Nonetheless, MacGregor Burns (2003) acknowledged that leaders impact history, but added a crucial dimension: the followers and their role in leadership. Furthermore, he also demonstrated how the field of leadership had changed and how the distinctions between leader and leadership, i.e. in the way we frame theories of change. He stated that some argue the best way we can learn about leadership is by relating to biographies of individual leaders, while others argue that we must construct a general theory of leadership to understand the role of individual leaders and their traits; by doing so, his aim was to prove that both approaches are necessary.

Leadership theories continued developing at the end of the 20th century, with the focus shifting from the individual to the group and the organization, emphasizing the context and circumstances of leadership, and also, how the leader's traits, group function, and specific context affected the leader's effectiveness (Northouse, 2022). This led to psychoanalytical and behavioural theories such as people's motivations regarding leading and be led, and exchange theories that were influenced by management studies. Thus, leadership theories started moving partly away from the idea of leadership being innate, towards the idea of leadership residing in the relationship between and among individuals (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). It was suggested that both leaders and followers shape leadership functions, making leadership a relational process by combining ability (knowledge, skills, and talents) and authority (voice, influence, and decision-making power) in order to positively influence and impact diverse individuals, organizations, and communities (Branson & Marra, 2019; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Northouse, 2022; Ospina et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Van De Mieroop et al., 2020).

The start of the 21st century brought new perspectives and research with emphasis on the sociocultural context (Lee et al., 2021) and approaches focusing on morality, humanity, authenticity, and ethical issues in leadership. As cultural issues and the expectations from leaders also changed, including a decline in respect for leaders and the legitimate powers of leaders, the last decade has brought further changes such as a shift in leadership power (Northouse, 2022).

Moreover, developments due to organizational changes, including, global economic uncertainty, climate change, globalization of competition, higher expectations from public services within the context of funding cuts, and structural and cultural changes within organizations have opened up new themes in leadership research and practices, such as the leadership behaviours that are needed and required nowadays, a leader's responsibilities across organizations, and training methods that are needed in new contexts (Storey, 2016).

And so, as leadership studies and publications have increased over the last decades, a large body of various concepts, models, and theories with various interpretations have emerged, like, transformational and transactional, task-oriented, charismatic, servant, authentic, practice-based, relational, distributed, coaching, ethical, reflexive, and visionary leadership. Consequently, scholars highlight the need to conceptually integrate the various leadership theories, as one approach cannot alone be sufficient to describe the many considerations in leadership (King, 1990).

Leadership development

The last decades have also brought a growing interest in leadership development, which has led to the expansion of leadership training and development industries (Northouse, 2022). In the sea of various perspectives, one concept that has grown in popularity is that of self-leadership: the process of influencing oneself to be able to lead others. The concept of self-leadership has existed in management literature over the past four decades (Goldsby et al., 2021) and was coined by Charles C. Manz (1986), a professor of business leadership. Manz stated that self-leadership is a comprehensive self-influential perspective and that it relates to leading oneself toward performance, going beyond a behavioural focus towards recognizing the importance of underlying motivations more fully, and with the notion of free will and why a behaviour is performed. What the process of self-leadership means in practice and in the everyday life of a leader is still not clarified, as pointed out by earlier analyses (Markham & Markham, 1995). Yet, studies continue to present the various benefits of self-leadership (Tenschert et al., 2024).

Over the previous decades, studies have also highlighted how leadership development is not just what to learn, but "how to learn how to learn", leading to a shift towards discovering and experiencing leadership from within, knowing oneself, one's beliefs, principles and commitments. This belief started a new approach towards leadership development, of leadership being learned through continuous practice, as opposed to learning leadership by attending courses and programmes where an "expert" teaches leadership based on conceptualized material. Hence, the concept of learning leadership as a "whole person", which includes taking "a journey into one's inner territory" and "finding one's voice" became central idea at the beginning of the 21st century (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004). This outlook promoted a variety of efforts towards the development of the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of inner awareness (Bennis, 2009), and the development of humanistic theories.

While the concept of leadership development has grown immensely in the last three decades and is a highly sought-after and valued commodity (Northouse, 2022), there are studies pointing out that current leadership development activities still focus on the same concepts and techniques used as far back as 40 years ago (Murphy, 2019). Making the field of leadership rather complex to understand and interpret.

Critical voices on leadership studies

As previously stated, over 30 years ago Rost (1993) argued that scholars ritualistically repeat summaries of leadership theories and movements without coming to any agreement of what leadership is, explaining how leadership theories are often distinct and separated from one another as if leadership can be studied in fragmented parts. Rost's critique remains and has been intensified by others. There are scholars who point out how leadership studies have evolved, making the concept of leadership everywhere and still nowhere, since it sometimes refers to a person, often a relation, sometimes to a group (shared leadership). Sometimes leadership is a function that exercises any kind of influence and sometimes even the absence of a leader (self-leadership) is perceived as leadership. Thus, scholars ask if leadership is about influencing, then what does this mean? Does it mean that all influence can be referred to as "leadership"? (Alvesson et al., 2017)

There are also scholars who question whether the theories and methods used to study leadership are broad enough to capture its complexities, including the socially constructed new ways of thinking of leadership (Mumford et al., 2000). Others highlight that there is a gap between the relationship of the passage of time

and its influence on leadership research; in other words, how time in different areas has been studied as a factor in leadership in linear thinking instead of nonlinear (Castillo & Trinh, 2018).

Some scholars even ask how we know what we are observing is in fact leadership? (Bohl, 2019) while some go as far as asking whether it would matter if leadership studies did not exist at all, claiming that leadership research has not really made any substantial contribution to society, including not providing any meaningful support for collective efforts towards addressing global challenges (Guthey et al., 2019).

Furthermore, a significant critique found in previous research revolves around scholars missing out on crucial knowledge about leadership by studying only "exceptional types of leaders" (Ciulla, 2020, p. 22), and asks questions related to what we actually know about the experiences of leadership, experienced directly. What are the actual problems identified in various real-life contexts? What makes a good leader? And how is leadership part of one's personal, social, and professional growth? (Allen et al., 2022b). This criticism seems to stem in the idea that many studies in leadership seem to be more inspired by the Hollywood idea of a hero, showing leaders with the ability to challenge, influence and change, and appealing more to fantasy and wishful thinking than presenting a realistic view of what most managers in an organization can actually accomplish (Alvesson et al., 2017). Hence, the image of the successful leader, who is not only powerful, but also powerful in the right way, with high moral standards and an authentic sense of being, often overlapped with the heroic image of a Disneyland version of the leader, and presents heroic stories of individual leaders rising from the shadows and leading society out of some dark crisis (Bohl, 2019). This image leads to a distorted view of the leader.

There are several critical gaps within this constructed image of the great leader and hero. According to Liden et al. (2025) samples used to study leadership generally consist of people who hold managerial positions within organizations, leaving out how leadership can be understood outside formal descriptions, although leadership is manifested both through formal and information influences (Northouse, 2022). Furthermore, with the progress of society, more women are beginning to take on leadership positions, demonstrating both their leadership ability and potential. This has attracted the attention and interest of researchers in female leadership research (Chen et al., 2025). This includes women leaders lived experiences (Bartlett, 2025), women leaders' competitive factors and advantages (Farhan, 2022), and the positive impact of women leaders on society (Kalbarczyk et al., 2025). Scholars argue that women leaders are overlooked because they do

not fit the male stereotypes of leaders (assertive, dominant or aggressive). Hence, given the numerous leadership theories and the empirical studies, it could easily be concluded that though leadership effectiveness is understood as many of the theories overlapping with underlying concepts and perspectives, these are all "created by men about men" and mainly represent male leaders without addressing women leaders (Johnson & Lacerenza, 2019). Moreover, although there are studies that demonstrate how leadership styles are influenced by cultural differences (Jogulu, 2010; Sunarso et al., 2024) many scholars point out that much of the mainstream leadership literature on leaders and leadership is created and developed by scholars in the West, making leadership studies and theories "Western-centric" (Hino, 2019). Consequently, although history has numerous stories about military, political, religious, social and business leaders who have been credited or blamed for important historical events, scholars argue that we still do not understand the causes and situational circumstances that make a leader influential (Yukl & Garnder, 2020).

Definitions of leadership

When defining leadership there is a need to differentiate between leaders and managers, yet it is difficult to distinguish between leadership and management in academic research (Liden et al., 2025) as there are scholars who make a distinction between leaders and the managers (Gradinarova, 2021; Jıbreal, 2021; Liphadzi et al., 2017) while others do not (Azad et al., 2017). However, although both leadership and management involve influence, working with people, and effectively reaching goals, the ideas and studies of leadership can be traced back to ancient times, while the idea of management emerged around the turn of the 20th century (Northouse, 2020). Still, as described earlier, leadership is an imprecise and multi-layered concept, and is not easy to define as there are several different assumptions about what leadership is, an abstraction that has been created and continues to be reinforced by various perspectives, theories, and models. This uncertainty is a challenging one, as different groups seek to define it in conflicting and contradictory ways (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Some would agree that leadership is often easy to identify in practice, yet difficult to define precisely.

Peter Northouse (2022) explains there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it, saying that it is much like the words love and peace. Each of us intuitively know what we mean by such words, but the words can have different meanings for different people. He argues

that after decades of differences, leadership scholars agree on one thing: that they cannot come up with a common definition for leadership and so he proposes one:

> Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2022, p. 6).

While Keith Grint, also a scholar in leadership studies (2010) states:

> We don't need to agree on the definition, but we need to know what the definitions are, and though the complexities undermine attempts to explain the exiting differences there are some similarities such as leadership is defined "as position, or person or result or process" (Grint, 2010 p. 3).

A recent critical and systematic literature review (Bugaj & Sulyma, 2022) covering publications from the years 2010–2020 with 55 full-text indexed publications shows that the concept of leadership seems almost intuitive yet is very complex. However, the authors state that leadership can be seen as a process but also a concept that encompasses the skills and abilities a modern leader or manager must have.

Although there are a multitude of ways of describing what leadership is, the Oxford English dictionary (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d) offers only one meaning for the noun leadership:

> The dignity, office, or position of a leader, esp. of a political party; ability to lead; the position of a group of people leading or influencing others within a given context; the group itself; the action or influence necessary for the direction or organization of effort in a group undertaking (OED).

This definition of leadership is based on one meaning, yet it refers to several aspects. Leadership according to this definition refers to a position, an ability to lead and influence, both individually and as a group within a given context, but also the action or influence necessary to lead. This implies leadership can be a position, a skill, and/or a behaviour. I find this definition to be rather unclear.

However, Gary Yukl and William Gardner (2020) comment that, given there are numerous ways to define leadership, scholars usually define it according to their own perspective and the aspects of the phenomenon that of interest to them. James McGregor Burns' (2003), for example, who had written a biography about Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency earlier in his life, was influenced by him when defining leadership and included moral actions in his definition.

There are also scholars who highlight how context and circumstances make a difference when leadership is defined, including the point in time (Storey, 2016). Furthermore, leadership according to Mary Uhl-Bien and Sonia Ospina (2012) is identified "not as a trait or behaviour of an individual leader, but as a phenomenon generated in the interactions and relationships among people – a collective capacity" (p. 540).

Since much of the existing leadership literature has been developed based on studies of formal leaders, Liden et al., (2025) offer an extended definition of leadership by describing that this involves:

> The process of influencing others toward a shared objective, leadership can be enacted by anyone, not just those with formal titles or positions of authority. Moreover, leadership is not confined to the exercise of managerial authority, it can also occur when formal leaders engage in informal behaviours beyond their official responsibilities (Liden et al., 2025).

To illustrate the variety of recent definitions, I include Pål Ellingsen's (2025) definition of leadership as a philosophical attitude. Ellingsen explains that traditional leadership theories are often focused on leadership as a set of skills, behaviours or traits, with the emphasis on the leader's ability to influence, motivate and lead followers towards specific goals. But since leadership is also characterized by ongoing reflective practices of learning, values, and ethical aspects, leadership can also be viewed as a mindset.

Based on the mentioned different definitions and views I hope that through my discoveries this dissertation may also offer a layer of perspective of what leadership is.

"Good" leadership

Based on the numerous ways of defining and understanding leadership, the issue of what a "good" leader is seems rather exhausting. How does one know what to look for when one "sees" an example of a "good" leader? Clearly, this is an intricate and challenging question to address. Still, since the question of what a "good" leader is relevant in this dissertation, there is a need to highlight selected research describing what "good" leadership is; an issue that has been addressed in numerous ways.

History is filled with descriptions and examples of "good" and "bad" leaders, of kings, queens, generals, and presidents; these stories have been examined from

various perspectives to get a better understanding of what a "good" leader is (Hursthouse, 2010). According to Joanne Ciulla, a philosopher in leadership ethics, "good" leadership involves morally good leaders, and technically good leaders (effective at getting the job done) yet she explains this raises some issues from a historical perspective, since some leaders meet both criteria, and others only one, while others meet neither. This means that some leaders act ethically but have not contributed anything of value, while others have made a difference yet not acted ethically. She clarifies the point by stating:

> Most historians write about leaders who were winners or who change history for better or for worse (Ciulla, 2020, p.9).

In 1995, Ciulla (2020) published an article discussing how to understand and navigate the relationship between ethics and effectiveness in leadership. She argued that the ultimate question in leadership is not how to define it, since there is no confusion as to what leaders are, but rather what they should be like. Thus, she claims that one of the main practical reasons for studying leadership is to learn how leaders can be better and how they ought to act. However, according to Ciulla (2020), despite scholars in the field of leadership using the best scientific methodologies to address "good" behaviours and ethical-related issues, the question of how leaders ought to act remains complex, since it involves human behaviour and relies on people's free will to act, making it difficult to make any predictions. Nevertheless, there are scholars who describe "good" leaders as those who are competent and ethical, with their primary role being to establish and reinforce values and purpose, develop vision and strategy, build community, and initiate appropriate organizational change. In other words, leadership includes effective leadership, with behaviours that require character, creativity, and compassion as core qualities; these are qualities that cannot be acquired cognitively but must be developed through experience and practice from early age and throughout a person's lifetime, as this includes dimensions of integrity, courage, honesty, and the will to do good (Allio, 2005). While there are scholars who highlight what "good" leaders do by describing what "bad" leaders do:

> Leadership solves the problem of how to organize collective effort; consequently, it is the key to organizational effectiveness. With good leadership, organizations (governments, corporations, universities, hospitals, armies) thrive and prosper […] bad leaders perpetrate terrible misery on those subject to their domain (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005, p. 169).

Furthermore, according to some scholars, there is no simple way to know how to evaluate efficient or "good" leaders since the choice of criteria on valuing a person's behaviours lies in the moral outlook of the beholder (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Yet, there seems to be a general view that since leadership includes influencing others, a leader's values, beliefs and perspective are entwined (Ko et al., 2018), which adds an ethical dimension to leadership. Or as scholars have expressed it:

> There is no ethically neutral ground for theories of leadership, because they always involve values and implicit assumptions about proper forms of influence (Yukl & Gardner, 2020 p. 251).

Nonetheless, despite the endless stories and accounts describing "good" leaders; except for some "snapshot theories that describe leadership behaviours and traits" ethics has not always played a central role in leadership (Ciulla, 1996, p. 182). According to scholars, though there have been many studies published on business ethics, including writings in management literature since the 1970s, the target group has mainly been practitioners (Northouse, 2022).

Ethics in leadership

The word "ethics", which stems from the Greek word ethos meaning "customs", "conduct" or "character", refers to the values and moral behaviours a person or a society finds desirable or appropriate, including the virtues and motives of a person (Northouse, 2022 p. 423). The branch of leadership studies dealing with philosophical aspects focuses on theories about the conduct of leaders, which in turn is divided into two parts: theories that focus on the consequences of leaders' actions, highlighting duty or rules governing a leader's actions, or looking at questions about what is right or wrong and whether a leader's actions may lead to desirable consequences (Northouse, 2022). Thus, a leader's character relates to virtue ethics (Newstead et al., 2020) and focuses on system of rules or principles that can guide a person to make decisions on what is right or wrong, good or bad in a certain situation. This also discusses what it means to be a moral being (Northouse, 2022).

Virtue ethics derive from the philosophical ideas of Aristotle (Bartlett & Collins, 2011) who believed that humans always exist within communities and interactions with one another. Thus, the ways people behave towards each other is essentially part of living a good life. In essence, a virtue is a characteristic, based one's choices and outlook on how to live a good and moral life, where

"moral virtue is the result of habit" (2011, p. 26). Yet, Aristotle was aware that it is not easy to define how to find the right balance, since each situation brings new challenges and choices. This suggests that a person who is motivated to act morally cultivates his/her moral identity over time.

Although researchers have not yet agreed on a set of universal traits that make leaders effective in all contexts, many leadership theories have normative ethical aspects, for example, transformational leadership, servant leadership, authentic leadership, and ethical leadership (Ciulla, 2020). Originating from Aristotle's virtues such as, courage, gentleness, justice, modesty, and truthfulness (Bartlett & Collins, 2011), five principles have been discussed in various fields, including in business ethics and leadership education (Northouse, 2022).

1. Respecting others: this refers to a leader acknowledging the ideas and beliefs of others, listens actively to others, being empathic and tolerant of opposing views.
2. Serving others, this means a leader puts people first and acts in ways that will benefit others.
3. Showing a sense of justice, this is about making sure that as a leader treats all followers in an equal manner, especially when making decisions.
4. Showing honesty: this is the heart of being a good leader and is often understood as someone who is truthful and dependable.
5. Building community: this is about influencing people to achieve common goals, which suggests that a leader must agree with his/her followers on the direction needed to reach the goals.

The above five principles have also offered a foundation for ethical leadership theory. *Ethical leadership* suggests that leaders should hold ethical standards and make ethical decisions. They influence others by acting as role models and by showing behaviours like trustworthiness, fairness, honesty, dependability, and are also able to show concern for others. In this process, they foster a positive and inclusive culture and promote growth. Ethical leadership was conceptualized in 2005 by Brown, Trevinõ and Harrison (2005). Their work was based on the claim that although qualitative research had begun exploring what characterizes ethical leaders, not much systematic work had been done to construct the necessary testing in order to develop a theory about its origins and outcomes. Thus, they laid the empirical groundwork by reviewing related literature and proposing social learning as a conceptual basis for understanding ethical leadership. They

concluded that ethical leaders are likely to use both transformational and transactional leadership approaches to influence their followers' behaviour, and noted nevertheless that previous work had not provided a theoretical basis for understanding ethical leadership and its outcomes.

Thus, based on the studies and concepts mentioned and stated principles, I draw the assumption, that an ethical "good" leader is perceived to be someone who shows respect, honesty, fairness, and compassion.

Leadership styles and 'Time'

When referring to "good" and "bad" leadership, many seem to refer to different leadership styles that can be viewed as an extension of behavioural approaches and which refer to how a leader chooses to lead, guide and act. Yet, here too lies a difficult issue as there seems to be no agreed number of leadership styles, since different researchers categorize these differently (Liden et al., 2025). However, there are some identified general styles, as mentioned earlier: transformational and transactional and laissez-faire (Khan, 2024); autocratic and democratic (Costa et al., 2023); ethical, authentic and charismatic (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023), autocratic and destructive (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Liden et al., 2025).

Studies show how perceptions of "good" leadership change over time as people understand and adopt multiple ethical role models over their lifetimes (Ko et al., 2018). This highlights how perceptions and preferred leadership styles differ and change across time and place.

John Storey (2016) gives an example of one of the most famous leaders in history (according to Storey) Winston Churchill (1874–1965), the prime minister of Britain. He describes how Churchill was rejected during much of his career, both by his party and his fellow parliamentarians. However, during the Second World War, Churchill's strategy became increasingly acceptable and preferred due to his oratorical skills, decisiveness, and other such attributes, even though his followers had been less impressed by the same skills just a few years earlier. Storey states however, these skills and attributes, which were acceptable for a time, "were nullified once again when the war ended" (2016, p. 21). This exemplifies how leadership is interpreted and recognized within a specific set of time and social circumstances. Yet, scholars and critics continue to discuss Churchill's "image" as a leader, his qualities and actions, and his choices. On the one hand, scholars like Longstaffe (2005) note that Churchill remains a source of inspiration throughout the world and exemplifies key leadership principles which are still relevant today. These principles include being a visionary leader with the ability to inspire people during change, being a very skilled communicator, being

responsive, listening to others, and demonstrating courage and integrity, both in actions and words. Furthermore, Gibson and Weber (2015) describe Churchill was also willing to take risks as he believed it was necessary to achieve "greatness" and win the war, even though this was not popular among the other politicians at the time. Thus, he was never afraid to make decisions and to take responsibility for his own actions. On the other hand, there are accounts on his hostility and acts of racism against India (Reid, 2024) as Churchill could not accept that India wanted self-government, instead, he was convinced that Britain should continue to rule. As such he has been perceived as being imperialist with egocentric and anti-social qualities (Addison, 1980; Gopal, 2011; Reid, 2024). And although many would acknowledge that Churchill was a professional politician in pursuit of power, scholars still ask: "how much further can analysis be taken? Is it possible to discern, in the many campaigns which Churchill waged, a pattern of behaviour?" (Addison, 1980 p. 23).

Machiavelli

A leadership style that has for decades been referred as a "Machiavellian" describes leaders who are manipulative and deceitful (Marbut et al., 2025). The philosopher and statesman, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), was a chief political advisor to the ruling Medici family in Florence during the Italian Renaissance and offered future leaders (princes) guidance by writing his political treatise *The Prince*, which covers ideas and advice on how leaders should act. It was written in 1513 but was published after his death, year, 1532.

Based on his writings, the concept of Machiavellianism was constructed during the 1970s and popularized in leadership and management studies by way of various psychological measurements (Christie & Geis, 1970). According to Daniel Jones and Delroy Paulhus (2009), Machiavelli advised leaders to be open to any and all effective tactics, including manipulative interpersonal strategies such as flattering and lying. Jones and Paulhus believe that this advice "struck a chord" four centuries later with the personality psychologist Richard Christie who noted parallels in Machiavelli's political ideas and people's everyday social lives. Together with his colleague Florence Geis and other colleagues, they developed scale measurements based on questionnaires to identify personal differences according to the Machiavellian personality. The results were published in the book *Studies in Machiavellianism* (1970). But, according to Christie, his concern was "not with Machiavelli as an historic figure, but as the source of ideas about those who manipulate others". (Christie & Geis, 1970 p. 1). Numerous studies were conducted from the early 1970s on showing how individuals who hold a

Machiavellian view of life are expected to be smooth liars and deceitful (Drory & Gluskinos, 1980). Based on a "Mach Scale", a face-valid measurement, investigations presented various scores from evaluations as to whether people demonstrate manipulative or deceptive abilities (Geis & Moon, 1981). One of the measurement scales (Mach IV), has been found to be valuable in studying manipulative tendencies among student samples (Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and various organizational reviews (Moss, 2005). Researchers have found Machiavellianism interesting since it offers the possibility to address issues of power that are connected to charismatic and transformational leadership: that is, styles that can explain exceptional leadership (Bedell et al., 2006). A way to describe Machiavellian leadership style is:

> Machiavellianism refers to deceitful manipulation undertaken to advance one's own self-interest. For example, leaders may pretend to act ethically while in fact aiming to obtain benefits to themselves. In time, followers will see through this facade and understand the real motives and moral values of their leaders. Therefore, although a leader with a high level of Machiavellianism may demonstrate ethical leader behaviours in public, he or she may be viewed by followers as an inauthentic leader (Ko et al., 2018).

However, recent reviews show that there are inconsistencies in understanding leadership effectiveness and what is meant by "good" leadership, since some studies illustrate how the Machiavellian style sometimes refers to charismatic leaders, for example, how Machiavellian presidents have had more governmental victories during their years of ruling (Genau et al., 2021). Other studies claim that even though scholars have pointed out the relationship between Machiavellian style and abusive leadership, with its negative and hostile actions, previous research has not been able to explain the underlying mechanisms of these connections (Li et al., 2024). Furthermore, scholars suggest that Machiavelli's thoughts on ethics were not fully understood and that after its publication, people initially focused more on provocative remarks without considering the bigger picture that Machiavelli presented of moral and political complexity.

Although I cannot deny the cruelty some of his expressions display when reading *The Prince* (2008), it seems that several of his statements have been taken out of context, in order to fit them into the mainstream management literature on ethics. Thus, to understand Machiavelli's thoughts on the ethics of leadership, we must first consider society and the events of the Italian Renaissance. According to scholars, this was "a time in the history of ideas before general concepts of

'international law' and universal human rights had become as developed as they now are" (Cosans & Reina, 2018, p. 278).

Furthermore, some scholars perceive him to be supportive of democratic ideas and against tyrants, and that his writings offer instructions on how princes and kings should act by making "all secrets clear and openly displaying the degree of wretchedness to the people" (2008 p. xix). Machiavelli writes for example:

> How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his word and to live with integrity and not by cunning, everyone knows. Nevertheless, one sees from experience in our times that the princes who have accomplished great deeds are those who have thought little about keeping faith and who have known how cunningly to manipulate men's minds […] It is therefore necessary to be a fox, in order to recognize the traps, and a lion, in order to frighten the wolves […] But since men are a wicked lot and will not keep their promises to you, you likewise need not keep yours to them (Machiavelli, 2008, pp. 60–61).

Machiavelli knew that especially those princes (leaders) who are placed on a pedestal are judged by some of the qualities that bring them either blame or praise. Therefore, he provided various examples of how rulers (leaders) should act in order to manage the complexities of leadership at the time. One example is about being dependable as a leader and making decisions. He describes a ruler at the time who never sought advice from anyone, yet at the same time, he never did anything his way. For example, when he carried out his plans without the advice of others, he was met by criticism by those around him, instead of being decisive, he simply diverted from his own plans, resulting that no one ever understood what it was the emperor wanted or planned, nor did they rely on his decisions. Thus, Machiavelli suggests that "a prince should always seek advice, but when he wants to, and not when others wish it" (Machiavelli, 2008, p. 81), in order to be able to make decisions. Also, it is important that a prince (a leader) should frequently ask questions and inquire about the issues at hand and be "a patient listener to the truth" (2008, p. 82). Thus scholars highlight that Machiavelli evaluates and distinguishes between different types of potential leaders, admiring some and condemning others; he therefore does not judge them based on how selfless the leaders are, since he does not believe in a purely heroic attitude, but rather he evaluates them based on their ability to recognize their own motives for what they are (Davis, 2023). Consequently, as scholars point out, there is a need to re-examine whether the qualities and behaviours Machiavelli highlighted are needed in leadership (Marbut et al., 2025) since "no leader leads innocently" (Ciulla,

2020, p. 13). Understanding how young people perceive "good" leadership in a modern liquid world is essential, since what was once valued and expected of "good" leaders is not the same today. Furthermore, in relation to leadership styles, a question I have asked myself while studying the participants' perceptions of leadership, is this: What are they looking for? Ciulla (2020) provides an alternative answer:

> The character of a leader is on display in a variety of behaviours from the small gesture to intentional action. The big and small acts help us hold leaders to a high standard of morality. We should pay attention to acts of morality in the miniature because such acts serve as red flags that alert us to potential problems (Ciulla (2020, pp. 46–47).

Implicit leadership theory

As discussed, much of recent research suggests that leadership is in the eye of the beholder, since studies show that leadership is not only shaped by the way a person is, acts or does, but is also shaped by their perceptions of others (Lord et al., 2020).

Implicit leadership theory, which has been widely studied by psychologists, (Ciulla, 2020) is a cognitive theory that explains the perceptions people have of leadership and leaders. In other words, implicit leadership theories influence how people evaluate leaders, based on their mental representations (stereotypes) of leaders with the qualities and behaviours that they associate with leaders; these are formed by pre-existing beliefs and assumptions about what leaders should be like but also about the way that leaders could act in the future (Lord et al., 2020).

Research shows that implicit leadership theories are based on people's personal life experiences, personalities, feelings, expectations, values, and motivations, and includes a person's socialization processes, as well as cultural and contextual influences (Alvesson et al., 2017; Bennis, 2009; Howard & Travis, 2022; Northouse, 2022; Reichard et al., 2021; Escobar Vega et al., 2025). Beliefs develop early in life, with parents and caregivers being the earliest leader figures that children interact with. And although a person's implicit leadership theories may change and be modified by experiences, they often remain stable (Schyns & Riggio, 2016). Consequently, a person's mental framework for processing information about leadership is often unconsciously formed by past experiences and influences. For example, when a person encounters someone in a leadership position or role, the person's mental representation of a leader is activated, and the person then compares the leader's qualities and behaviours, a process that is

often unconscious. And although the person may not be aware of these beliefs that are continuously being formed, these assumptions still guide judgments and behaviours (Lord et al., 2020).

However, studies also describe that sometimes people draw hasty conclusions based on previous experiences and observed behaviours or dismiss certain behaviours due to lack of information, or by not taking into consideration the context in which the behaviour was observed. This is complex since a person's own values and moral outlook in each situation and in the context of interactions shape the moral implications of the observed actions. Furthermore, people's mental representations may also influence and affect who is perceived as a leader, regardless of actual performance. Still, implicit leadership theories suggest that a leader is more likely to be considered effective or "good" if their qualities and behaviours align with these implicit representations (Ciulla, 2020).

Furthermore, if followers have positive perceptions of a leader, then they are more likely to state that their leader has shown positive leadership behaviours. In other words, because of implicit leadership theories (beliefs and assumptions), people basically assume that a leader exhibits the desired behaviours (Schyns & Riggio, 2016).

Consequently, in one way, a leader can be perceived as "good" because he/she has accomplished a great deed or attained an important and influential position, even if he/she has acted unethically. Equally a leader can be perceived as "good" because he/she displays ethical qualities and behaviours, but does not really accomplish anything significant. Since implicit leadership theories are generic collections of everyday conceptions and beliefs about leaders, people can perceive someone as a leader based on implicit images about what a leader *should* be like: in other words, a person can be perceived as a "good" leader without a formal leadership position or role (Ciulla, 2020).

In their review Lord et al. (2020) note that most of organizational studies to date have focused on three main outcomes of implicit leadership theories: 1) leader evaluations, more specifically relating to transformational leadership 2) work attitudes and 3) work performance. Thus, they state that previous studies demonstrate that implicit leadership theories play an important role in people's perceptions of qualities related to transformational leadership and have indirect effects on followers' attitudes and job performances.

Besides explaining how various leaders are evaluated, implicit leadership theories are also useful for understanding why leadership evaluations do not merely reflect leader behaviour but are also a reflection of our images of leaders. According to scholars, this is problematic since when leaders are retrospectively

evaluated, people's views can be coloured by their own implicit theories in order to fill in the gaps in their recollections. This implies that when asking a person as to how they perceive someone as a leader, the answer may be a combination of the actual behaviours of the leader and the expected behaviours (Schyns & Riggio, 2016).

Lord et al. (2020) also highlight that many people may not even have previously thought of their manager as a leader until a researcher asked them questions referring to their manager as a leader. Such questions may activate mental images that had not been previously activated. Lord et al. (2020) also note that this encoding as a "non-leadership" is relevant to understanding as this relates to how people respond to questions about leader behaviours. If a person's behaviours were not previous encoded as leader behaviours, then respondents may rely on generalized impressions alone. According to Schyns and Riggio (2016), a significant aspect of the theory is that a person's leader identity is influenced by implicit leadership theories; if a person feels that they personally do not possess the qualities and behaviours that match their own images and expectations of leaders, then they are less likely to be motivated to claim leadership themselves.

Leadership development

Warren Bennis (2009) argued that leaders are not born but made, despite the tendency of thinking of leaders as being gifted and capable individuals who can solve problems. His arguments were based on the view that from the start leaders can express themselves fully, understand themselves and the world, are aware of their own strengths and compensate for their weaknesses, and that they know what they want, and why. Equally important, they know how to communicate what they want to others, to influence and cooperate, and can achieve goals. Bennis claimed that more leaders have been made by accident, circumstances, and sheer grit than by any leadership courses, since leadership courses can only teach skills and cannot teach character or vision (Bennis, 2009). In other words, leadership courses "produce managers rather than leaders" (Bennis, 2009, p. 67). Although it is not easy, Bennis underlines that everyone can become a leader. The image of a leader that he describes via a set of ingredients are: having a clear idea of what one wants to do, having the strength to face setbacks, and having passion, integrity, curiosity and courage.

Bennis assumes that a person somehow "becomes a leader" who has a set of skills and qualities, while Rost (1993) asks: How do people know what traits they

as leaders should have? And even if there are certain characteristics leaders should have, can leaders authentically take on these characteristics without changing their personalities and questioning their basic assumptions? But most importantly, how do leaders know what style is best for each situation they encounter? Although Rost (1993) upheld the need for leadership programmes, he commented that designing and implementing leadership development programmes dealing with leadership as perceived in the 21st century would be difficult. He stated that young people (students) must be able to understand and practice new ideas of leadership that can function in the 21st century, and not the old ones that dominated the 20th century, with its values and assumptions of the industrial era and which involved a hierarchical structure. Therefore "cookbook recipes" are to be avoided when planning courses. But then there are scholars like Day and Dannhäuser (2024) who argue that there is a need to approach leadership development from a view that encourages holistic approaches instead of time-limited programme-based approaches.

Scholars (Snook et al., 2012) have noted that since 1985 when *Leadership in Organizations* was published "widely considered to be the first formal textbook specifically designed to teach leadership" (p. xi), the field of leadership has expanded immensely. One example of this is a simple internet search for "leadership books", which resulted in more than 84 million hits. Scholars (Snook et al., 2012) also noted that the demand for courses on the topic has increased and that universities and professional schools place clear emphasis on educating leaders. Thirteen years later, when I entered "leadership books", the search engine gave me 2,460 million hits (31 March 2025), thus highlighting the substantial amount of literature and studies that cover the topic of leadership development according to various beliefs and perspectives.

Emphasizing that previous studies make a distinction between leadership training as something that is formally designed and often time-limited activity, which focuses on building specific skills through structured programmes such as formal education, coaching, and action learning projects and leadership development that is more general and perceived as a process over time, often developed through experiences (Lacerenza et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2021; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Another differentiation is made between leader development and leadership development. Developing as a leader does not ensure that effective leadership will result, given that leadership is a social process. This means that individuals can develop their capabilities to become effective leaders in their roles and processes, but it does not mean that the person's capacity will be applied or applied effectively. However, one view is that a leader's development is

embedded in ongoing adult development (Day & Liu, 2019), while Kjellström et al., (2020) propose that leader development can be defined as an expansion of a person's capability to be effective in a leadership role and process. This is built on the assumption that if a leader develops knowledge, skills and abilities, leadership will be more effective. Thus, according to Kjellström et al., (2020), there are six ways to theoretically understand leadership development in the adult development field.

1. One's own development and way of understanding, consisting mainly of one's own perspective based on present experiences.
2. The individual leader becomes better in his/her role by developing increased competencies.
3. Personal development that embraces and shares the focus on developing oneself within the role, but conceptualizes as something broader, involving the whole person.
4. Organizational development that is an essential aspect of leadership development.
5. Leadership development as a collective work, an emergent quality of a collective
6. Leadership development is an open-ended process that cannot be fully controlled and with uncertain outcomes.

This definition illustrates the complexity of understanding leadership development, both from a theoretical as well as a practical perspective. This illustrates how the field of leadership development is extremely categorized with various opposing perspectives, which influences how youth leadership development is viewed and studied. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplification, this dissertation focuses on the perspective of one's "own development" as well as "personal development", indicating an emphasis on self-leadership.

The question of whether leadership can be taught

Despite the growing interest in leadership development and the variety of leadership training programmes showing successful and effective results (Lacerenza et al., 2017), the question of whether leadership can be taught is still ongoing (Channing, 2020; Elmuti et al., 2005; Murphy & Johnson, 2011).

Graham Mole (2004) observed that "the leadership training and development industry is big business" (p. 127) and that it keeps expanding because of the growing interest in leadership development, with the assumption that leadership

can be taught via some essential ingredients. He provides a few examples of training that include learning about one's inner self and being encouraged to learn how to relate efficiently to others through team games. Mole noted that though many leave leadership training with good feelings and affirmations, the similarities between activities offered and the actual challenges that the participants face in their jobs may well be minimal or non-existent, since the elements of the training will be selected by the trainers according to their own preferences, habits and experiences. Mole suggested that there is a need to ask what kind of learning happens during training and how the most crucial aspects of leadership are being taught, as leadership is bound to context, followers, and circumstances; "there is no single job model, no universal template, for leadership roles" (Mole, 2004, p.131).

However, there are those who state that organizations do not always assess or understand the effectiveness of developmental activities in leadership, since this depends on various factors such as differences in the participants' attitudes and reactions, training design and the supporting conditions in the organization (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Nevertheless, there is an awareness among scholars that leadership programmes still fall short of demonstrating impact and that there is still a lack of both theoretical and empirical grounding to base leadership development practices (Day & Liu, 2019).

Although the issue of leadership programmes is apparently multi-layered and dependant on the choice of perspectives, a key perspective that previous studies have not addressed clearly is that of educators teaching leadership (which will be discussed later).

Leadership development from a lifespan approach

Meanwhile a new perspective is emerging that views leadership development from a lifespan approach, a process involving a leader's self-identity developing over time (Liu et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2024). For example, the context of a person's life stage, situated in time across different social identities can affect both values and leadership style, which means that leaders lead differently in their early life than when they have gained experience later in life (Allen et al., 2022a).

The lifespan approach was initiated by Ronald Riggio and Michael Mumford (2011) who introduced a series of longitudinal studies of leadership development, proposing that there is a need for a long-lens approach to leadership studies. This was connected to Fullerton Longitudinal studies (FLS), which is an ongoing research programme that began in 1979 with 130 one-year-olds and their parents from a wide range of socioeconomic areas serving as the database. From this

database, several longitudinal studies have examined young people's leadership potential as adults followed over time (Gottfried et al., 2011; Guerin et al., 2011). For example, Oliver et al. (2011) showed the relation between parents and a positive family atmosphere in the development of positive self-identity early in life, but also in later life as a leader. This highlights how children who are valued and who are given opportunities to make decisions and to participate in shaping family rules develop positive views of themselves, which may enable them to develop leadership skills.

Another study (Liu et al., 2021) shows that young people can develop as leaders, starting in pre-school years, through playing activities with peers, and/or at home, and performing household chores, but there are also influential aspects with regard to siblings and parents. Children who interact with peers and adults can also learn social skills during primary school, and during adolescence, young people can develop leadership skills when engaged in various activities at school as well as after school, through role models, such as parents, teachers, peers, historical individuals or persons in the media. A further aspect is the relation between being engaged in various leadership activities at a young age and leader identity. A recent longitudinal study (Walker et al., 2024) followed young people from the ages of 12–38. The researchers focused on the leadership roles the participants held during those years, and whether the participants held a view of themselves as leaders. The findings show that those who held leadership roles during the early years were more likely to hold leadership roles as adults, a belief that is generally held according to the authors but is also mentioned by others (Kumar et al., 2024). However, it was significant that these individuals viewed themselves as leaders, which means they had developed a leader identity from an early age. Thus, their findings indicate that developing leader identity from an early age is as important as being engaged in various leadership activities. This suggests that young people do not develop as leaders merely by engaging in various leadership activities but there is also the need for developing a leader identity.

The idea of a leader's self-identity seems to be a rather new one. Twenty years ago, a study (Komives et al., 2005) pointed out that most leadership development scholars focus on skill-building and short-term interventions, rather than on how leadership identity is formed and changed over time. Based on grounded theory, they investigated how leadership identity can be constructed. The study shows that the students participating had different experiences of leadership as they became aware of themselves as leaders at different ages and stages; this included the variety of ways their experiences had influenced their own identity as leaders.

The authors conclude that leadership identity is the cumulative confidence in one's ability to intentionally engage with others to accomplish group objectives.

However, recent studies (Barling et al., 2023) agree that leadership development is the result of a lifespan that is influenced by family, environment and individual factors, and is entwined with an individual's self-awareness and formed from a very early age. We still do not know when and how leadership emerges as it this has not been studied in depth. There is also the issue of how leadership identity is developed and the mechanisms by which it is formed (Hastings & Sunderman, 2023).

Leadership educators

Leadership educators are referred to teachers and instructors in higher education who teach leadership courses or integrate leadership concepts into other subjects. They are also referred to as practitioners, such as professionals and coaches who engage and teach in leadership activities, training and programmes in their communities (Friesen et al., 2024; Jenkins & Owen, 2016; Priest & Seemiller, 2018). Hence, leadership educators can be found in a variety of settings such as, civic organizations (sport clubs), schools, colleges, student programmes in higher education, community development programmes, workplaces, military training, and religious groups (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Huber, 2002; Jenkins & Owen, 2016).

Although the topic of leadership has been studied in numerous ways and from many disciplinary perspectives, including a vast number of textbooks on leadership that are authored by scholars from multiple disciplines and backgrounds, there seems to be very limited understanding of who teaches leadership. One reason is because educators are often the intended audience within leadership education literature; they are not the subject of research and are themselves forgotten in present leadership education research (Seemiller & Priest, 2017). Another reason is the lack of a clear definition of what is meant by "leadership education" (Jenkins & Owen, 2016), which is rather understandable when considering that there is a lack of consensus of what leadership is, as has been described.

A further issue is that there is no consensus of what to teach as there are countless approaches to teaching leadership, and each programme takes a different point of departure in the pursuit of teaching students the critical elements of leadership and organizational behaviour (DeLong & Hill, 2012). For example, there are scholars who wonder if one was asked to teach a course on leadership, where would one start? How would one go about learning from practical

experiences of others? And which theoretical assumptions and pedagogical techniques would one use? Moreover, though there are a few studies describing how leadership educators conceptualize and plan their leadership teachings (Huber, 2002), it is only in recent years that there has been more interest in how leadership educators prepare and design leadership training activities, with the main finding showing that leadership educators prepare their teachings based on their own experiences in leadership roles or experiences of leaders (Priest & Seemiller, 2018).

Another issue that has been highlighted is how educators who teach leadership perceive their own role; this too has recently been explored in literature; studies highlight educators who do not feel prepared or knowledgeable enough to teach students to be effective leaders and how they have received little to no training in leadership education. Instead, they are being thrust into a role in which they must serve as leadership educators, especially early in their careers (Seemiller & Priest, 2017). Leadership educators also highlight their struggles of drawing meaningful distinctions between the activities of managing versus leading or questioning whether coaching is considered as a managerial activity or a leadership activity. Another challenge is the choice of pedagogy and how to teach leadership, since much of the teaching is drawn from the field of adult education. This emphasizes that the models of leadership that are being used for teaching are often abstract and linear and require interpretations that include both practicality and creativity. Therefore, teaching must be based on opportunities to practice (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). However, many teach leadership by sharing their own personal stories during activities and trainings as a way to illustrate the leadership concepts that are being taught (Priest & Seemiller, 2018).

Studies also point out that when planning and conducting leadership training the educators must take into consideration several aspects, since even if there are young participants without prior leadership experience attending, they still hold strong beliefs and ideas about leadership (Caza & Rosch, 2014).

At the same time, we cannot disregard that there are leadership educators who practice leadership in their daily lives and learn more about leadership that they can teach; this means a leadership educator's identity, which includes perception, is a process that encompasses his/her own life history, with experiences as a leader and the ability to continuously learn more about leadership and to experiment with leadership concepts (Richardson &Yancey, 2025), making the issue rather complex.

Young people and leadership

Over three decades ago, two studies were conducted (in 1988 and 1995) with the aim of attaining greater understanding of how young people (students) perceive leadership, a crucial question according to the scholars conducting the studies, since understanding the students' views and beliefs on leadership could help educators when preparing and designing leadership programmes. The main finding was that when the students were asked to give characteristics they thought would be necessary for leadership in the year 2000, the most frequently cited qualities were strength, power, trustworthiness, honesty, determination, devotion, willpower, mercy, care and compassion, as well as good communication skills, loyalty, being open-minded, and having self-confidence. A noticeable difference between the two studies was the increased emphasis on accountability in the later study, followed by honesty, trustworthiness and high moral standards. With regard to the question of how they would prepare themselves for future leadership opportunities, most of the students replied that they would get the best possible college education and attend more leadership programmes (Karnes & McGinnis, 1995). Thus, not only did the students' expectation of ethical behaviour from leaders increase, but they also believed that they could "become" leaders by getting the best college education and attending more leadership programmes. This study was one of the few studies at the time addressing young people's perceptions of leadership.

A few years later Carole MacNeil (2006) asked the question: where are the young people in all that has been studied and written about leadership? She commented that when young people are mentioned in leadership studies, it is with a future orientation, saying that young people will develop as leaders of tomorrow, instead of perceiving them as leaders of today. MacNeil raised a significant issue at the time; research on youth leadership development focused mainly on defining the essential components in leadership programmes, or on specific programmes and activities that can help young people develop their leadership skills and knowledge. She asked the question that if programmes wanted to support young people in leadership development, where could these young people find opportunities to practice and develop leadership skills in real-life situations? She noted that we cannot simply invite young people to be a part of a leadership team and believe that they will understand what leadership is, or improve their leadership skills, even if we believe that it will offer them opportunities for decision-making. As she concluded by saying that young people learn *about* leadership instead of learning leadership.

Although scholars point out that the field continues to ignore how young people develop as leaders (Murphy, 2019; Tackett et al., 2023), there is also growing interest in young people as leaders (Anderson et al., 2017; Carroll & Firth, 2021; Griffith & Johnson, 2019; Henness & Ball, 2019; Hornyak et al., 2022; Hoyland et al., 2021). The following is a selection of studies that focus mainly on young people's perceptions of leadership and leadership development.

Young people's perceptions of leadership

To understand how young people can develop as leaders, a qualitative study from Australia (Dempster et al., 2010), explored through focus group discussions, how 40 young people (14 boys and 26 girls, aged 14–16) understand "good" and "bad" leadership in the context of school and sport clubs. The findings showed for example, that the participants considered "good" leadership included ethical and moral behaviours such as showing responsibility, respect, autonomy and initiative, and also demonstrating care and understanding. According to the authors, young people construct ideas of leadership in personal and relational terms and that collaborative and social characteristics are central to their views on good leadership. Yet the study also accentuated that the young participants believed that bad leaders are confident and strong (just like the good ones).

Two years later, in a different context, an exploratory empirical study was conducted in a higher educational setting (Zekan et al., 2012). The aim was to examine 182 (138 female and 44 male) Croatian students' perceptions of leaders, and the characteristics they believed leaders should possess. This was done through open-ended unstructured questionnaires. The findings show that the examples of leaders given were largely taken from sports and politics. One significant issue was that only a small number of women were highlighted as leaders. The characteristics mentioned that good leaders should possess, were, by order of importance: self-confidence, responsibility, charisma and caring about people.

A mixed method study during the same period (Haber, 2012) examined the perceptions of leadership of 1100 undergraduate participants; these were selected through random criterion sampling from the national dataset, reflecting diverse sub-populations and aimed to determine if there were any differences in the perceptions of leadership based on their gender, race, and age. The findings suggest that the young participants tended to have a hierarchical and leader-centric understanding of leadership rather than collaborative understandings of leadership. The authors state that the findings were somewhat contradictory with regard to more contemporary perspectives of leadership, since they reflected a

disconnection between how leadership was promoted and conceptualized by leadership educators and scholars, and how it was understood by students. It should be noted that this gap is evidence of the problem of leadership identity development with students: they must first understand, and practice skills based on a hierarchical structure in order to be able to learn and implement the skills in a non-hierarchical and interrelated manner.

Another study with 130 participants from a year-long leadership development programme in USA (Mortensen et al., 2014) examined how the young participants conceptualized leadership and the ideas they held, when compared to existing adult theories of leadership. The findings showed that no single adult theory aligned entirely with the perspectives of the young participants, and, according to the authors some adult theories were even contradictory, such as how young people define the characteristics of leaders, the goal of leadership, and issues of power and control. The authors emphasized how important it is to understand young people's perspectives, since educators can use these perspectives as guides when planning and conducting leadership programmes.

Furthermore, a longitudinal qualitative case study in a rural school context highlighted the importance of listening to the students' voices, and how they perceive leadership and themselves as leaders while developing their leadership abilities. The findings show that the young participants emphasize characteristics such as inspiration, patience, responsibility, determination, and supportiveness as well as skills such as encouraging, active listening, and communication skills (Sherif, 2018). Just a year later, similar findings were found in an exploratory multiple case study involving 18 young participants (aged 18–24) in the West Indies (Landwehr & Lloyd, 2019). There were three cases, each involving six participants, and consisted of an equal number of male and female participants. One case involved a group of unemployed young St. Lucians; another case was a group of entry-level workers from an internationally affiliated local business; and the third case was a group of young people who had received training from a St. Lucian youth organization. The findings from the interviews show that the young participants believe that leadership is more about people than any specific task, and that good leaders are more concerned about the good of others, this is why "good" mattered to them, and that ethical behaviours are seen as important aspects in leadership. Furthermore, although they highlight power and authority, the young people believe that anyone can be perceived a leader since the attitudes and actions of a leader are more important than the leader's position.

Another significant study (Caza & Rosch, 2014), which included a random sample of 1465 undergraduate students in Australia who had no prior leadership

education and examined the students' pre-existing beliefs about leadership. The findings show that students felt that leaders needed to serve their community, to be open-minded, honour their values, and be comfortable with change. The authors also noted that the overall findings suggest that to be more effective during leadership courses, educators must take into consideration the pre-existing beliefs the young participants hold when attending these courses and connect these beliefs to the models being taught.

A recent study (Kumar et al., 2024) conducted in-depth interviews and surveys with 200 students and staff members at a university in India. The researchers found amongst all that around 87% of the students connect good leadership with qualities such as confidence, communication skills and decision-making ability, and 13% of students believe that charm, empathy, integrity, and vision are essential attributes of effective leadership and also interpersonal skills and ethical behaviours Other recent cases show similar results. For example, a qualitative study from Greece (Karagianni, et al, 2023), explored the meaning of leadership and examined the perspectives of 20 adolescents (aged 12–16) and 15 young adults (aged 21–23) through interviews and reflective journaling. A central theme that emerged was that the young participants perceive good leadership as including how leaders make other people feel, acknowledging and accepting differences, and identifying the needs and abilities of everyone, as well as taking time to encourage the individual and the group. The study also highlights how young participants view themselves as leaders and that they mainly rely on their own experiences when interacting with others and how others make them feel competent and validate them as leaders. The case emphasizes that though young people develop leadership skills in different ways and based on various factors, they are still very much informed by their own experiences and sense-making. This suggests that the support from educators, parents and other adults in young people's social environment plays a significant role in developing leadership skills in young people

A survey-based study (Lee et al., 2021) explored the perceptions of leadership of approximately 400 gifted students in South Korea and in the US. Questions were designed to compare students' views across cultures within the sample (South Korea versus US gifted students). Though there were some significant cultural differences, the qualities and abilities the students preferred leaders to display related to how leaders offer vision for the future and demonstrate concern for the feelings of others. The majority valued a leader being adaptable rather being an innovator, and that they created a balance between putting people first

and taking responsibility for one's role. Honesty, responsibility, and morality were consistently rated as the most important characteristics.

Lastly, a case study in Israel (Perets et al., 2023) examined leadership in the school context by conducting interviews with 14 teenage girls about their views and experiences of leadership and their self-perception as leaders. The findings show that the students describe leaders as being people who are tolerant of other opinions and are willing to listen to their followers. The young participants also stressed that a key element of becoming a leader is self-confidence, something they believed young girls in their teens lack. The leadership programme at the school was viewed as empowering, yet the young participants did not know how to implement the knowledge they had learned or even if it was possible to do so. The young participants expressed disappointment, for example, they also stated that the training was inefficient, boring and taught in an unconvincing way. Some of them even mentioned that they never heard anything about leadership during lessons, and if they did, they could not remember the content of the lessons. The participants experienced an absence of role models and mentoring at the school.

Teaching young people leadership

There is also research focusing mainly on leadership education and its impact on young participants. For example, in 2006, Max Klau conducted a study based on the belief that youth leadership education contains elements of theory and practice directly relevant to promote development in young people. The aim of the study was to explore three cases of youth leadership programmes in the field. The most significant finding was that two of the three programmes, which were national programmes reaching thousands of young people yearly, had no clear conception of what they meant by leadership. The other was that the programmes were conducted away from the participants' own familiar environments in four-to-six-day activities explicitly focusing on teaching leadership. Klau noted despite so much organization, personnel and efforts, it is remarkable that the educational undertaking at is core is still so vague. For example, although one of the programmes clearly claimed to teach young people not *what* to think, but *how* to think, the programme provided almost no space for reflection.

David Rosch and Arran Caza (2012) examined the effects of short-term leadership programmes using self-reported scores from the students. Their findings suggest that three months after training, the students who participated in leadership programmes showed an improvement in leadership capability. However, they also state that not all the leadership competency indicators showed any improvement after training. They concluded however that leadership training

does enhance students' understanding of leadership. Six years later, Rosch (2018) conducted another study and noted that research on the effects of participating in formal programmes designed for leadership growth is – at best – mixed. By referring to various studies that have examined effects on participating in leadership programmes, Rosch concludes that even if students had significant experience in formal leadership programmes, they still did not see themselves as leaders. The students were also not motivated to lead, and they lacked the necessary abilities such as collaborating with others.

Leadership programmes in higher education

Over the last three decades there has been an increase in the number of leadership programmes and courses for students in higher educational settings across US (Diallo & Gerhardt, 2017; Martinez et al., 2020) and worldwide (Meer et al., 2019; Skalicky et al., 2018). Programmes aimed to prepare students for their future work opportunities: skills, providing the knowledge, experiences, attributes and behaviours needed to perform a job effectively, with the belief that capabilities can be learned and developed and are not innate personality attributes (Seemiller, 2021).

However, although there has been continuous growth in leadership programmes and studies showing that these have several benefits (Gigliotti & Spear, 2022; Meer et al., 2019) there are also several challenges. For example, since leadership education has been approached (in universities and colleges) from different perspectives, this has led to a range of methods of the design and delivery of leadership programmes (Martinez et al., 2020). With no consistency in the programmes with regard to course content and requirements, this has added even more confusion to the existing understanding of what leadership is, especially from an academic perspective (Diallo & Gerhardt, 2017: Lubker & Petrusa, 2022). Moreover, there are those who question whether leadership education should be provided in a more formalized manner or if it should be immersed in a range of leadership activities within student-led programmes, enabling students to develop leadership skills through practice (Elmuti et al., 2005; Skalicky et al., 2018) and to move beyond the classroom and into the real world. Scholars also note that educators must understand their role and their own preconceptions, as well as how they follow up and gain understanding from evaluations (Lubker & Petrusa, 2022).

There is also the issue of whether the skills and knowledge about leadership that is taught at university is sufficient for taking on leadership roles in the future, as the context of today's leadership has changed with new issues coming to the

fore, such as social injustice, political dissonances, worldwide pandemics and environmental decline (Seemiller, 2021).

In order to examine the applicability of the leadership skills taught at a university, a single case study was conducted involving alumni from an undergraduate academic leadership programme in the US (Beatty et al., 2021). The study included 51 in-depth interviews and shows that the young participants were able to connect and apply their past leadership training programmes to their current professional and personal leadership experiences, highlighting skills such as their practice of reflection, appreciation for collaboration and building relationships. The authors state that their findings are consistent with previous research that demonstrates that academic leadership programmes provide opportunities for students to reflect on their leadership learning and build relationships with the intention of including collaboration as a part of the leadership process.

A new systematic review (Ueda & Kezar, 2024) of formal leadership programmes for college students includes studies published between 2001 and 2020 on pedagogies and leadership programme outcomes, shows that it remains unclear whether purely academic programmes can foster students' practical leadership capacity. The authors (Ueda & Kezar, 2024) suggest that future research needs more qualitative approaches that provide nuanced information about students' learning and experiences within these programmes, such as academic leadership courses focusing on learning about leadership conceptualizations. And if programmes aim to foster student leadership capacities, then peer education and team-based learning pedagogies are favourable, to powerfully motivate students and develop their confidence in leadership. If resources are limited, reflective pedagogical practices are recommended for any leadership programme to improve student self-awareness, since recognizing one's own strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, values, goals, purposes, and leadership styles is considered the foundation of effective leadership.

Real-life experiences

There are numerous studies that shed light on the importance of young people learning leadership from "real-life" experiences, such as engaging young people as influencers and planning leadership events (Henness, & Ball, 2019) or supporting young leaders (adolescents and young adults, aged 12–25) who have been diagnosed with cancer themselves, or have a family member with cancer, to be co-creators of a leadership framework at a non-profit organization (Hornyak

et al., 2022). Furthermore, they developed leadership skills by participating in a residential nature resource camp and connecting to the natural environment (Frey & Parent, 2019). They can also contribute to their communities in tangible ways (Christens et al., 2022). Moreover, through performance-based techniques, young people are offered ways to share their individual perspectives and stories and engage by projecting their reflections onto the realities around them, making them change agents of their own realities (Buzinde et al., 2019). Another example is engaging in the formation of a club designed to enhance leadership skills in secondary school athletes. During the two-year process, young people learned decision-making and engaged in meaningful situations (Blanton et al., 2014). Moreover, although studies show that it can be challenging to share decision-making power and responsibility with young people (Strittmatter et al., 2024), offering them opportunities to practice skills in small group settings allows them to view themselves as competent in their own actions and learn through making own decisions (Colakkadioglu & Celik, 2016; Siebert et al., 2021; Suhaimi et al., 2018). Furthermore, voluntary sport organizations contribute in important ways to the development of social and practical skills in communities; contributing a sense of belonging that includes bonding and feeling valued by others within a context; this can lead to the development of confidence in one's abilities (Darcy, et al., 2014; Puxley & Chapin, 2021).

A mixed-method case study (Song & Hur, 2024) involving 15 Korean American teenagers explored the impact of a community-based programme by investigating changes in participants' leadership skills and perceptions of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that the opportunity to support community members promoted leadership skills among participants, such as communicative skills. Also, by engaging in "real-life" activities, the young participants were empowered to act as positive changemakers. The authors state that the findings are consistent with previous studies, suggesting that practical learning experience is critical for developing youth leadership.

Lastly, a new dissertation shows how young people develop transformational leadership experiences by engaging in 4-H youth programmes in the US, experiences that encourage leading by example, caring about others' needs, being motivational, and bringing out the best in people (Oyedare et al., 2025).

Need for new directions

Scholars and practitioners in education emphasize the need for new directions in youth leadership studies that relate to the challenges of increasing globalization.

For example, since there is much debate about how educational programmes can best support the development of global leadership in youth, a case study (Allen-Handy et al., 2021) was conducted at the Urban Youth Scholars programme, a two-year after-school programme with five secondary school students who participated with the aim of cultivating global leadership abilities. The participants came from diverse backgrounds, but importantly were all situated within their own urban school and community. The findings show how technology has become an integral part of young people's lives, a "hyper-connectivity" that enables young people to gain broader perspectives on how local and global issues impact people's lives. The authors (Allen-Handy et al., 2021) point out that though leadership literature highlights the importance of empathy in leadership, this characteristic is not enough to transform systems and structures of oppression and injustice, which was also highlighted by the participants. Rather, students must be offered opportunities for critical social analysis and consciousness-building, in order to cultivate self-awareness and curiosity about how an individual fits into the larger framework of society, using elements from leadership theories.

Moreover, although there is sufficient knowledge in various areas referring to youth leadership, studies (Redmond & Dolan, 2016) show that crucial factors are missing. Many focus only on skills development without considering opportunities for practicing skills, while others focus only on actions and the practice of skills. Others focus on "authentic opportunities" but do not mention the skills needed to practice in real-life situations, such as the ability to know and lead oneself, to be able to lead others. Also necessary is the ability to collaborate and differentiate perspectives and opinions, to reach common goals, to communicate effectively with other people, and to share vision.

Summary of previous research

Although much in leadership development for young people remains unclear, it is nevertheless important that we clarify what we know about this, and what knowledge we lack. In order to highlight the gaps that this dissertation focuses on, I will draw some conclusions, based on previous research in the following summary.

The concept of leadership and the image of a "good" leader

Previous research shows there are numerous ways of understanding leadership, in a similar way to words like love and peace, which have different meanings for

different people. This suggests that leadership is essentially a non-existing idea, and a social phenomenon that is bound to context, the people involved, and circumstances, in time and space. Thus, despite the immense knowledge produced over a century, the concept of leadership remains abstract; depending on who is defining it.

As the world has changed significantly, for example, with the development of advanced new technologies (digital meetings and conferences, digital learning, and artificial intelligence), leaders are facing more complex, flexible, and non-traditional situations when performing their leadership roles. In the new digital world, leaders and followers do not interact necessarily face-to-face but often on various digital platforms. These changes in workplaces and businesses bring new questions to the field of leadership. Scholars are questioning whether the theories and methods used to study leadership are broad enough to capture and provide insights into the leadership challenges in the ongoing new era (Faix et al., 2020; Liden et al., 2025; Riggio, 2019; Yukl & Garnder, 2020). They also stress that we lack knowledge about leadership experiences from various real-life situations and contexts, since many studies in leadership are more inspired by the heroic image of a leader, almost wishful thinking, than by a realistic view of leaders (Allen et al., 2022a; Alvesson et al., 2017; Bohl, 2019; Ciulla, 2020). Much of previous studies and literature have upheld a distorted view of the leader, a Western-centric view (Hino, 2019) that has been "created by men about men" (Johnson & Lacerenza, 2019 p. 126).

There are scholars who claim that there is no simple way to know how to evaluate efficient or "good" leaders, since the choice of criteria on valuing a person's behaviours lies in the beholder's moral outlook (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). However, there is also a general view that since leadership includes influencing others, a leader's values, beliefs and perspective are entwined (Ko et al., 2018). This implies that even though we can agree to some extent that what "good" leadership is, it still lies in the eyes of the beholder, and we must therefore consider the subjective experience of "good" leaders, that is, a leader who influences others through his/her own values, beliefs and perspectives. In light of this, previous research shows that despite scholars in the field of leadership using the best scientific methodologies to explore "good" behaviours and ethical-related issues, we have not come any closer to the question of what makes a person a "good" leader (Ciulla, 2020). Since even though there have been numerous publications on business ethics since the 1970s, there is still very limited theoretical understanding of leadership ethics (Northouse, 2022). In relation to how young people perceive leadership based on previous research, this

is a significant gap, as there is a clear indication that young people's perceptions of leadership involve ethical behaviours such as honesty, accountability, and putting people first, a view that has not changed in the last four decades. This implies that young people are clearly paying attention to what people in influential positions such as leaders are doing, and how they are behaving; young people are paying attention to small acts of morality as they believe "small actions" matter and have consequences.

In a changing world where leadership scholars are questioning whether the existing theories and methods in leadership are broad enough to capture and provide insights into the challenges leaders face in their daily lives, including the limited and distorted images of leadership; this makes the question of how young people perceive "good" leadership fundamental.

Leader development

It is also crucial to consider that the number of players offering courses to teach leadership skills is growing, with an increasing amount of money involved, and with relatively little understanding of what the learning outcomes are from the various courses. Though many of the current programmes and activities continue to focus on the same concepts and techniques used as far back as four decades ago (Murphy, 2019) there are also new movements towards individual development plans with various digital tools and applications (Allen et al., 2022b) such as social and interactive platforms, and learning tools from both traditional institutions and new organisations that make up what is known as the personal learning cloud (Moldveanu & Narayandas, 2019). This suggests a market that offers a multitude of ways of developing as leaders, with no consensus of what should be taught, nor how a person develops as a leader.

The lack of understanding of how a person develops as a leader seems to reside in the theory–practice gap (Day & Liu, 2019). Research shows that, on one hand, scholars emphasize that a person develops as a leader by learning a set of skills and qualities. On the other hand, there are scholars who question how a person can know what qualities and skills are needed for each situation they encounter (without changing their personalities and questioning their basic assumptions). These conflicting views involve some scholars highlighting the importance of leadership education (theory), while other scholars claim that leadership education cannot be taught, as it cannot "capture" the everyday challenges and complexities a leader (or a manager) must face (practice). Nevertheless, believing that the skills needed for effective leadership are learned merely from experiences and not from formal programmes simplifies and disregards the complexities in

leadership development since well-planned programmes can offer participants valuable insights and skills such as self-awareness, skills in reflective and critical thinking (Allio, 2005), thus adding a layer of understanding of one's experiences. Consequently, the lifespan approach, which is built on the view that a person develops as a leader from childhood and throughout life; a process that involves a leader's self-identity developing over time (Liu et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2024) seems to move beyond the theory–practice gap. This emphasizes that young people do not develop as leaders merely by engaging in various leadership activities and programmes, there is also the need for developing leader identity. And although studies show how the influence of a young person's social environment and individual factors are connected to the formation of a leader identity (Barling et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2024), it is still unclear how young people develop their leader identity. This makes the question of how young people perceive their own leadership development critical.

Educators teaching leadership

Despite the fact that the topic of leadership is studied in numerous ways and disciplinary perspectives, including a vast number of textbooks on leadership, there is a limited understanding of educators teaching leadership. It is only in recent years that this interest has emerged, with studies showing leadership educators preparing their teachings based on their own experiences in leadership roles or on the experiences of leaders. Many teach leadership by sharing their own personal stories during activities and trainings (Priest & Seemiller, 2018).

Studies also suggest that the educators face several challenges, such as the choice of pedagogy and how to teach leadership since much of the teaching is drawn from the field of adult education (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Also, since there is no consensus of what it meant by leadership education (Jenkins & Owen, 2016) or what to teach, the field of leadership education includes countless approaches with each programme taking a different point of departure (DeLong & Hill, 2012). They point out that educators must take into consideration several aspects when planning and conducting leadership training, since even though there are young participants without prior leadership experience attending, they still hold strong beliefs and ideas about leadership (Caza & Rosch, 2014). Also, there seems to be a gap between the perceptions of the young people participating in leadership programmes on what is being taught, and what should be taught by the educators (Eva & Sendjaya, 2013). This suggests that there is a need to understand the practices and knowledgebase that educators are drawing from, as

well as the pedagogical challenges they face during leadership activities and programmes.

Young people and leadership

A recurring way of delineating in youth leadership studies is to either focus on leadership development in various contexts such as in schools, after-school activities and sports, or to focus on students at universities and colleges. This implies that the spectrum of age and context may differ significantly, as well as the cultural and geographical differences. Nevertheless, several of the stated studies involve both the young participants' perceptions of leadership and how they can develop as leaders, including their own self-perception as leaders. This implies the connection between how young people view and experience leadership and their own leadership development is crucial to understanding, especially when preparing and performing leadership education for young people, as pointed out by scholars (Caza & Rosch, 2014; Mortensen et al., 2014).

However, despite the increase of leadership programmes and courses for young people, scholars and practitioners are questioning the applicability of the existing leadership programmes, and the various challenges they are now facing. Challenges such as the vast number of methods designed and implemented without any consensus of what young people need to learn about leadership and how they can develop leadership skills by participating in various activities and programmes. It should not be forgotten that confusion exists due to the lack of understanding of what leadership is. And in all of this, there are those who question whether leadership education should be provided in a more formalized manner, while others question whether the programmes can provide the skills and knowledge about leadership that is sufficient for taking on leadership roles in the future, especially as the context of today's leadership has changed with new issues increasing such as social injustice, political dissonances, worldwide pandemics and environmental decline (Seemiller, 2021). Thus, scholars and practitioners in education emphasize the need for new directions in youth leadership. This suggests that young people need opportunities for critical social analysis and consciousness-building (Allen-Handy et al., 2021) through reflective practices. Consequently, we need to ask what insights from various cases of leadership activities and programmes can inform future leadership education for young people.

Contribution to knowledge

Based on the presented research it is fundamental to recognize young people's perceptions of leadership, and what knowledge can inform practitioners when preparing and performing leadership activities and programmes. Also important are insights that can inform scholars in the process of developing theories explaining how young people develop as leaders. However, though previous research shows that young people expect leaders to have ethical behaviours, there is still limited understanding of how young people perceive "good" leadership.

Furthermore, studies show that young people do not develop as leaders merely by engaging in various leadership activities and programmes, rather there is a need for developing their leader identity. And although the influence of a young person's social environment, together with individual factors, is connected to the formation of a leader identity, there is still much we do not know, such as how young people perceive their own development as leaders. Leadership activities and programmes can offer young people valuable insights and opportunities to develop skills and capabilities. But at the same time, many scholars and practitioners question the applicability of existing programmes. This implies that there is a need to gain insights from existing leadership activities and programmes and to ask what can inform future leadership education for young people.

One discussion that appears to be very limited is that of the pedagogical challenges faced by leadership educators. For example, many of the educators who teach leadership are also practicing leadership in their daily lives, which suggests that there is limited understanding of how they teach or transfer their practical knowledge, which is often done in an abstract and theoretical manner. This includes limited knowledge about the educators' perceptions of leadership and their own leadership development, which may affect how they view and teach leadership.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I will present and discuss the theoretical framework that supports this dissertation. It is based on two building blocks: the first one consists of the selection of leadership theories that were described in previous chapter, and the second block is that of John Dewey's pedagogical ideas about experiential learning, reflection and education.

Since I have approached this study inductively by first collecting and analysing the data in order to look for and identify patterns and themes, without any predefined theories (further description is given in the following chapter), the theoretical framework has been developed and refined through my data analysis (Joy et al., 2023). As a result, the theoretical framework derives from the experiences of the participants and how they perceive "good" leadership and their own leadership development, based on their own understandings, which includes their cultural and social contexts and relates to the research questions and purpose.

My starting point in this chapter is a brief discussion, followed by an illustration and descriptions of some of the main leadership theories and concepts presented in previous chapter. The presented palette of leadership theories offers a holistic lens for understanding the perceptions of the participants. This is followed by John Dewey's pedagogical ideas on experience and education (1938/2015) and on reflective thinking (1934/2005). Dewey offers a lens for understanding the links between the young participants' and the educators' way of learning and developing. The chapter concludes with a discussion regarding the choice of theories.

A palette of leadership theories

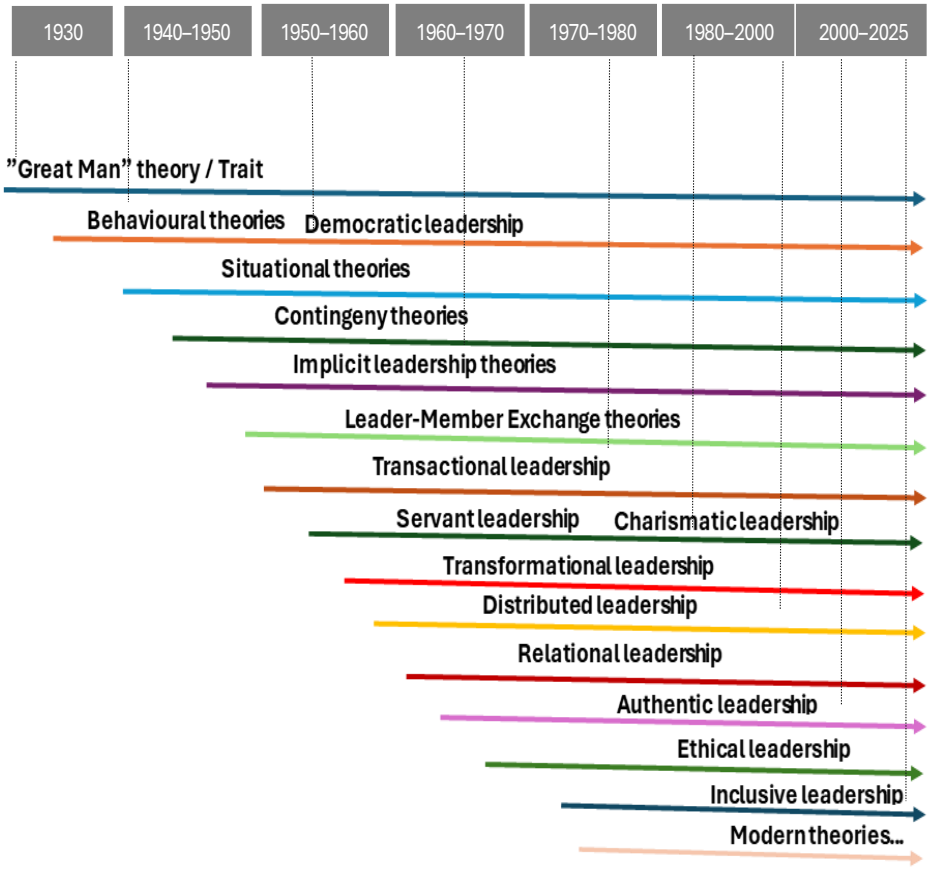
Numerous theories can help us gain a better understanding of the perceptions of the participants in my study. Yet, based on my studies on leadership, I agree with scholars who claim that the theories used to understand leadership are not broad enough to capture the daily real-life complexities of leadership (Riggio, 2019). Many of the theories and their underlying concepts even overlap with each other, making it rather problematic to differentiate them. Moreover, studies show that many of the theories and concepts lack empirical and theoretical support, or conceptual clarity (Northouse, 2022). Nevertheless, it is still important to have an overall understanding of some of the main leadership theories and concepts since (explicit) leadership theories can influence and even change implicit leadership theories, for example through leadership education (Reichard et al., 2021).

Hence, despite the complex ways of approaching and understanding leadership, I have aimed to understand the participants' perceptions of "good" leadership based on a theoretical framework, from a holistic perspective covering various integrated leadership theories and concepts that have overlapping themes.

The following image (Figure 2) illustrates an evolution of leadership theories, from 1930s to the present day.

Figure 2

A palette of leadership theories with descriptions



Trait theory (“great man” theory) explains how certain people (men) have qualities that can identify them as leaders. The theory is based on the idea that leaders are born with innate qualities like intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and extraversion (Liden et. al., 2025).

Behavioural leadership theory describes the observed behaviours of leaders: what they do and how they act towards their followers. There are two general kinds of behaviours: task-oriented with focus on goals and processes and relationship-oriented with a focus on emotional needs and the wellbeing of the team. The central purpose is to explain how leaders can combine these two kinds of behaviours to influence followers in their efforts to reach common goals. (Northouse, 2022).

Democratic leadership theory explains how democratic leaders distribute responsibilities and empower their followers. The theory was presented by Kurt Lewin and his colleagues at the end of the1930s. They distinguished democratic leadership from autocratic and laissez-faire styles, arguing that a democratic leader involves team members in decision making and shares responsibilities. Help team members develop emotional and moral abilities (Gastil, 1994).

Situational leadership explains that leaders must be able to adapt their behaviours based on the specific needs of their team members, the task and the overall situation. They should provide right level of direction and support to be able to adapt and adjust for a given task. The concept was developed by Hersey and Blanchard at the end of 1960s (Northouse, 2022), with the idea that different situations demand different types of leadership style (changing the leader's behaviour according to the situation).

Implicit leadership theory explains the perceptions people have of leadership and leaders and influence how people evaluate leaders, based on their mental representations (stereotypes) of leaders; these are formed by pre-existing beliefs and assumptions about what leaders should be like but also about the way that leaders could act in the future (Lord et al., 2020).

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory conceptualizes leadership as a process that is centred on the interactions between leaders and followers. Emphasizes that leaders should develop high quality exchanges (networks of partnership) with all of their followers rather than just a few. Making the followers feel part of the in-group (Northouse, 2022).

Transactional leadership theory focuses the exchanges that occur between leaders and their followers. The exchange dimension is found at many levels throughout all types of organizations, e.g. employment contracts (Northouse, 2022).

Contingency theory explains that leaders and organizations must be able to adapt their practices to fit situational variables like the environment (context), the nature of the task, and the capabilities of the team members. The theory was developed by Fiedler during the 1960s (Northouse, 2022) with the idea that there is no one best way to lead an organization and that leadership should be matched to various situations in management (matching the right leader to the right situations).

Servant leadership suggests that leaders prioritize the needs and growth of their team members. They show empathy, awareness, and communicative abilities and are responsive to others. The theory emerged from the writings of Greenleaf who had worked for 40 years at AT&T and after his retirement he began exploring how institutions function and how they can do better to serve society (Northouse, 2022; Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

Transformational leadership describes how transformative leaders inspire and motivate their team members to achieve extraordinary outcomes and personal growth. The theory was developed by Burns (2003) in 1978 and expanded in 1985 by Bass' four defining dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. **Charismatic leadership theory** was developed around the same time and is often associated with transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Distributed leadership is an approach that explains how leadership responsibilities are shared across a team or an organization. This moves away from top-down structures and implementation and instead towards shared decision-making, flexibility and empowering people. The theory had its origins during the 1950s, however it was not until the 1990s that the concept reappeared in organizational management theory, and interest grew in the early 2000s (Northouse, 2022).

Authentic leadership proposes that authentic leaders are genuine, have self-awareness and a strong ethical compass. Authentic leadership emerged from George's writings in 2003 as a practical approach to describe the essential qualities of authentic leaders and how individuals can develop these qualities. It was a response to the global uncertainties at the start of the 21st century. Also, an increased awareness of what is going on in the world; people started looking for trustworthy leaders who are honest and "good" (Northouse, 2022).

Ethical leadership suggests that leaders should hold ethical standards and make ethical decisions. They influence others by acting as role models and by showing behaviours like trustworthiness, fairness, honesty, dependability, and are also able to show concern for others. In this process, they foster a positive and inclusive culture and promote growth. Ethical leadership was conceptualized in 2005 by Brown, Trevinõ and Harrison (2005).

Inclusive leadership incorporates a sense of shared identity among group members. The leader is seen as a representative of the group members who establishes behaviours that group members should adopt, moving away from status boundaries within the team. A relational approach that operates according to norms of input and shared decision making (Northouse, 2022).

Experience and Education

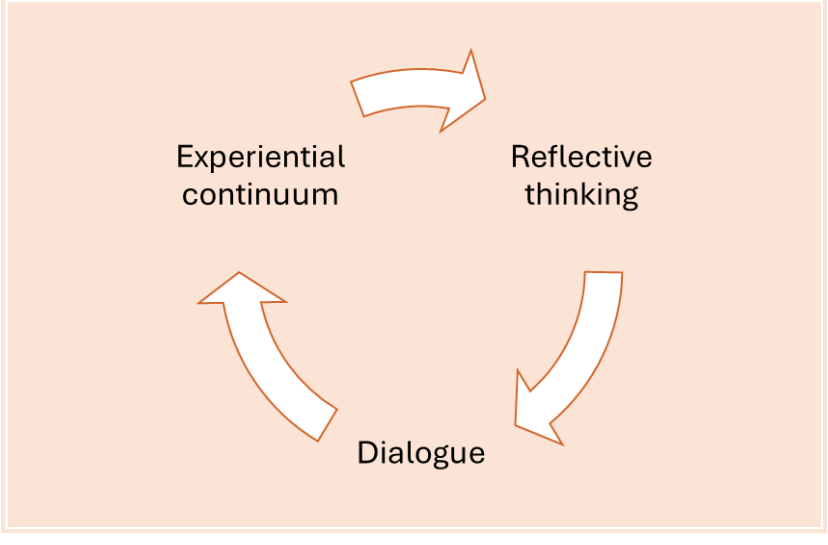
Education is often referred to as activities that are formally planned and taught and bring about learning (Pring, 2021). However, the word "education", which according to the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) is used extensively and is part of how society is shaped, has several meanings, including its origin meaning referring to the general process of nourishing or rearing a child or a young person. With time the word "education" has increasingly come to refer to what happens in school, namely the "systematic instruction, schooling or training given to the young" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). Along with the word "development", which has 28 meanings in the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), yet can also be simply referred to as the growth or maturation of a person involving a gradual change or progression in successive stages, this dissertation can be framed by the discussion of what "education" is. This frame defines education as a formally planned and taught activity that involves a process of moving a person from one position to another: a transformation. This outlook rests on the belief that learning encompasses the whole person and is an ongoing process of experiences that are intertwined with thoughts, actions and feelings, including social interactions. And since people develop in different ways with numerous differences in experiences, it is difficult to know exactly how and what influences and shapes a person's learning and transformation over time. However, as interpretative beings, people

select and interpret their experiences through meaning-making. However, although people learn from their own experiences, learning nevertheless occurs in social contexts and situations, i.e., when two people are in the same place at the same time, their experiences may be similar but not the same (Jarvis, 2009).

In order to get an overview of how learning can occur based on Dewey's pedagogical ideas on "experiential continuum", reflective thinking and the importance of supporting young people in their learning and understanding, which can be done through dialogue. The following image (Figure 3) illustrates a conceptual framework of the three elements I especially focus on in this dissertation.

Figure 3

Illustrating three elements identified in Dewey's pedagogical ideas



John Dewey (1859–1952) is considered as one of the theorists who has influenced many educational thinkers during the 20th century and who paved the way for challenging traditional notions of education and learning according to Karl Aubrey and Alison Riley (2022).

Dewey's ideas, from his writings in *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938/2015), highlight a key idea that I argue is central in this dissertation: that education is part of life and growth, part of a person's transformational process,

including a person's experiences and social interactions. Moreover, Dewey did not claim that learning occurs merely through experience but that it also occurs when education is connected to real-life experiences. Thus "experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 25) since there are considerations that must be made both when talking about experience and in how education is provided and the quality of an experience and how education is provided.

Dewey viewed experience as a fundamental process of learning and growth where an experience is an active process that includes social interactions and influences, and are all part of a person's "shaping of actual experiences" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 40). This means that a person learns by actively engaging with others, and by doing so, the person's needs, desires, purposes, and capabilities are all part of a situation where interactions take place. In a sense, a person's social environment is part of a person's growth. However, according to Dewey, learning from experiences also includes reflective thinking. This means that he did not consider that all experiences are educational, as there are times when experiences may immediately be perceived as satisfactory, and there are experiences that are not educational. Some experiences could even lead to a decrease in further learning and be so disconnected from one another that it is impossible to know if learning has taken place. Yet most importantly, he highlighted that "experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 26). As a result, a person may feel detached from the experience, and either view the experience as a fun and a satisfactory experience or as dissatisfying and not connected it to any other experience.

Dewey linked the idea of experiences being disconnected from one another to education, which he viewed as being provided in a fragmented manner. Thus, although he maintained that experience is crucial part of learning, and that education, in a formal and organized manner, can offer multiple opportunities and insights, there is still the issue of knowledge being fragmented. This means that what is taught and learned during education is done in an isolated manner since the knowledge that is taught cannot offer the learner meaning without it being connected to real-life experiences. In this sense, knowledge is fragmented and detached from the learner's own reality and experiences and is "defective from the standpoint of connection with further experience" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 27), consequently leading to lack of meaning. And when meaning-making (part of a person's learning process) does not occur, a person may experience boredom and

disengagement since he/she cannot comprehend what is being taught. Yet Dewey explained that concepts are continuously taught to young people from the viewpoint of adults, and are suitable for adults, and that these concepts go beyond young people's own existing capacities and experiences. He noted that young people are taught with a "finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 19).

Dewey reasoned that although young people have experiences (outside educational settings), an educator cannot assume that they have sufficient experience or understanding of the topic being taught through instruction manner. Instead, educators should provide opportunities of the kind of experiences that encourage young people to participate. He proposed that educators should select activities that are meaningful in the present moment and which encourage young learners to engage and move towards subsequent experiences, resulting in an "experiential continuum" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 33).

The idea of the "experiential continuum" is interesting as it is according to Dewey an opposite way of thinking about education since there is an assumption that education must be applicable for future possibilities and therefore must be organized and delivered in a way that it can lead to the development of certain skills and knowledge in the future. However, Dewey claimed that there are various considerations that must be made to ensure that the education provided can lead to a certain direction, especially when knowledge is presented in fragments and often in isolation, with no relevance or connection to a young learner's own social reality:

> The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his (her) future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 49).

Hence, Dewey explained that we need to focus on how every experience affects the next one, as each experience includes attitudes that influence and can help the decisions as to whether a young person can be encouraged to move to the next experience or not. Every educational moment should create a meaningful experience for the young person in the present, enough for them to want to take the next step towards the next educational experience. In this sense, according to

Dewey, if an educator creates learning opportunities in the present through an activity that is meaningful for the young learner, then the educator can "see what direction an experience is heading" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 38).

The question of knowledge being isolated from real life and even fragmented can also be linked to Dewey's explanation of how we understand things based on observations and experiences, which include all our senses: what we see, hear, and touch. Our observations consist of the consequences that come from various behaviours. And in those cases, for example, when a young person is familiar with an experience from previous experiences, the young person does not have to stop and wonder what this experience means but rather builds upon previous experiences. But in unfamiliar situations when a young person cannot tell what the consequence of an action is and the young person does not have the possibility to connect with related experiences, there is a disruption. However, if the young person reflects on an experience in order to see what similarities this can be related to, the young person can then "go on to form a judgment of what may be expected in the present situation" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 68). This implies that reflecting on experiences can support an experience to be perceived as meaningful by connecting and relating it to one's own knowledge and social reality.

Reflective thinking

According to Dewey, there are four ways of defining thinking: the first refers to everything that goes through one's mind. The second refers to something that is not directly presented to us, something that we have not directly seen but we have been told about it by others, like a story. The third refers to our beliefs that are based on knowledge that goes beyond that which is directly in our presence. In other words, some beliefs are based on experience, while other beliefs are accepted without any proof being considered. The fourth refers to beliefs that are deliberately examined through the process of reflective thinking. Any of the first three ways of thinking can lead to reflective thinking, which is a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a previous one. Thus, reflective thinking, according to Dewey, is an "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey, 1910/1997p. 6).

Reflective thinking involves thinking about various situations and the signs or indicators that can demonstrate or prove a belief. For example, a person's belief in how trustworthiness is demonstrated and the signs that indicate trustworthiness in another person's actions. These signs and indicators are based on previous

experiences and prior knowledge, whether directly or indirectly acquired. However, if signs and indicators are accepted without any further reflection, one could say that a person has not thought critically or sought any further explanation or references (proof) for further new understanding. This implies that a person who thinks consciously acts "on the basis of the absent and the future" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 14). Instead of acting without thinking, a person can develop and reproduce signs that can help him/her to remember consequences and thus find ways of avoiding actions or acquiring (repeating) them.

Thus, according to Dewey, thinking is important as it has the function of providing or showing signs and indicators. This way of reasoning, which rests on cultivating effective habits for recognizing tested beliefs, enables a person to develop an open-minded preference for conclusions that are properly rooted in a person's habits and ways of reasoning that are appropriate in various situations and challenges. This is a "training of mind" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 28) that involves the support of a person's social environment. This highlights that in order for a person to develop the ability to think, training is fundamental, and that this training involves supplying the mind (thinking) with curiosity. According to Dewey, the curious mind is a person who is constantly exploring and "seeking material for thought" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 31) with a willingness to experience and learn unexplored knowledge.

However, Dewey also notes, since thinking is specific, given that different things suggest their own meaning and are dependent on a point of view, learning how to develop reflective thinking is difficult. It takes time to process and organize impressions and make sense of one's thoughts and ideas, a process that varies from one person to another. Furthermore, it takes time to indirectly develop habits of thoughts and to learn how to organize one's thoughts; this is especially important to consider with young people, as their daily actions, efforts and pursuits, including motivations and beliefs are momentary and are not as fixed or organized as those of adults. Hence, it is difficult for young people to develop organized thinking as their daily activities are in a continuous flux. For example, an educator can influence and encourage young learners to think. Dewey views this as important since most people take their mental ideas and thoughts for granted and unconsciously derive from thoughts to make judgments of others and their actions without considering what beliefs, and proofs (signs) one's own thoughts are organized and shaped by. This understanding is significant in relation to educators as they tend to forget the importance of encouraging young learners to learn this kind of mind training, which leads to young learners producing the "expected" answers without understanding what they are

producing; this makes knowledge abstract and not applicable to their own life situations.

> Information is knowledge which is merely stored up; wisdom is knowledge operating in the direction of powers to the better living of life (Dewey, 1997, p. 52)

Hence, information implies there is no need to train one's capacity, while wisdom is the consequence of training one's capacity. Thus, instead of educating young people to train their thinking and make good judgments, all too often this is replaced by attaining as much information as possible to "cover the ground" (Dewey, 1910/1997 p. 52).

According to Dewey, childhood is almost entirely unreflective and instead involves sensory, motor, and memory development, while during adolescence, young people's thoughts and reasoning abilities start developing. However, he also pointed out that this does not mean that young people start to magically develop the ability to reason. Rather, thinking must be developed and followed up by testing conclusions, including beliefs. This process involves adults, such as educators, coaches and other adults engaged in young people's development, who can follow up the thought processes and experiences of young people to be able to encourage and support them as "positive habits are being formed" by carefully looking into things (Dewey, 1910/1997 p. 66). A habit of reasoning that involves a process of understanding that, if an idea (such as a behaviour observed or an attitude of someone else) is adopted, certain consequences follow. This means that at the first stage the idea is abstract, but when the idea (action) is tested (imitated), the consequences may either be accepted or dismissed. This implies that observation exists at the beginning of a process, in order to determine more certainly the nature of the idea (action) and, at the end of the process, to determine the value of the conclusions made. And since thinking does not happen "in a vacuum" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 52) guidance and explanations should be offered.

The process of reasoning is very important when it comes to making good decisions and judgments. According to Dewey, uncertainty a prerequisite for judgment. This implies that if something or a situation is uncertain, and there are several possible interpretations, it becomes necessary to make a judgment. However, there are many details to consider in every case and on every occasion. For example, the process of being able to separate what is significant and what is valuable information from that which is not relevant to the situation.

Dewey proposes that there are no rules that enable a person to select or reject given information. It comes down to a person's good judgment: knowing what information is irrelevant and letting that go, and retaining that which is relevant. He also proposed that part of a person's good judgment is instinctive, but it is also formed by previous experiences and outcomes, that is, tested and tried actions and choices that include alertness, flexibility and curiosity as essential qualities in the process. However, learning is not the same thing as wisdom, since information does not guarantee good judgment. Instead people develop certain modes of understanding that encapsulate previous experiences and meanings, enabling a person to make good or bad judgments.

Yet how does a young person who has not observed or experienced a behaviour in a given situation develop an understanding or make sense of what a person is doing? According to Dewey, confusion is prior to familiarity. In order for a person to understand an idea (a concept or a behaviour) and make meaning out of this, learning must primarily derive from practical activities such as testing and exploring the possibilities of a concept. At the same time, since people identify various concepts by functionality, a young person must learn that there are differences and what these differences signify. A young person learns to understand that there are variations but there are also different perspectives and that this means that perspectives do not describe the characteristics and values of the thing itself but of the observers. Imitation is one way to test and learn the activities of adults as this enables young people to develop habits of action that they find meaningful. However, mere imitation does not give rise to thinking or meaning-making, according to Dewey, but rather, young people must recognize the actions of others and events to receive further suggestions through interactions and dialogue and by being asked questions that relate to their own experiences. This is something that can be done through symbolic representation, which is a process of mental representation of language, objects, ideas and experiences using symbols (Callaghan & Corbit, 2015). When things are transformed into symbolic representations, playfulness becomes a central activity that involves mental processes. Highlighting Dewey's comment that "to be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 218). "Playfulness is a more important consideration than play" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 162), as playfulness is an attitude that opens the mind and provides the freedom to explore with flexibility and curiosity. In conclusion, all learning experiences are not regarded as educational since everything depends on the quality of the experience. And all education is not regarded as learning since it depends whether the experience can be directed

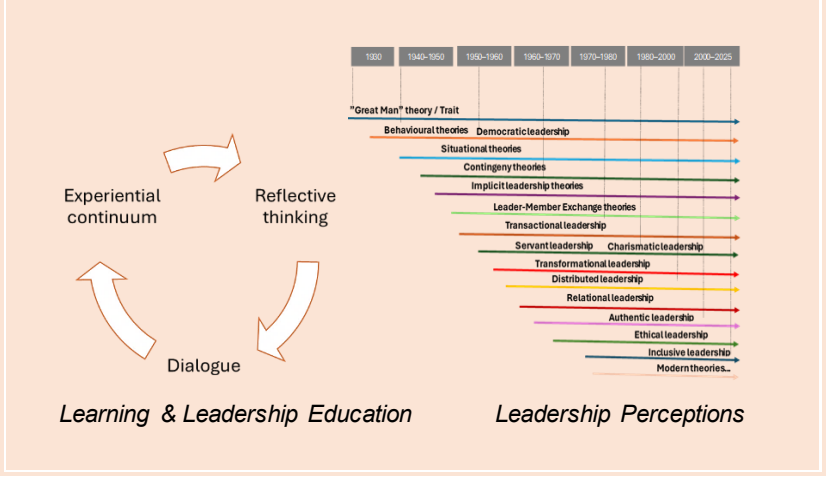
into the real world or not. And since experience does not simply happen inside a person, but through the interaction with others, then learning changes to some degree continuously in different situations. By incorporating connections between training content and real-world examples and experiences, learning can encourage and enable young people to develop a better understanding of abstract ideas and make sense of newly acquired knowledge.

Choice of theories

My choice of two building blocks (Figure 4) with one consisting of a palette of leadership theories as described above, and the other consisting of Dewey's pedagogical ideas is based on a strategy for addressing the complexities and challenges of my empirical data. It has offered me a more comprehensive understanding, and a more nuanced exploration of my findings.

Figure 4

Theoretical framework



In order to explore the participants' perceptions of leadership and their leadership development I have drawn theoretical insights holistically by integrating different leadership theories. This has been especially important as I

have needed to take into account their limited or entirely absent leadership experience.

Furthermore, in order to get a better understanding of the leadership programmes but also the participants' learning experiences, I have drawn from Dewey's pedagogical ideas by conceptualizing three elements that can offer learning moments.

Highlighting this perspective illustrates that although education is part of a person's growth and ongoing transformation, there is a need to consider the importance of organizing education so that it is not fragmented or isolated from real-life experiences. And although education, such as the leadership programmes in this study (further presentation of the programmes are given in the following chapter), are time-limited activities, as many leadership programmes are, Dewey's view offers a significant understanding that education cannot be viewed from a future-oriented outlook but from the outlook of the present, creating learning opportunities and experiences in the present that can support and encourage curiosity for young people to enable them to take a step forward.

Dewey's views on reflective thinking are also valuable in this study as his ideas help to clarify the thought processes of the participants and how they make sense of their own experiences. It also highlights that although references of reflection go back to ancient times, Dewey is considered as having created the concept of reflection (van Beveren et al., 2018). Reflection has attracted increasing attention in theory, practice and education in social and behavioural sciences, especially in the field of education, with clear evidence in empirical studies relating to professional development (Van Beveren et al., 2018). Scholars have discussed reflection from different perspectives for different purposes since reflection is understood as a key ability for enhancing learning through the transformation of concrete experiences into abstract concepts (Chang, 2019; Kohn, 2024; Raudoniute & Beresford-Dey, 2024; Roberts, 2008; Wei, 2024) including exploring personal experiences, efforts, and abilities (Lorencová et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2018). In other words, reflection helps to make connections between theory and practice and to connect the world of experience and the world of ideas (Correia et al., 2008; Van Beveren et al., 2018). It is a practice that also involves developing one's self-awareness (Van Beveren et al., 2018) and enhancing professional identity, especially that of students who struggle with their self-awareness (Luft & Roughley, 2016).

However, it is noteworthy that although reflection (and reflexivity) are perceived as important skills for leaders (Alvesson et al., 2017) scholars note that reflective practices have been studied primarily among teachers, nurses, social

workers, and other professionals. This leaves an empirical gap that includes the daily struggles and reflective practices of leaders (Van der Steen et al., 2021). This gap can also be seen in the leadership development of business students where there is little empirical work to inform curriculum development (Harry-Nana & Bosch, 2020). Moreover, scholars highlight the complexity of reflection and that there is a need to question under what circumstances and for whom these practices of reflection do and do not work in relation to management development (Higgins, 2011; Van Beveren et al., 2018). There are also some studies that highlight how reflective practices are applied in different approaches, according to the situation and purpose, and that these can enable leaders (school head teachers) to develop effective leadership (Day, 2000). This can also enable a leader to grow as he/she can make better sense of personal experiences (Walker et al., 2024). Reflection can also support leaders in their complex daily challenges through taking the time to address questions and create meaningful relations that can help leaders to adapt to challenges (Van der Steen et al., 2021).

Although studies demonstrate that reflective habits are difficult to attain, there has been considerable research on ways of doing this, like keeping a reflective journal or writing reports, practices that can enable young people to improve their reflective skills (Chang, 2019; Correia et al., 2008: Lew et al., 2011).

4 METHODOLOGY

Studying a social phenomenon such as leadership is not just the matter of the qualitative data collected, analysed and presented, but also the methodological choices one makes when collecting the data and the theoretical lens one chooses to look through and interpret in order to be able to make sense of the data.

With the overall aim of this dissertation being that of gaining understanding of how young people develop as leaders, and based on my research questions, I conducted an exploratory case study (Ridder, 2017). The research design included collecting qualitative data, generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and by keeping a research journal. Furthermore, a reflexive thematic analysis was performed. An analytical technique was applied that emphasizes the researcher's subjective role in the process of identifying recurring patterns, and in creating central themes, formulated inductively, in order to be able to present the findings (Braun & Clark, 2022b; 2024; Joy et al., 2023).

In this chapter, I begin by presenting my own interpretative view, which is embedded in my everyday world and includes my philosophical assumptions about science, which are entwined with the findings, as described by Alvehus (2025). This is followed by a presentation of the study's research design; the choice of sampling, which involves two leadership programmes from two contexts, as well as the young participants and educators connected to the programmes, choice of methods for collecting and analysing the qualitative data, as well as methodological and ethical considerations.

The researcher's standpoint

Leadership is an elusive multi-layered concept with numerous ways of understanding the phenomenon, which essentially is defined by the eye of the beholder. This suggests that exploring my research questions based on the collected qualitative data, together with my understanding of leadership both from previous research but also from previous practical experiences has been challenging. The process of collecting and analysing qualitative data in order to provide useful descriptions in a systematic manner has required that I am aware of my own subjectivity as a qualitative researcher. This process has involved balancing rigorous, systematic analysis with my own subjective interpretations, which include my views, beliefs and assumptions, all embedded in my social reality, which is continuously affected by my various unique experiences and interpretations (Clark et al., 2021).

Approaching this study from an interpretive outlook, as described by Ted Benton and Ian Craib, (2019), aligns well with my belief that there is no actual objectivity, only various ways of seeing the world. This is a view that derives from the ideas of Thomas Kuhn (1997). This proposes that our observations are guided by concepts and beliefs and that science does not track the truth but instead creates partial views that can be considered to contain truth only by people who hold those views. This suggests that what knowledge we have is not a firm idea of how the world is, but instead a practical and useful way of organizing our experiences, since there will always be new and unique interpretations of existing social realities.

My beliefs and understandings are based on years of experience as an educator and a musicologist. For over 25 years, I have taught music in schools as well as in private settings, teaching children and adults of all ages. These experiences also include working as a performing artist signed to a record label, as well as running my own business, and using music and the arts as a method in various learning processes, both in educational and organizational settings. In the years before I set out for my scholarly journey, I was employed by an investment company. One of my responsibilities was to work with some of the social projects that the company was engaged in, such as sports clubs and school projects for children and youth in the community. It was during those years that I started noticing all too clearly that there seemed to be an absence of young people engaged as leaders, in sport settings but also in the various youth projects I was involved in. This concern but also my curiosity made me question what I was missing. This question guided me to take the path of exploration. And so, as an

industry PhD student, employed by a private investment company, I enrolled at Malmö University in the subject of Education with the aim of collecting knowledge and understanding about young people and leadership.

Shamoo and Resnik (2015) highlight the importance of values in research, an aspect that has been central in this study. Throughout the research process I have incorporated values that have guided me in all my doings and interactions. For example, there is the issue of my research being funded by a private investment company, while, in general, researchers receive public funding and have basic ethical responsibilities towards society. However, while the investment company providing the funding is a commercial entity, it receives no direct gain from the research outcomes or is there any conflict of interest for the company, as the research does not relate to their specific focus area. As an industry PhD student this has meant continuously balancing ethical issues and reminding myself to "switch hats" from representing the company to being a researcher who conducts research funded by the company. This has been especially important with my interactions from my network as there have been at times differences in values and norms both within and outside academia.

The values that have guided me in my relations with participants, associates and organizations who have shared insights for and during data collection are trust, respect, integrity, and accountability. It is important to emphasize that trustworthiness is crucial and takes time to build when developing and maintaining relationships. Besides trust I have tried to show respect for the participants' contributions and time and for sharing their knowledge and experiences, but also to show integrity by following agreements.

The artistic lens

There is a layer of outlook entwined in my subjectivity which I want to highlight; I call it the artistic lens. It is a way of describing my creative and explorative way of thinking, which derives from my curiosity of identifying and understanding patterns in daily life. "Images of thought" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2011) have shown me that there are multiple ways of seeing (Berger, 2008) and that there can be more than one answer to a question (Eisner, 2002), enabling me to embrace the chaos that enters into the reflexive process of exploring multi-layered daily experience, and to remain flexible and open to discovery (as will be exemplified by my research journals). This was a challenging process that has been necessary in order to articulate practical experiences in a systematic way (Lyotard, 1984).

Not only are there many ways of exploring that have the purpose of creating meaning and deeper understanding, but there is also the consideration of the

ability to question, which is based on the kind of methodological tools and forms of representation that I am familiar with.

As I started my scientific inquiries, I was inclined to use the artistic way of exploring as an extension of what I was already doing, to understand everyday realities by illuminating, describing, and explaining that which is invisible or out of reach (Leavy, 2015). However, I soon discovered what Sarah Tracy (2010) means by "qualitative methodology is as much art as it is effort" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841).

The artistic lens is rather like the researcher's lens, as I learned that both involve formulating new and puzzling questions, engaging in the experience of creating answers to these, explaining, building understanding, and challenging assumptions through reflection, descriptions, problem-formulation and problem-solving (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Eisner, 1981). This work is about how I make sense of what I am observing and interpreting since much of my thinking derives from my practical experiences teaching music and with its various complex teaching situations. For example, over the years I have come to realize that being engaged in music as a performer and musician requires more than establishing an advanced technical habit since significant improvements in technique at an early point of musical development are easy to observe. However, after the initial stages, improvement appears to be slower since progress is revealed more subtly. Thus, there is a need for constant interplay between reflection and action in a non-linear manner. Thus, the ability to achieve or implement something with more ease involves long and developed commitment as well as awareness, a way of redefining and editing one's process.

Then again, the artistic lens also creates personal challenges, such as organizing, explaining, and articulating unconnected thoughts, and avoiding confusion, as well as the need to maintain a strong sense of self-discipline to avoid losing focus. Yet embracing an open-mindedness for mistakes, adapting to a fluid work process and finding ways to capture and organize fragmented thoughts effectively over time, such as by keeping research journals, including continuous work and time management journals, I have been able to work in a systematic way.

Research design

An exploratory case study

Designing research as a case study provides a way of exploring specific issues such as events, experiences and processes in real-life settings, a strategy that has become more common in the social sciences (Denscombe, 2013) and is often used in educational research. This approach is often based on the assumption that the chosen case can offer theoretical insights into the studied phenomenon as it involves detailed analysis, focusing on the complexities and particularities with questions of the "how and why" being asked in real-life contexts, including social relational aspects that are interconnected in order to achieve deeper understanding (Cohen et al., 2011). Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) formulates this as follows:

> The closeness of the case study to real-life situations and its multiple wealth of details are important in two respects. First, it is important for the development of a nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behaviour cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process and in much theory. Second, cases are important for researchers' own learning processes in developing the skills needed to do good research. If researchers wish to develop their own skills to a high level, then concrete, context-dependent experience is just as central for them as to professionals learning any other specific skills (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223).

There are different ways of designing a case study: one way is an exploratory approach, which according to Hans-Gerd Ridder (2017), is a case study with "no theory first". This implies I approached my collected data inductively, without a specific chosen theoretical lens initially for identifying and highlighting themes. By so doing, the study contributes to new concepts and propositions that can be used in future theory building and explorations.

Thus, the reasoning behind choosing this design was based on the identified gap in previous research: the limited theoretical knowledge about the way young people develop as leaders. This is a topic that was appropriate to explore from an inductive approach, by collecting qualitative data in various ways (Denscombe, 2013) that were related to issues in the area. Data such as observations of the participants during the leadership programmes and activities, as well as field notes to ensure that what I saw and heard could help identify themes and patterns in the data. Furthermore, I carried out interviews with the young participants as well as the educators connected to the leadership programmes, and did reflective

journaling (a more detailed account will be given later). Besides showing the relevancy of the topic studied, and its contribution, Tracy (2010) also highlights the importance of reliability and validity as criteria for quality when conducting qualitative research. This suggests that designing research in this way requires maintaining a critical attitude towards the study; especially since the findings are mainly built upon the accounts of 15 participants, which includes events from two different context, merged and viewed during the analysis as an "embedded single case study" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 291). This means that qualitative data was collected from two different contexts but is viewed as a single case.

A common critique is that a single case cannot sufficiently represent a group of people nor be more generally applicable to other cases. For example, how can two leadership programmes with young participants represent all other leadership programmes offered to young people? And how can the findings be generalizable to all leadership programmes designed to young people? I learned during the process that each qualitative study is unique; data may not always be transferable to other studies (Denscombe, 2013; Saunders et al., 2018; Thomas & Lacey, 2016). Thus, the findings presented do not aim to produce generalizability, nor does this case claim to be a representative sample of a diverse population (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Rather, it is a case that is appropriate for exploring and identifying patterns and relationships within the data itself, based on a broad set of research questions relating to the purpose of the research. By designing a single case study, I have been able to focus on details that otherwise could have been missed in order to deliver meaningful descriptions. Tracy (2010) explains that accessing implied (tacit) knowledge requires paying attention to small details, for example, not just by taking notes of who is talking and about what, but also who is not talking and what is not being said.

Another commonly criticized issue with regard to case studies is the researcher's own subjective bias. This is a challenge that has required constant scrutiny of my own preconceptions and beliefs towards the findings. Yet, learning along the way, through in-depth analysis, case studies can enable researchers to revise preconceptions and views as described by Flyvbjerg (2006). This became clear to me during the research process, since I was keeping a research journal with notes on personal impressions, feelings and statements from the field and about the research. For example, based on my accounts, I realized at one point how some of my beliefs had altered, such as how my own perception of leadership had gradually moved away from the hierarchical view to a more relational outlook. Thus, during the research process, I have aimed to manage my own influence over the data and to document my analysis in a transparent way. I also

aimed to identify the nuanced judgments that have undergone various alterations during the process as highlighted by Olmos-Vega et al. (2022). Even so, I realize that it is not possible to be totally bias-free since subjectivity is inherent to human understanding (Galdas, 2017). Nevertheless, choosing a pragmatic outlook offered me flexibility and a practical relevance to focus on the participants within their own real-world contexts. This was important since the boundaries between the phenomenon of leadership, learning and the notion of "good" leadership and its contexts are unclear. This suggests that the choice of an exploratory case study design also helped me to develop as a novice researcher.

Purposive sampling

Sampling is central in a research study as it relates to the people the research focuses on by choosing a small group to study. It is also fundamental in determining the rigor of the study.

Purposive (i.e., for a purpose) sampling is one of the most used approaches in qualitative research, across a wide range of scientific disciplines according to Maiss Ahmad and Stephen Wilkins (2025). It is a deliberate process of selecting context, materials or participants who share specific qualities that are relevant and have the potential to answer the inquiry about the phenomenon of interest.

However, Ahmad and Wilkins (2025) explain that existing research suggests that many of the available guidelines and tools on qualitative methods, including purposive sampling, tend to be general and not consistent. And although these tools are supposed to provide common directions in qualitative research, they often end up being shallow, rigid, not fitting to all qualitative methods, but most importantly, they can create the impression that they are enough to judge the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Ahmad and Wilkins (2025) claim that, basically, the application of purposive sampling is based on the researcher's personal experiences, reflections and insights and that there is a scholarly consensus that the adequacy and appropriateness of involved participants in purposive sampling should depend only on what the researcher wants to know, relating to the research questions, and the available resources. However, at the same time, Ahmad and Wilkins (2025) highlight that scholars in the existing literature on qualitative research underline the need for novice researchers to develop adequate level of data collection skills to be able to produce valid outcomes. This makes the issue rather complex to understand.

Furthermore, the concept of saturation is crucial for validity in qualitative research, often broadly defined as "information redundancy", that is, the point where no new information, code or themes are identified from data, and one has

gained a full overall understanding of the data collected. Yet, there seems to be increasing critical discussion related to the imprecise use of saturation and, in some instances, the view that the concept of saturation is a rhetorical device for quality assurance for bypassing the gatekeepers of knowledge, according to Braun and Clark (2019).

Consequently, learning how to handle issues relating sampling, sampling size and saturation has been a challenge, since, according to scholars, there are uncertainties about how large a sample size should be in qualitative studies, as it varies from situation to situation, and this is also relevant when saturation is reached (Ahman & Wilkins, 2025; Clark, et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2019; Tracy, 2010).

Since I have conceptualized my study based on reflexive practice, I am aware that full saturation cannot be reached as there is always the potential for new understandings. Analysis can never be complete; there is no fixed end point. Rather, I have made own judgments about when to stop collecting data and when to stop generating and mapping new themes before finalizing my themes. Still, issues of saturation will be further discussed in the findings.

The reasoning of my sampling choice aligns better with an alternative to data saturation for thinking around justifications for sample size; Malterud et al.,'s (2016) concept of *information power*, which notes that the more relevant information a sample holds, the fewer participants are needed. As described earlier, I did not look for a representative sample, but rather a sample that represents participants who have the knowledge, skills, and experience to answer the research question. Thus, focusing on fewer participants rather than many in order to attain rich and thick qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2013). The choice of participants was based on the specified target group, while showing some variations within their experiences. Thus, I strategically selected two programmes designed for young people aged 18–30: one from a sports context, and the other from a higher education context; these are good examples of information-rich context and participants who could provide relevant data with a specific reason. Though the participants were all geographically "close", which may have some limitations (Clark et al., 2021), they represented different characteristics and backgrounds. Thus, at the time, besides the collected field notes from observations and focus group interviews, I decided that the information given during the individual interviews that consisted of a total of 15 participants from diverse backgrounds and experiences provided sufficient information power.

The qualitative data

I collected qualitative data that can tell me something about the perceptions and experiences of the participants in this study. The data was not "out there" waiting to be collected and organized, but rather was generated through various kinds of interactions in social settings and with participants. As described by Amanda Coffey (2018), it was a sort of co-production between me as the researcher and the participants; it was made and crafted not captured, through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations and by keeping a research journal.

In sum, my empirical data consists of; transcripts from semi-structured interviews with eight young participants (aged 20–30) and seven educators engaged in activities and leadership training programmes designed for young people. There were also two focus group interviews, one with six of the young participants whom I interviewed individually later; the other focus group consisted of six educators connected to the programmes. Besides the interviews stated I also conducted observations in two different contexts: one in a sport context and the other higher education. Observations covered a total of seven occasions. Lastly, my field notes and research journals are also part of the qualitative data.

In the following section I will present the two programmes, as well as the participants connected to the programmes: together with the necessary steps for collecting the qualitative data, as well as some clarifications of the data.

Entering the field

Entering the field to collect qualitative data I decided to contact educators facilitating leadership programmes in various settings for young people with whom I was familiar from previous experiences. From the many good examples of programmes, I was invited by educators from two different programmes. In both cases I was met with a very positive outlook and a whole-hearted welcome, each at their own workplace. The purpose of the initial meetings was to introduce myself, my PhD project and the overall aim. It was also to get an idea about the format, the aim, the goals set for the programmes, and the content of the programmes. During the meetings, both educators described how the programmes had developed during the years and the various obstacles they had faced in recent years, especially during the Corona pandemic (2020–2022) and the difficulties of not being able to run their programme as usual. There was also the challenge of not knowing the best way to move forward.

When the educators agreed to participate, the next step was to receive their signed consent forms so that I could attend and conduct observations during the sessions.

Informed written consent

Informed consent operates in a way to protect the interests of a person or a group; this includes that participants in a study being informed and understand the consequences of participating in the study, as well as comprehending that participation is on voluntary basis (Macrina, 2014). It was thus fundamental that I made sure to give all the participants sufficient information about the research project and the purpose of the observations and interviews, and to receive their signed consent (see appendix A, B) (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018; Clark et. al., 2021). This was important since I did not want to intentionally harm my participants in any way nor to jeopardize my study. However, when participants sign their name, there is a risk of their anonymity being removed (Israel, 2015).

Before attending the first session, the young participants in each programme had received information about my participation and the study, from the educators facilitating the programmes. As I attended the programmes, on both first occasions, I was asked to introduce myself, my PhD project and the implications it had for the participants. This also involved an invitation to the young participants to consider being interviewed at a later date (see appendix C). After my presentation I asked if they had any questions or concerns. The questions regarding my interest in the topic included why I wanted to explore and learn more about young people's experiences of leadership. There were also practical questions, such as how an interview is conducted, and where and what kind of questions I was going to ask. It was also stated that no sensitive data would be collected, or any notes taken that could identify the participants' identities. Furthermore, I asked the young participants if anyone objected or did not feel comfortable with me conducting observations, but there were none. Instead, I was reassured by the attending young participants that they had received enough information to consent. I received written consent from all the young participants and educators who chose to contribute through interviews on a voluntary basis (further descriptions will be given hereafter). I underlined that I was familiar with some of the educators from my previous engagements, thus it was essential that I gave them sufficient information about the study and the purpose of the observations and the interviews. Furthermore, as guided by Francis Macrina (2014), in order to ensure the safe record keeping, all the collected data, including personal records (a collection of tangible handwritten journals) together

with the received signed consent (documents) were stored in a locked and safe location.

The leadership training programmes

The sport leadership programme

In sport contexts, teaching and learning leadership can be understood through practical approaches such as developing leadership skills through engaging in sports both individually and in teams in order to promote skills like cooperation, communication, and other experiences, including making choices and decisions; these can be viewed as "life skills" (Gould & Voelker, 2013; Perkins & Noam, 2007). It can also be understood through programmes and activities that are explicitly designed for young people to practice and develop leadership skills (Bean & Forneris, 2016). The empirical data from the sport programme in this study is one such example.

The leadership programme had 20 young participants signed up for autumn 2022. The programme offered leadership training to those who were curious about learning more about leadership with the aim of developing leadership skills though connecting theory and practice. The importance of acknowledging differences and diversity was emphasized. There were no requirements to take part in the programme. However, although there were young participants who did not have any prior experience or knowledge of leadership, there were also participants who had experience of leading groups of children and other young people in various activities. The programme consisted of eight workshops that were conducted over a period of five months. Each workshop looked at different themes such as self-leadership, equality and inclusion, democracy, and values, conflict resolution, and communication. One of the goals of the programme was to develop social skills such as collaboration.

I attended five occasions during the programme, each lasting two hours. This underlines how the justification of my sample size at the time was based on the research questions and the judgment that the collected data held sufficient and relevant information as described by Malterud et al., (2016).

The mentorship programme at a higher education setting

Likewise, teaching and learning leadership in higher educational settings can be understood as being based on courses and programmes (Martinez et al., 2020; Meer et al., 2019; Skalicky et al., 2018), and through leadership programmes that offer students practical experiences, enabling them to develop various skills in

"real-life" contexts (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2018). The empirical data from the higher education setting in this study is an example of the latter.

The mentorship programme had 60 participants signed up for autumn 2022 and spring 2023. The programme aimed to foster social skills by developing relationships of trust between university students and children aged 8–12, with the goal of promoting positive development through an adult role model from the university. Meetings between the mentors and the mentees were held weekly and took place outside school hours and lasted approximately three hours over a period of eight months. The mentor supported their mentee in basic areas, such as language and educational guidance throughout the school year, but also, in expanding the child's social support networks outside the school though the organization of activities with other mentees and to help them to discover new leisure activities. During the period of mentorship, the mentors attend four leadership classes to learn about their role as a mentor and a leader.

I attended two occasions, each lasting two hours. Since my aim was not to evaluate nor distinguish between the two leadership programmes but instead to gain some insights by observing interactions and events from two different contexts with similar purposes, my judgment to attend only two occasions in the mentorship programme was based on the belief that the collected data held sufficient and relevant information needed to conduct an analysis.

Introducing the participants of this case study

The young participants

Before introducing the young participants, I will first give an overview of the various ways "young people" are defined and what I refer to as "young people".

When referring to "young people" there seems to be no standardized universal definition for adolescents or young adults. For example, one report (Perovic, 2016) focuses on how the concept of "youth" is defined across 47 European countries in terms of age, illustrates that though young people are in a specific social position, there is still no clear definition of who is a young person. This points out that this problem is due to "youth" representing a very heterogeneous category of diverse social, economic, cultural and educational backgrounds, interests, challenges, and needs. And although age can be a useful way of defining a group, the report nevertheless states that it is an insufficient indication of what characterizes a young person transitioning to adulthood. The report also demonstrates that there seems to be a consensus among European youth researchers that indicates that existing youth definitions are becoming less clear

due to recent adjustments in young people's life paths, especially regarding sociocultural patterns, geography and various policy settings. Nevertheless, the author (Perovic, 2016) states that national legislation defines the age brackets of a category labelled "youth", or "'young people" as being aged 15–24 or 15–29. Another report from the EU presenting a statistical summary of young people in Europe (Eurostat, 2022) defines young people in the age bracket of 15–29.

In studies of young people, researchers frequently refer to characteristics believed to be common for this age group. For example, Jeffery Arnett (2000) developed a theory of development from the late teens to the twenties with a focus on aged 18–25, stating that emerging adulthood is neither adolescence nor young adulthood. He argued that the use of "young adulthood" implies that adulthood has been achieved, yet he maintained that individuals in this age period have left behind the relative dependency of childhood and adolescence but have not yet taken on the responsibilities of adulthood, suggesting that the term "emerging" captures the dynamic, changeable, fluid quality of the period, since it is a time of exploration that generates uncertainty and instability with aspects such as changing jobs, relationships and places of residence more than in other age groups.

The mixed-method study by Klingenberg and colleagues (2022) has the aim of providing an overview of the basic characteristics of the young adults aged 16–30 and to discuss the findings based on existing theoretical assumptions about young adults. The authors highlight the critique of using the conceptual categories of "youth" and "young people" as being too unclear, and notes that the concept and theory of "emerging" adulthood is not applicable to all young people. For example, studies show that emerging adulthood exists only in cultures that delay the entry into adult roles and responsibilities, as seen in Western countries. Non-Western cultures may have either a shortened period of emerging adulthood or no emerging adulthood at all because these cultures tend to place greater emphasis on practices that lead to an earlier transition to adulthood (Badger et al., 2006). But then, Klingenberg et al. (2022) argue that there is still an increasing acceptance of emerging adulthood as a perspective on young people.

Consequently, although young or emerging adulthood is viewed by some as the period between the late teens and early twenties: aged 18–25 (Arnett, 2000; Higley, 2019; Scales et al., 2016) there are some researchers who include up to the age of 30 in their definition (Barlett, et al., 2020: Klingenberg et al., 2022). Still others emphasize that stage theories have never been able to explain individual transitions across the life course, and therefore stage theories, including the theory of emerging adulthood, should not be used (Arnett et al.,

2011). Although the concept of emerging adults is not used in this dissertation, the developmental perspective is applied to the young participants in the study, specifically, the age bracket of 20–30.

The young participants of this study are described as being within a unique life-cycle stage, characterized by when entering the job market and with identity issues (Klingenberg et al., 2022), including self-examination, cultivating a personal identity and one's own belief systems while also gaining independence (Higley, 2019).

A related issue that must be addressed is the study of generations, which is commonly used in US (Klingenberg et al., 2022; Twenge et al., 2012) and can provide valuable perspectives (Anderson et al., 2017; Laird, et al., 2015; Twenge, et al., 2010: Wisniewski, 2010). This dissertation however is in line with Karl Mannheim's (1952) idea that not all groups of people form a generation since there are always differences. Mannheim states that there is a need to consider some of the general aspects of this problem such as when addressing the social phenomenon of generation; it merely describes a representation of a specific kind of identity of location, which includes an "age group" within a certain "historical social process" (Mannheim, 1952, p. 292). Thus, cultural creations and accumulations are not accomplished by the same individuals but as a result of a continuous process of change through new age groups where no lines can be drawn between generations since "generations are in a state of constant interaction" (Mannheim, 1952, p. 301).

And so, the concept of "location" has a central significance since one's ideas and concepts have similarities and are bound within one's social environment and community, which form "generation-units" (Mannheim, 1952 p. 306). This emphasizes that not every generation's "locations nor age group creates or evolves new collective and distinctive ideas, interpretations or principles" (Mannheim, 1952, p. 309). This means that whether a new generational style emerges every year, every thirty years, every hundred years, or whether it emerges rhythmically at all, it is still dependent on the pace of changes, the social, cultural process, including through "the agency of the economy or of one or the other 'ideological' spheres" (Mannheim, 1952, p. 310).

I would like to point out that I do not distinguish between the young participants through comparisons and categorization such as gender or socioeconomic and/or cultural circumstance or how these influence their values and understandings, but rather as stated, the developmental perspective is applied in the study, specifically those aged 20–30.

Presenting the young participants in this study with pseudonyms

In order to introduce the young participants in this study while preserving anonymity, I have given a pseudonym to each participant. Pseudonyms are commonly used in qualitative research to preserve anonymity; it is a technique that allows data to be de-identified without being de-personalized, by removing all personal identifiable information such as name, location or information relating to occupation. Yet, replacing first names that have personal, social, cultural and symbolic meanings was not easy since choosing fictitious names for the participants can still colour or affect the reader's understanding (Heaton, 2022). The young participants consisted of four young women and four young men in their mid- to late twenties and were given randomly chosen names. Carole and Elsa were assistant coaches at a sports club; Felicia and Diane were exchange students. Felicia was from Northern Europe while Diana was from North Africa. Albert was an exchange student from Eastern Europe while Amir, who also was an exchange student, was from Asia. Leo was an undergraduate while Oliver was a recent graduate.

The educators

Before introducing the educators, I will first give an overview of what I refer to as educators.

As described in earlier chapter, educators teaching leadership are called "leadership educators". This in turn refers to teachers and instructors in higher education who teach leadership courses or integrate leadership concepts into other subjects. But this also refers to practitioners such as professionals and coaches who engage and teach in leadership activities, training and programmes in their communities (Friesen et al., 2024; Jenkins & Owen, 2016; Priest & Seemiller, 2018). Hence, educators teaching leadership can be found in a variety of settings such as, civic organizations (sport clubs), schools, colleges, student programmes in higher education, community development programmes, workplaces, military training, and religious groups (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Huber, 2002; Jenkins & Owen, 2016). In this study I refer the participants who are practitioners and professionals in the field of leadership and hold positions as managers and coaches from various settings, as educators.

Presenting the educators participating in this study with pseudonyms

The educators who participated in this study were, as stated, connected to the activities and programmes, yet they represent different actors in the community:

from the municipality, private sector, civil society, and the academic community. Just like the young participants, the purpose of interviewing them was to collect information about how they perceive and experience leadership. Information about their practices as educators in activities and programmes for young people was also relevant. As in the case of the young participants, the educators were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity (Heaton, 2022).

Four of the educators held positions as managers and had different roles in their own organizations, yet they were all engaged in various leadership programmes designed for young people, giving lectures, facilitating workshops and activities. Julia was a manager who has worked as an HR manager at an international organization for the past 20 years. Beatrice and Alex were project managers with over 10 years of experience in the public sector. Anna was a manager with over 30 years of experience as a leader in various educational settings. The other three educators were coaches from different sports contexts: Erik had over 20 years of coaching experience while Louise and Sarah had over 10 years of coaching experience; all three were engaged in leadership training programmes for young people.

I have chosen not to give any further introduction to Ayla who was an educator during one of the sessions as she did not have possibility to participate in an interview. However, I received her consent to present her story based on my field notes from the observations conducted during the session. Ayla's story is presented using pseudonym and all identifiable markers have been removed from the descriptions. Furthermore, though in many of the cases I refer to the educators with the pseudonyms, there are still several times I do not refer to any name, in order to ensure the educators' anonymity, since some descriptions may contain identifiable information and markers.

Generating qualitative data

Observations

Participant observation is a common form of observational research and involves a researcher directly observing participants in their context and recording behaviours in as much detail as possible with the aim of developing some insights (Clark et al., 2021). My starting point for generating data was through observations for the purpose of getting an overall understanding of how leadership education designed for young people can be carried out, and to get

some insights by observing interactions and events from two different contexts with similar purposes: to offer young people opportunities to develop as leaders.

I collected qualitative data based on short accounts from the programmes that were conducted in various sites, a form of micro-ethnography according to Johan Alvehus and Lucia Crevani (2022) that focuses on the details of interactions and where they occur (space). This way of conducting observations allowed me to observe interaction sequences, enabling me to develop certain understandings. It required me to be open to that which appeared in my observations, since I was part of the context. Simply put, I observed, listened, and felt, in order to understand and make sense without interacting with the participants. Yet, it was not easy to remain unnoticeable, and I am aware that my presence may have affected the participants.

The observations took place from September to November 2022 and included a total of seven occasions, each lasting two hours. The choice of not attending every occasion was based on the judgment, as described, that sufficient and relevant information to conduct an analysis had been attained. This was rich information that could give me an overall understanding of how the programmes were conducted as well as insights from observing the participants' interactions (Malterud et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). However, as Katrine Fangen (2013) describes, being "the complete observer" was challenging since it was difficult to keep track and take relevant field notes, and gain insights from interactions and events. For example, in my field notes I write during one of my observations:

> I am so unsure, am I writing down everything I need to? Am I missing anything? I am trying, but I am not sure (field notes, autumn, 2022).

The qualitative data was collected during the observations was recorded using handwritten notes; the sessions were not recorded by audio or film, which Clark et al., (2021) suggests are more commonly used when conducting research in social sciences. Moreover, for ethical reasons such as maintaining anonymity, and/or making participants uncomfortable I did not take any photographs (except for a few PowerPoint slides as a reminder of the themes, which I deleted after I no longer required them). Although I realize that this choice was rather limiting, given that I view myself as somewhat of a novice in the research field, taking field notes reminded me clearly that I was not detached from the various settings, but instead was part of them, as suggested by Hellesø, et al. (2015). The observations also produced some scribbles such as reflective notes after each observation.

As there are no standard rules on taking field notes (what to include and what not), I used some basic guidelines as suggested by Coffey (2018) during the observations, in order to be able to provide detailed field notes and as a reminder of the contexts and training sessions. For example, I made notes of the settings, such as objects and artefacts, but also sensory impressions such as sound, smell, feelings and so on. Furthermore, I made notes on what was said and wrote descriptions of the use of language with some details of conversations and other kinds of interactions, both verbal and non-verbal. Lastly, some details of actions, interactions, and behaviours, which focused on the observable, including an overall timeline of what happened, when, and how.

Interviews

Collecting qualitative data through interviews is probably the most widely used method in research as it offers flexibility and has dynamic features, but most importantly, it is focused on the participants and how they think and feel about the issues being studied (Clark et al., 2021). Thus, the choice of semi-structured interviews was based on the fact that I had a rather clear focus of my research topic: I wanted to understand the participants' perceptions and experiences of leadership and leadership development. This meant that I prepared and formulated my questions in a rather general manner and did not specify them in advance. I put together an interview guide based on Brinkman & Kvale's (2018) descriptions. The interview guide (see appendix D, E) provided flexibility since the questions were framed in a rather open way in order to assist the participants in giving somewhat detailed answers. However, I also diverged slightly from my questions or changed the order when certain circumstances arose. The questions were also formulated in a way that made it be easy for the participants to understand them, as well as being relevant to my research questions.

Thus, my focus was on the participants' views and beliefs on leadership and whether I would be able to find any patterns in their responses based on the main interview questions: What is a "good" leader? How do you view (perceive) your own development as a leader?

The interviews took place from November 2022 to June 2023 and were conducted in various settings since each participant was able to choose their own setting for the interview, thus ensuring the participants felt comfortable and familiar with their setting. It was also important that the interviews took place in a quiet location, with little distraction and no worry of being overheard. This choice meant that I had to adapt and fit into different locations, exploring these in a more unpredictable manner, but it also offered me flexibility and positioning

in terms of the relationships with participants I interacted with at different locations as Alvehus and Cervani (2022) explain.

Conducting the interviews

In addition to the interview guide, I also followed some general steps proposed by Brinkman and Kvale (2018) as well as by Clark et al., (2021). I started the interviews by briefly talking about the purpose of the interview and why I had invited them to participate, underlining that I wanted to keep the information brief since I did not want to influence them with my own thoughts and views. I also reminded the participants of their engagement and confirmed again that they felt comfortable, as they had given their consent to participate. Lastly, I asked if they had any questions before starting the interview.

As the case of collecting data from observations, collecting data from qualitative interviews are nearly also always recorded, by audio recording. Yet, I chose to collect the data by taking handwritten notes in a separate "interview journal" and transcribing these from my journal at a later date, as described by Rutakumwa et al (2020). A main reason for this was that I was familiar with taking handwritten notes during interviews from previous experiences and practices. However, during the interviews I also noted that practically all the participants commented that they preferred the way I had recorded the interview by taking handwritten notes. Some also explained after the interviews that note-taking had offered them space to share their thoughts without feeling the need to hesitate or interrupt themselves. They could also talk at a slower pace since they knew I was taking notes. Moreover, since I had my eyes mostly on my notes this made some participants more at ease. Some previous studies (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Clark, et al., 2021; Frankenburg, 1993) show that the use of recording equipment can make some interviewees nervous. Thus, taking handwritten notes is a way of capturing information without the risk of data being recorded without the interviewee's consent. However, I am aware that I may have missed some key points or left out some nuances and details, or may have misinterpreted what was said by not audio recording the interviews. Furthermore, I informed the participants that during the interviews that if they felt uncertain about anything, they could give me a sign or tell me to not include something that they were about to share, without having to interrupt their own sense-making of their experiences.

During the interview I asked questions in different ways: there were some introductory questions that were related to my interview guide, and also follow-up questions to allow the participants to elaborate upon their answers. However,

I mostly acknowledged their sharing by nodding. At times I took brief pauses, and on other occasions I noticed that the participant did likewise. This gave them time to reflect on, and/or expand an answer, something I felt was really helpful during some of the interviews. At times I also found myself probing for better descriptions, yet did not feel the need for direct questions as I did not want to influence the direction of the interview too much; I was aware that the course of the interview should keep to a certain structure. At the end of some of the interviews, I sensed that there was some unease, and I realized it was from participants who had been too open about personal and emotional experiences. Recording the interview by handwritten notes made it easier for me to go through my notes and make sure I had not included any sensitive material. Some interviews ended with feelings of emptiness, as I recalled how vivid the discussions had been, and then suddenly it was all over. All the interviews were concluded by me asking if there were any further questions or if there was anything else they wanted to bring up before we finished: this was a good choice, since I gained a lot of interesting insights in this way.

Taking notes required that I actively listened and stayed alert throughout the interviews. It was also important to stay flexible and non-judgmental. Thus, the balance between being active but not too intrusive was difficult, especially as I needed to be open, not only to what the participants were saying, but also to their body language, which could indicate unease about a certain question, an awareness I gained from Brinkman and Kvale (2018). The interviews lasted for approximately 45–60 minutes, except for one interview, which was merely 30 minutes as the participant had to leave earlier than expected. Most interviews were conducted in Swedish, except for three interviews that were conducted in English.

Focus group interviews

A focus group usually consists of six to ten participants led by a moderator, either the researcher themselves or a person associated with the researcher who sits with the participants and is in charge of asking the participants questions, probing for answers, and facilitating discussion between the participants (Prosser et al., 2024). This is a non-directed way of interviewing with the purpose of encouraging various views on an issue through discussions (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018). Thus, I planned and conducted two focus group interviews for the purpose of gaining some insights from the participants' experiences of leadership and leadership development. The focus group interviews took place during December 2022. There were some practical considerations when preparing the interview,

questions like how many groups I should have, how many in each group, the role of the moderator, what and how to ask questions, how to begin and end the discussions and finally, how, and what I would record (by hand) during the sessions, questions that are discussed by Clark et al. (2021) and Cohen et al. (2011).

I chose to have two groups, one with young participants and the other group with educators involved in leadership programmes and activities designed for young people. The choice of only two groups was to be able to ensure that I could find enough participants. Each group consisted of eight participants, including me and the moderator (a researcher connected to my project). However, when planning the focus group interviews, I deliberately invited more participants as there is always the issue of people not showing up for various reasons, and it is impossible to control this. For example, although I had invited participants from both programmes, the six participants who did show up were the young participants who had already signed up for individual interviews. Nonetheless, smaller groups worked very well since the participants had a lot to say on the research topic and it was easier to follow the discussions and to encourage all the participants to speak even though there were those who were less active in the discussions.

Conducting the focus group interviews

At the start the moderator thanked the participants for coming and invited them to introduce themselves: this was followed by an overall description and the aim of the research. There was also a short overview of key ethical issues, including informed consent and the right to withdraw. The participants were informed that the session would be documented by me as the researcher taking notes and that I would do this in order to include some of the data in my analysis and that this meant that all data would be handled confidentially and be anonymized. Yet in both groups the participants already knew each other from various contexts and so confidentiality and anonymity were obviously already compromised. The choice of questions were general ones in order to stimulate the discussions.

I realized that having a moderator was important as she identified any differences of opinion early on and could explore these with the participants as well as the influences that could lie behind them. As I was aware that focus groups often feature a mixture of complementary or argumentative interactions (Clark et al., 2021), this allowed me as the researcher to see the tensions associated with people's beliefs and ideas regarding the complex concept of leadership. However, it also made me wonder if the moderator influenced the participants' responses

(either intentionally or unintentionally). For example, Prosser et al. (2024) point out that there are issues to be aware of such as the moderator asking leading questions, expressing personal opinions, or using non-verbal cues to suggest approval or disapproval, especially since the focus groups were designed as more free-flowing conversations.

Nevertheless, focus groups offer significant opportunities for investigating research questions collectively (Clark et al., 2021), even though I experienced less control than during the individual interviews. Although the moderator was able to skilfully lead the discussion and include the participants by giving the participants quite a lot of freedom, thus allowing the discussion to range as widely possible, while at the same time moving the group on collectively, I found the method challenging. It was difficult to find the balance as to what extent I should allow participants to "take over" the running of the focus group. It was not easy to keep balance between control and spontaneity. Some participants for example, had a great deal to say about what "good" leadership is, and though this was included in the discussion topics, my notes show that I did not record everything that was said. This suggests that although I was seeking spontaneous responses, I would have preferred more controlled discussions to be able to capture everything that was said. The participants may have influenced each other and may have expressed views that were expected rather than their own personal views. This was something I noted, for example, when I interviewed the participants individually at a later date: they all expressed views that were not mentioned during the focus group discussions. Though this kind of interactive context may offer a sort of guided discovery, it may also leave out the individual's viewpoint or miss out on valuable knowledge from participants who are quieter or more passive in a group setting (Clark et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 2011).

Field notes/research journal

Keeping an ongoing journal on my experiences and reflections has been part of my own practice and learning throughout the years, ensuring me narratives and concrete traces of my own thoughts, concepts, and actions, and also teaching me to have an explorative outlook with regards to my own concepts. This is a practice that can be related to Donald Schön's concept of reflecting-in-and-on-actions (1983) and also aligns well with qualitative research. As I was aiming to access experiences in real-life contexts, my own presence and reflexivity with regard to the role and impact I have in the field under study have been crucial. The practice of keeping a research journal is sometimes used as a memory aid in social research so that researchers can keep track of what they are doing at different

stages, which has some similarities to the field notes of ethnographers that are based on their observations, one of the processes of ethnography that Coffey (2018) describes. I find the way that ethnographers take notes is rather similar to mine – sometimes briefly and quickly after seeing or hearing something interesting, and sometimes in a very detailed way to record feelings about something. I was careful to take notes that were clear enough, so I that I did not have to ask at a later date: what did I write or mean? It was important to include initial analysis about what I saw, heard, or thought, all of which I find very interesting. Some of these accounts will be part of my analysis.

Besides my own reflections it has also been important for me to include some notes from various informal conversations with social actors in and of the field of leadership. I also include sketches that to try to make sense of my own thinking. For example, during a meeting with a leader at an organization, we discussed youth unemployment, and how hard it is to find a job without having personal connections. The leader scribbled some notes to try to describe some personal experiences as a leader. With their consent I made some notes to remind me of our discussion. After our meeting I wrote in my research journal:

> Despite all the competence, education, and experiences (the leader) had, it was not good enough, to "get the right job" as a manager/leader. (The leader) "got in" finally through a personal connection (through a leader with a good reputation in the community). The leader did advance and develop thereafter, stating that it was because of "my upbringing and a safe home environment that gave me the confidence and courage to stand against challenges". How do we encourage young people in our community? Role models? Basic skills such as accountability, self-leadership? To be confident? Does a leader need confidence? (field notes, 2023)

Besides learning more about my own values, interests, priorities, and myself, keeping a journal has also enabled me to keep track of my own learning process. For example, this account describes a reflection on theory:

> Is this something I need to think about? Absolutely! The theory I employ shapes how I interpret evidence […] Choice of theory? based on how I perceive reality/the world/my daily experiences. I must remember when perceiving daily experiences, to be aware of complexities and multi-dimensions, suggesting I must combine theories (research journal, 2023).

Furthermore, in order to visualize my thinking and understanding, I take photographs, enabling me to explore the gaps that exist in my thinking, as "images of thought": pathways I may not have seen before; to create new thoughts from another perspective, saying something in the world forces me to think differently, as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2011). For example, how our environment influences and changes us (Figure 5), how and authoritarian leader can make a person feel small (Figure 6). Also, the idea that what is important is not what I look at but knowing how I see – Sapere Vedere (Flores & Braker, 2013) and what I see (Berger, 2008) (Figure 7).

Figure 5

Illustrating the influence of our environment

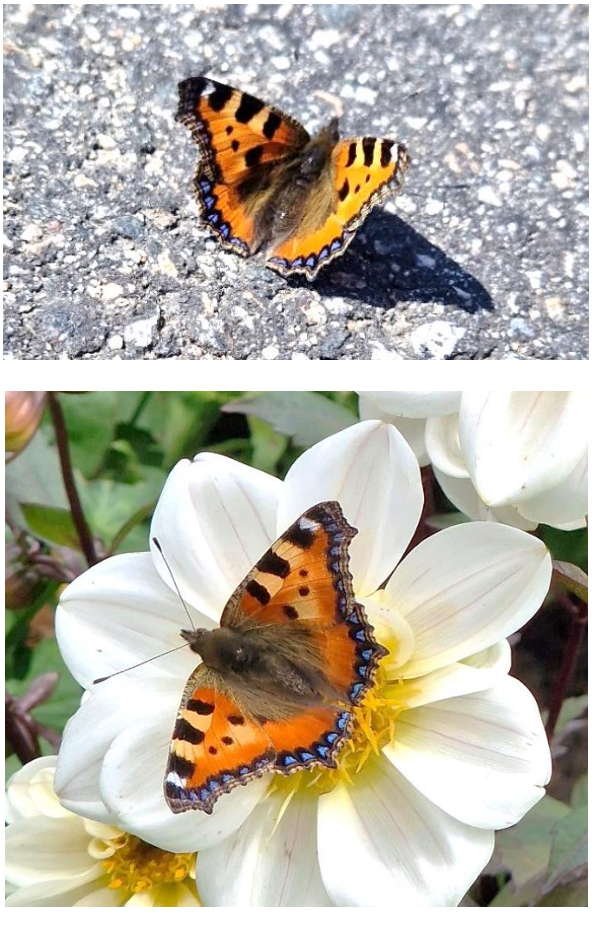
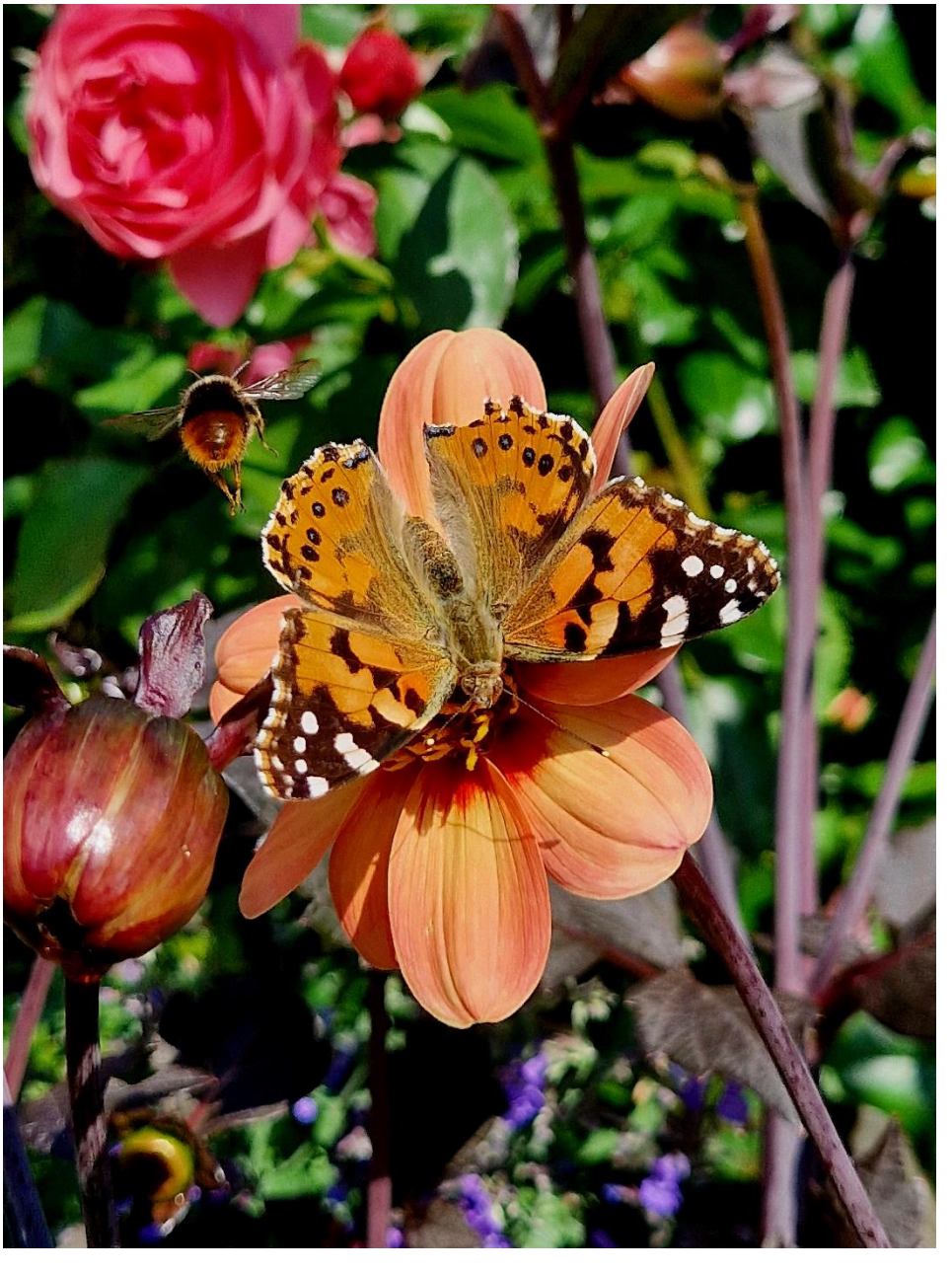


Figure 6

Illustrating authoritarian leadership style

Figure 7

Illustrating ways of seeing



Thus, daily insights and questions prompted me to move forward but also enabled me to go back and follow thoughts and ideas that had not made much sense at a previous time; this means that I was continuously aware of how my understanding from previous experiences had changed as well as the reflections on my research process. Hence, I find that my own research journal (Figure 8) is a work-in-progress that I have been able to include in my analysis and reporting. It has provided a framework for me for understanding my own knowing and experiencing throughout the research process, as described by scholars (Grey & Sinclair, 2006).

Figure 8

Research journals

An aspect I want to add in relation to keeping journal is that of the importance of writing by hand. Although I write on my computer for various reasons, including when presenting texts, I have learned throughout the years that writing by hand (with a pen) offers me the freedom to express myself without any disruptions; in a way, my thinking is somehow disrupted when typing. Writing by hand helps me to access thoughts and become aware of what I am thinking.

> I keep forgetting I am not in my head, I am in my pen. I have not been able to express my thoughts because writing on the computer has prevented my words from coming out (research journal, 2024).

I often find myself writing and drawing mind maps to visualize my layered thinking and experiences which are rather difficult to explain. Furthermore, I have found explanations from studies that illustrate how writing by hand offers a freedom to think and connect to the brain (van der Velden, 2023). A study in neuroscience also demonstrated that the act of writing by hand stimulates the brain to connect motor activities with cognitive processes, this in turn enhances neural activities, which is particularly beneficial for learning, creativity and memory. This suggests that writing by hand activates a broader network of the brain, while typing engages fewer neural circuits, resulting in more passive cognitive engagement (Marano et al., 2025).

Thus, my research process, including analysis, has involved taking notes, writing reflectively and drawing mind maps (Figures 9–12).

Figure 9

How I visualized my thinking of the various theories and concepts of leadership, which helped me see how they interconnect and overlap

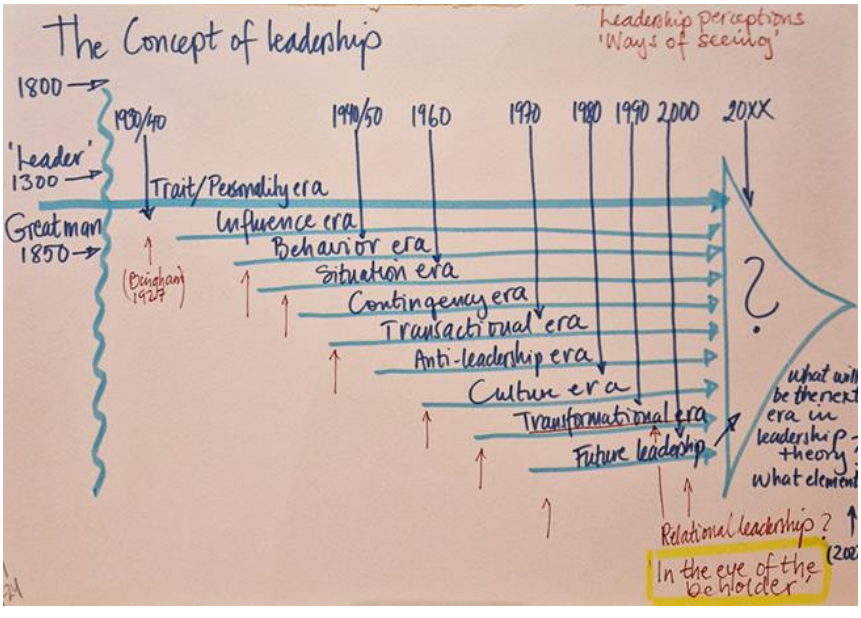


Figure 10

My thinking about the way the educators perceived their own leadership development in comparison to the young participants. Based on notes as a way if gaining additional insights

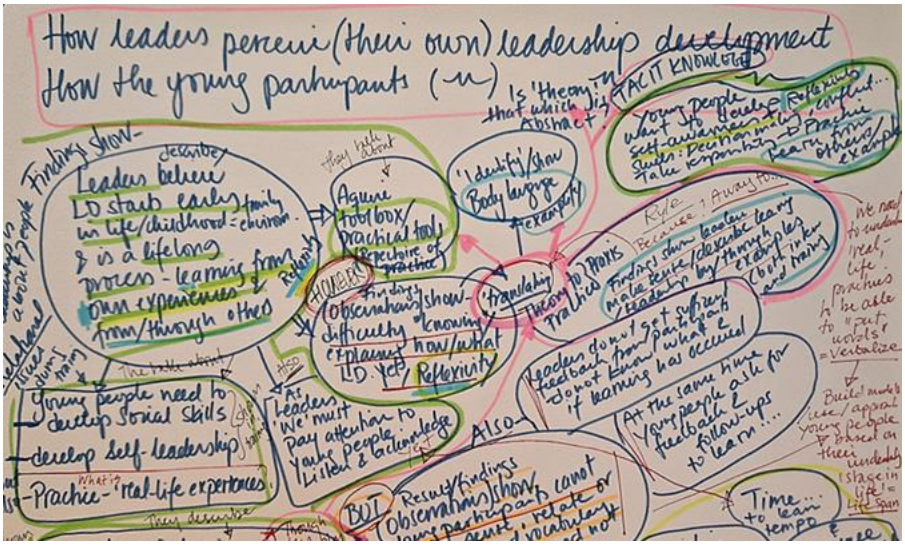


Figure 11

Added perspective of my findings from the observations

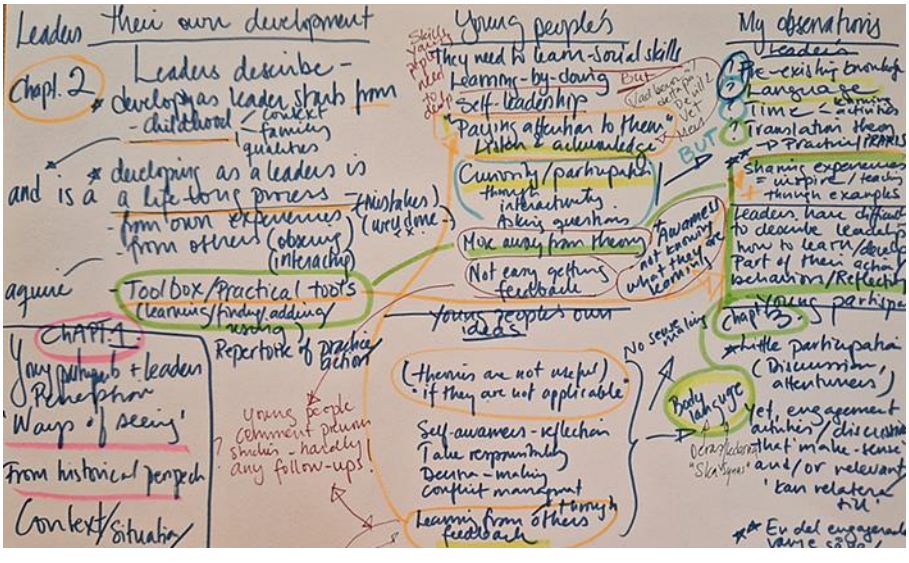
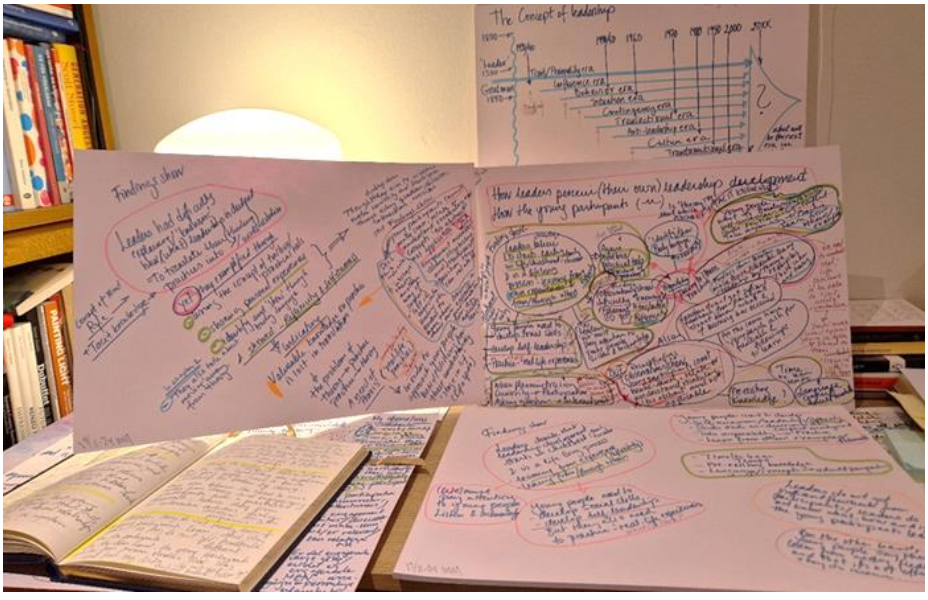


Figure 12

Ways of connecting separate thoughts, concepts and findings to get an overview of the findings



Analytical work process

Reminded of Hannah Arendt's (2018) view that the world is a common meeting ground for all, and yet everybody sees and hears from different positions, I chose to approach the collected qualitative data by conducting a reflexive thematic analysis, based on the work of Braun and Clark (2023; 2024; Joy et al., 2023).

The analytical work process involves producing findings by keeping track, describing and making the analytical process visible in its multitude of contradictory, shifting directions. There are a variety of analytic techniques used by researchers to produce an understanding of rich datasets. One of the more common techniques is that of thematic analysis, which involves the identification of recurring patterns that are presented by researchers as central statements or themes. Although there are various ways of conducting thematic analysis, these are often described as the general steps taken to identify themes, built upon codes identified in the collected data. Codes refers to the actual "words" (keywords) or "short phrases" that are used to indicate important concepts or ideas in the data.

Thus, generating themes based on codes provides a basis for a theoretical understanding of the data, according to Clark et al. (2021).

Thematic analysis is not aligned to a particular theoretical framework but can rather be understood as a technique where themes are formulated inductively and thus it is exploratory and data-driven: themes are derived from the data itself without the influence of pre-existing theories (Joy et al., 2023). This means that the choice of using a thematic approach was an evident one, as the study design is that of an exploratory case study, approached inductively.

The six phases of Braun and Clark's *reflexive thematic analysis* (2022a; 2022b; 2024; Joy et al., 2023) inspired me in my analytical process. Here, a choice is involved in identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data set (Byrne, 2022; Pearson et al., 2025). Furthermore, Braun's and Clark's updated analysis process from their earlier version (2006) highlights that, although reflexive thematic analysis follows the six steps they originally outlined, it takes another point of departure, instead of saying that the themes "emerge" from the data, they highlight how the researcher's reflexivity and perspective shapes the analysis.

The process offers also continuous interplay between theory and material through reflexivity since the process involves using different theoretical lenses to help understand the data from different perspectives and to come closer to complexities (Neubauer et al., 2019). Nevertheless during the analytical process I tried to be sensitive and to not include too much of my own voice, but to centre the voices of the participants, offering fewer partial and distorted descriptions and understandings (Harding, 1989).

The stages of analysis

One of the main strengths of qualitative research is the depth and richness data it produces, yet there is the issue of it not always being a straightforward way when analysing the generated data since there are many ways of approaching the generated data. I chose to approach my analysis from a pragmatic form of reasoning, seeking to understand something that is unclear and trying to explain this by using the most likely explanation, switching back and forth from the generated qualitative data to the social world and the literature. This means the data shaped the succeeding steps in the analytical process as described by scholars (Clark et al., 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). Although the following demonstrates the steps taken during the analysis, my process of analysing the data started while collecting the data. For example, in my field notes I can observe the interplay

between taking notes from observations while at the same time analysing what I was observing. As the following account illustrates:

> Something is different, almost the opposite, the engagement of the participants is different; they express their thoughts and feelings. The questions and comments are about, "feeling", "caring", "talking", "being validated", "being listened to", there are participants who have not talked in previous sessions, suddenly they are now talking (field notes from observations, 2022).

Getting familiar with the qualitative data

I started off by organizing my qualitative data and making sure that all handwritten notes were transcribed to the computer. After printing out the transcripts from the observations, interviews, and my research journal, I started reading and re-reading these in order to become familiar with the qualitative data. While writing further notes alongside the transcript without imposing an interpretation on the dataset, I reflected based on certain questions such as: What is happening? What are the participants saying? What views do they appear to agree or disagree with? What experiences do they have in common and being described? When the process of reading and re-reading the whole transcript was complete, I chose to continue by first focusing only on the data generated from the interviews. This was important, since simplifying the process helped me to manage my data, but also, to ensure greater truthfulness and consistency, Nowell et al. point out (2017). After my first review and study of my interview transcript I colour-coded parts of the text by hand. This offered me a better overview and made it easier to follow the text. This process was repeated with the data covering the observations and my research journals. A significant step when sorting the material was to focus on the purpose of the study, while being aware that as I was offered interpretations from context-specific perspectives, it was crucial to remember what was important and relevant for the participants when they shared their knowledge and experiences, showing respect through the way I interpret the information given to me.

Coding the material

A key aspect in the initial steps was to identify some relevant patterns in relation to my research questions, a process where I was trying to understand what the material was trying to "say" to me, since some parts were highlighted more than others. This process was difficult since it involved my preconceptions, especially in the preliminary stages when I had difficulties in seeing the various plural and

interlinked perspectives. Thus, the data immersion stage in thematic analysis is not only about documenting everything but also about identifying significant information relevant to the research objectives (Clark et al., 2021). I organized, described and categorized, focusing (again) first on the transcripts covering the interviews in an "open way" based on research questions in order to gradually refine my notes and generate initial codes, this included collecting codes (key words and short phrases) though a closer examination of the data in order to create initial possible themes. This was a way of segmenting the entire data to capture the data's core message, significance, and ideas, a process of simplifying complex textual data by transforming it into a theoretical form, which can assist in identifying elements related to the research questions (Joy et al., 2023).

In order to get a better overview I also separated the transcript based on my research questions: one part consisted of descriptions covering what the participants said about what "good" leadership and important leadership abilities and qualities are. The second part was their views on leadership development. An additional separation of the data was the information covering the leadership programmes and the educators' information relating to their practices. Having done this, I was able to first generate a total of 32 codes covering how "good" leadership is viewed by the participants such as caring, respect, responsiveness, commitment, gentle, non-judgmental, reliable, daring, accountable, decisive, fair and self-reflective as seen in Example 1.

Example 1

Generated codes with descriptive sentences by each participant

Leadership abilities stated	Sentences describing "good" leadership	Codes	Category
Honesty Trustworthy Reliable Modest Self-reflective Decisive Accountable	"…takes people seriously". "Sees everyone…sees the needs and motivations of the group and the individual". "Sometimes one has to say things to others even though it is difficult…to adjust and not ignore things".	Respect Responsive Caring Seeing Listening Daring	Honest Acknowledging Reliable Decisive Courageous

I listed the codes together with chosen sentences in order to create categories and get a better understanding of what each participant had expressed. The first column (Example 1) shows the abilities and qualities a participant stated during the interview. The second column shows examples of sentences/phrases describing "good" leadership by the same participant. The third column is the code I chose to represent column 1 and 2. This highlights that the more I studied columns 1 and 2 representing all the 15 participants' views and beliefs, the more re-evaluation and alterations were required, while generating the codes (column 3), especially since I had the issue of translation as the interviews were conducted in Swedish (except for three interviews which were conducted in English). This means that the data analysis was conducted using the original language: Swedish. To ensure that the themes generated from the translated materials were accurate, I had to read and re-read in their original form. Also, in order to present quotes or certain words and concepts, translations were required, which was a challenging process since I wanted to avoid misinterpretations and any unconscious preconceived notions during the translation of concepts that were not directly translatable, from the source; these are issues raised by McKenna (2022).

Example 2

Adding descriptions to codes

Descriptive codes (keyword translated from Swedish	NE – meaning (translated from Swedish)	NE synonyms (translated from Swedish)	Category
Listening	To consciously use one's sense of hearing. To try to recognise and understand what someone is saying.	To pay attention to To care	Acknowledge Based on – To pay attention to= acknowledge =show appreciation, support affirm (NE)

The process of searching for the meaning of the chosen codes involved giving each code a description of what it means, which helped me to get a better understanding of each code and to ensure that their meaning could be connected to the selected sentences as seen in Example 2: first I focused on the sentences I had selected such as "to take someone seriously". This sentence can express an act of respect that relates to the second sentence "sees everyone… sees the needs

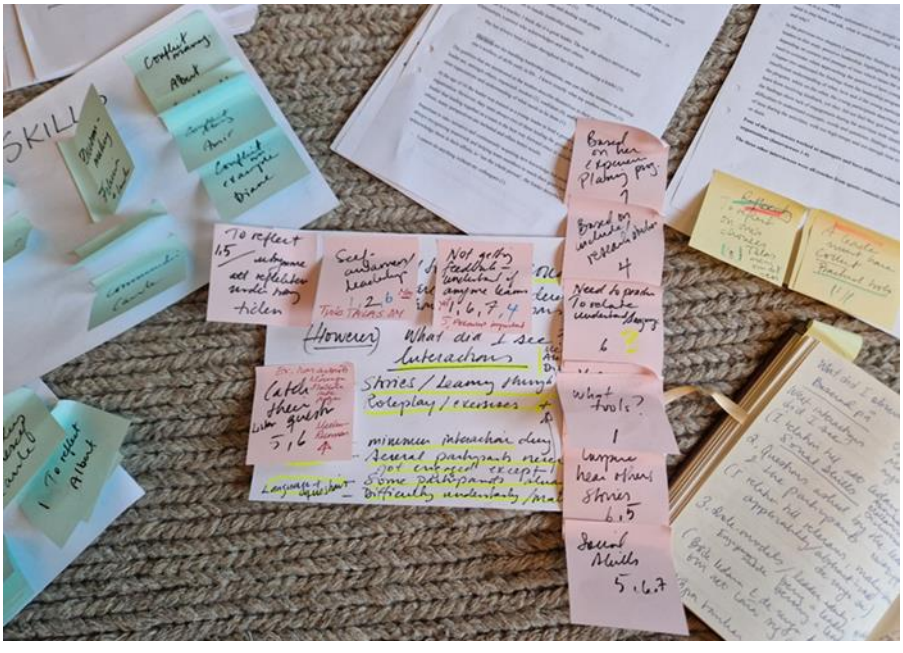
and motivations of the group and the individual", a description that can mean that a "good" leader shows responsiveness and caring. The last sentence "sometimes one has to say things to others even though it is difficult…to adjust and not ignore things". This shows that a "good" leader is perceived to be someone who dares to take certain actions. Furthermore, two keywords that were reoccurring in this participant's accounts were "seeing" and "listening", and I therefore listed them as well. In order to determine their meaning, I identified that the verb "listening", which includes "to recognize and understand what someone is saying". The next step was finding synonyms for "listening". I listed, "to pay attention to", and "caring". The synonym for "to pay attention to" was "acknowledge", which in turn meant "to show appreciation", "to support" and "to affirm". This reasoning helped me to generate eight categories, each given a descriptive meaning. The colour-coded categories were: committed, decisive, clear communication, courageous, acknowledges, trustworthy, accountable, kind. This procedure was repeated with the transcripts covering the second part of the interview transcripts, which focused on the research questions about leadership development.

During this phase I also coded the observations and the research journals in order to initiate the process of identifying patterns and connections between the overall data. While studying and coding my research journals (Figure 13), I also discovered concepts and ideas that I had written in my research journals, which made me wonder whether my own thinking was influencing what I was seeing, or not. When I found the following account in my research journal (2023) I realized that, on the contrary, it was perhaps my fear of influencing the analysis that had hindered me from seeing:

> I can see it! Where? Between the lines? Dialogue. I have been so careful not to be influenced by my own experiences and ideas, to construct something that isn't there that I have missed it. After a lot of reading and reflecting I realize that it is there with neon lights! Dialogue! The relational perspective in leadership, how could I have missed this? The simplest acts have become the hardest for people. The world has never been so connected, yet, at the same time, disconnected (research journal, 2023).

Figure 13

The process of coding and generating preliminary themes



Example 3

Meaning added to codes

Category	Meaning	Theme
Acknowledge	To pay attention, be responsive, to recognise and listen to others. Understand differences and that everyone holds a unique perspective. To support others and not just with words but through caring actions.	Putting people first ”Basically, putting people first, to acknowledge and enable people to reach their potential” (Albert).

Generating themes based on codes

The coding process enabled me to generate preliminary themes; adding a quote to make sense and support a theme, as seen in Example 3. In order to improve trustworthiness of the findings, I reconsidered the codes (keywords) by going back to the relevant quotations to select further codes for further examination. Going through the interview transcripts, I generated possible themes that portrayed significant characteristics of the interview material that I found relevant. I did this by marking and organizing certain codes and extracting sentences for the analysis. This procedure was repeated with the transcripts covering the observations and the research journals as well.

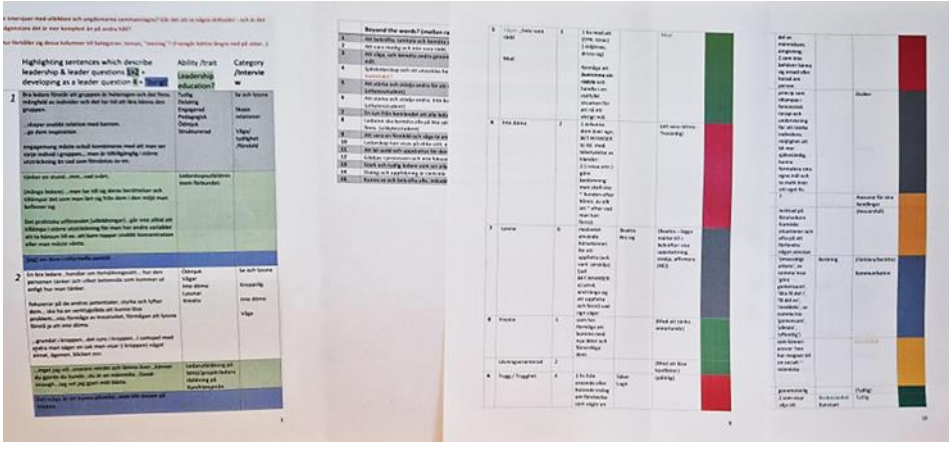
Identifying themes

After having identified the codes, categories and preliminary themes, I was able to develop significant wider patterns of meaning that covered the entire data transcript, and to look for relevant material to each possible theme and review the viability of each theme. This included checking and reviewing the possible themes against the entire transcript to determine if the themes resonated with the material. During this phase I divided the coded transcripts covering the young participants from the educators to make it easier to follow quotes and make sense of them.

I noticed the need to further develop the themes, which meant splitting up or combining some themes. However, when trying to make sense of each category and preliminary themes I ended up in a "rabbit hole" (Carroll, 2021), lost in a complex situation of not knowing what I was looking for, given the various intertwined connections of ideas. In order to manage the situation, I started reading and deep re-reading of the transcripts in order to reassess any inconsistencies in the previous analysis. In this way, I organized the codes again into meaningful categories in order to identify patterns and relationships. By doing this I moved from a detailed analysis of codes and categories to a more abstract interpretation by setting new themes. This means that the themes were created were based on my interpretations instead of merely recurring elements and patterns. This was a necessary process for linking the themes to the research questions (Figure 14).

Figure 14

An overview of codes (including quotes matching), meaning, and finalization of themes



Finalizing themes and conceptualizing

Before the final analysis, I returned to my research journals and previous notes. This led to a renaming of the themes, the refining of thematic content, and the addition of context to the findings. It was important for validating my interpretations, yet it was difficult to balance between the way I used the quotes (not too short) and not making the material too fragmented so as to fit with the themes. The refining and final process involved developing a detailed analysis of each possible theme throughout the data in order to conceptualize my findings based on the identified patterns (Braun & Clark, 2022b; 2024). This was done so that I could locate my analysis in relation to existing knowledge and the wider context it aims to be part of. Thus, I created mental representations of my data in order to look for structures or links from the specific to broader, which included my past experiences together with present understandings (Margolis & Laurence, 2015). For example, as seen in Example 4, the category "acknowledges", which the theme "putting people first" was generated from was connected to previous research that highlighted how leaders make others feel, and the importance of acknowledgment. But I also added the kind of leadership that this theme describes.

Though I have described these steps in order, with each step building on the previous one, the analytical work process has been more of a moving back-and-forth in order to be able to make sense of my material. A significant realization

during this process was that as I entered the research field, I had certain preconceptions of what "good" leadership is and what leadership development includes. During the analysis process, the more I learned about each participant's views and experiences of leadership, the more I could make sense of the whole transcript. This led to a sort of revision of my own understanding and judgments of leadership as I gather new information. Hence, by understanding the parts of the transcripts, I achieved new understanding. This highlights that each unique experience of leadership was meaningful. The parts informed the whole and the whole informed the parts. Consequently, every time I returned to the analysis process, following the same pattern, I learned new things from the transcript, and my own understanding developed as well during the process.

Example 4

Themes connected to previous research

Descriptions relate to Transformational leadership, Servant leadership, Ethical leadership Connecting to previous research A recent study explored the meaning of leadership and examined the perspective of adolescents and young adults about the concept and experiences of leadership . One central theme that emerged was that the participants shared how potential leaders make other people feel (Karagianni et. al., 2023). To acknowledge and accept differences , this includes identifying the needs and abilities in everyone as well as taking time encouraging the individual and the group. Multiple case studies explored young people's perceptions of leadership, and the findings show amongst others a leader 's role is to encourage, support and help others. Perceptions of youth morality and ethical behaviour were seen as important aspects of leadership (Landwehr & Lloyd, 2019).

Self-reflexivity

According to Tracy (2010) one of the most celebrated practices of qualitative research is self-reflexivity, a means of developing sincerity, which includes being trustworthy and transparent in data auditing.

I have aimed to be mindful and to practice reflexivity in all my choices and actions while conducting this research, including being as truthful and transparent as possible about my preconceptions and beliefs. During the analysis process I also made sure to document my choices and actions by taking clear notes and by visualizing mind maps. For example, as noted, I have been careful to not

misinterpret the data, since my subjectivity including ideas, assumptions and preferences, were the filters not only through which questions were asked and reinforced during the interviews but also during the analysis process (Clark et al., 2021; Neubauer et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, the matter of subjectivity is raised by scholars (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2009) who claim that what rigor means can vary amongst researchers and that it can mean different things. Although there are extensive methods and techniques that achieve rigor when properly applied, there is still the matter of subjective interpretation. I argue that the notion of universal criteria, with reference to Tracy's work (2010) has some problems. For example, the impossibility of reaching an agreement based on a world of multiple realities that are socially constructed. This is also the issue of the usefulness of any criteria that can change and be modified for certain purposes and over time, leading to misinterpretations of what counts as "good" quality, and leading to less trustworthiness. For example, the methods I have used in this study have unavoidably influenced the participants. And although this awareness has enabled me to provide a clear account of my process of data collection and analysis, it remains unclear how I, as a novice researcher, can trust my own judgment and make sure that I have been able to offer an accurate description of how my data generation evolved during the coding process and produce clearly defined concepts and explanations of the data (Roberts et al., 2019).

Though there are no easy solutions for limiting the likelihood that there are errors in this qualitative study, Thus, I have aimed to improve validity by following some general steps, according to Macrina (2014), in order to continuously reflect on the clarity of my research questions in relation to the data that have been collected and thus handle my data and the analysis with sensitivity. I was also mindful of my assumptions and experiences, which have in some extent have influenced my inquiries. Furthermore, although my sampling has its limitations, I have aimed to show a wide range of different perspectives and provided an audit trail for others to be able to repeat each step, including the analysis.

Subsequently, although the findings drawn from the generated data are merely plausible, but not completely certain (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018; Clark et al., 2021), this unique single case study contributes insights by being "part of a growing pool of data, with multiple case studies contributing to greater generalizability" (Cohen et al., 2011 p. 294).

5 YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF "GOOD" LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

At the end of the 20th century, the young participants in two studies (Karnes & McGinnis, 1995) expressed that leaders in the new century should have ethical behaviours such as honesty and accountability. When the young participants were asked how they could develop as leaders, their answers showed a belief that this could be done by attaining the best college education and attending leadership programmes. At the time, ideas on leadership were changing from traditional management concepts and theories like traits (personal characteristics) and behavioural leadership (skills), towards ideas like transformational leadership with new models and theories emphasizing collaboration and followership (Burns, 2003). These ideas illustrated a move away from administrative structures towards self-management (leadership) concepts and schools of thought, with a focus on empowering leaders and supporting change, which included recognizing abilities such as adaptability and collaborative skills, and moving away from traditional command and control models (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Liden et al., 2025). Despite this, three decades later, scholars still point out how many studies in leadership continue to reinforce the idea of a leader as hero, separated from social relationships and daily complex realities (Allen et al., 2022a; Alvesson et al., 2017; Bohl, 2019; Ciulla, 2020). Furthermore, scholars continue to highlight the lack of understanding of young people's perceptions of leadership (Karagianni et al., 2023) and their developmental pathways of leadership (Tackett et al., 2023). This implies that even if there is an understanding that every person holds implicit leadership theories (Ciulla, 2020) that are connected to layers of

experiences, views and beliefs, we do not know much about young people's perceptions of leadership, which are based on their own social reality and from their observations of leaders and leadership situations.

This chapter focuses on presenting, analysing and discussing the findings with the aim of understanding, describing and interpreting the young participants' perceptions, including their beliefs and feelings about "good" leaders, and their perceptions of their own leadership development.

The following questions are asked:

1. How do young people participating in leadership programmes perceive "good" leadership?
2. How do young people perceive their own leadership development?

The presentation of the findings is divided into the four themes that were generated during the analysis process. The first theme is *"Good" leaders put people first*; the second theme is *"Good" leaders are rare*; the third theme is *Moving forward and seeking guidance*, and the fourth theme is *Pursuing personal growth.*

The findings presented are based on empirical data from the focus group interview and semi-structured interviews involving the eight young participants (aged 20–30), presented in previous chapter. Also, notes from my research journals.

"Good" leaders put people first

In order to understand how young people perceive leadership, I asked the young participants what they think "good" leadership is. Though they all initially hesitated – which is understandable – during the analysis, a theme was identified (that is, a reoccurring pattern was found across all the participants' accounts relating to the question) *"Good" leaders put people first.* This theme can be exemplified as follows:

> Complex yet good question, a respectable person who does not search for own benefit but aims to do good for others … to empower others, that is for me a good leader […] basically, putting people first (Albert).

As noted above, according to the young participants, a "good" leader is perceived as being someone who puts other people first, a view which includes

acknowledging differences and people's (followers, team members, employees) different opinions, while supporting them in their efforts and growth. The young participants commented, for example, that "good leaders look at things from other people's perspectives", "listen to other's opinions"' "help others", "support others" and consider "the wellbeing of others".

This emphasizes that their accounts show "good" leadership is not about exercising authority through a position or about seeking personal gain but is about doing "good" for others. They also described what a "good" leader is *not*, as exemplified by this comment:

> A good leader is someone who is not an oppressor and does not dominate (Felicia).

By sharing personal experiences from situations, events and interactions, the young participants illustrated the qualities and behaviours that "good" leaders have. The young participants' experiences included situations when assisting coaches (on a voluntary basis), training younger children in sport settings, working on various projects, and being part of teams at workplaces with specific assigned tasks.

During the analysis process, it was noted that they referred to the small daily actions of people in their own social environment, especially leaders and/or people in charge, when describing qualities and behaviours. They expressed, for example: "takes time and listens", "asks how you are doing" "shows appreciation for one's efforts" and "helps one to understand a difficult task". The following account exemplifies their outlook:

> I had a coach who was not a coach but an assistant. He was not a leader, but he really noticed all the participants, he could give comments like "oh, are you wearing new shoes? Or did you have a good weekend? […]". What I am describing is everyday life and it is about competencies and qualities that must show… if it doesn't show then it does not matter […] it happens in everyday life and it is important to think about (Elsa).

As these examples illustrate, their perceptions of "good" leadership involve paying attention to small actions and behaviours, and in turn reflecting on these experiences. They also highlighted that seeing the actions of a leader makes it easier to know the intentions of a leader. They noted that a leader's words show what they are thinking about, but their actions show their behaviours and habits, which in turn show their intentions. This outlook indicates that young participants

define "good" leaders by their actions, which, according to the young participants, include bodily and facial expressions.

Nevertheless, it was noted that the young participants still had difficulties in defining "good" leadership, since they thought that this was dependent on one's own perspective. The young participants commented on two main aspects – context and culture – which influenced the perception of "good" leadership. Their descriptions indicate that a leader is situated in a specific context and culture, and that these influence and shape the leader's behaviours and actions, based on what is accepted and considered as "good" leadership in that specific culture and/or context. However, the young participants also highlighted that the culture and context of the observer interpreting the actions is just as important, since it influences that person's perspective.

The following account exemplifies the importance of culture and context, (including the observer's situation), but also provides examples taken from their own realities, which are also part of their perceptions of leadership.

> We really need to think about different backgrounds and situations when we talk about leaders […] There are so many differences in culture for example people have other problems like home, family, money, bank loans, they cannot care what leadership is (Amir).

The importance of differentiating between leaders and managers was another aspect that was noted. For example, Leo expressed how he has learned that there are differences between managers and leaders; leaders are visionaries, while managers need to manage various challenges in workplaces such as discrimination, racism, and negative preconceptions among employees.

Furthermore, some of the young participants commented that the way a person defines the word "good" influences how one perceives "good" leadership since, "good" can mean different things to different people.

Despite the complexity of the question, their accounts highlight qualities such as trustworthiness and honesty, commitment and, most notably, acknowledging others. This is illustrated by the following descriptions:

> First of all, dependable, and trustworthy I think is fundamental…people should be able to take a leader seriously and listen … so I would say, trustworthiness is important (Carole).

> A good leader, I would say, is a trustworthy person who can listen, and recognize the need of others, both individually and a group…a good leader should be a person who is committed, engaged in all aspects, such as being a team leader who acknowledges team members, makes sure their voices are heard. As well as leading from a democratic viewpoint, collectively, according to my point of view (Leo).

Thus, to be trustworthy, acknowledge and recognize everyone's abilities, needs, concerns and feelings were described as essential qualities. But the young participants' accounts also highlighted abilities that are part of building relationships, as the following accounts show:

> Good leadership is about communicating and building relationships. In this process it is also important to acknowledge everyone and have dialogue with the people one leads … For example, if I tell my leader that I am having a bad day, the leader will listen to me (Elsa).

> A good leader is someone who can see another person's perspective, a person who stays on the ground and actively listens (Diane).

As these examples illustrate, the abilities mentioned by several young participants were: sincere dialogue, actively listening, the importance of clear and transparent communication, such as communicating a vision clearly (a bigger picture), expressing expectations, stating clearly common goals, and "the way forward". However, there were also comments such as "a leader must be knowledgeable" and "be prepared to take action" and "having control over a situation". At the same time, a leader must be able to provide support and give clear and constructive feedback, which includes motivating, inspiring and encouraging team members in order to achieve personal goals, as well as developing personal capabilities while accomplishing tasks.

According to the young participants, being able to communicate clearly demonstrates the competence and knowledge of a leader. Acknowledging and recognizing others is another way that a leader shows commitment, empathy and respect for people's differences, unique perspectives, and a willingness to support the growth of others. This in turn makes it easier to perceive the leader as credible and to respect him/her enough to follow them.

During the analysis, three further qualities were identified from their accounts: courage, accountability and fairness.

The following expressions were used: a "good" leader "shows courage", "takes responsibility" and "makes tough decisions when needed". The following three descriptions illustrate this outlook:

> There are leaders who do not know what they are doing, and one wonders what they are really doing … It's just a matter of getting things done. One cannot sweep issues under the rug (Felicia).

> The leader cannot run from a conflict. He or she must face the conflict. The leader must talk to the people, cannot take side, be neutral, not stereotyping people, understanding both sides (Amir).

Furthermore:

> There is so much politics in leadership, and I want to preferably stay neutral, one can say … to be transparent and not hide under the table … but it is not easy since real life is wicked … Is this how we want to live tomorrow and, in the future, all the days to come? Do we really think about it? (Leo).

"Good" leaders are rare

The second theme identified was *"Good" leaders are rare.* This theme explores how several of the young participants could not find "good" examples to relate to, suggesting they lacked positive leadership role models. Others gave examples of "good" leaders when referring to family and close relationships.

However, five of the eight young participants could not give any examples of "good" leaders. A key reason identified was that they could not come up with any "good" examples because they could not think of anyone. Instead, their accounts provided examples of "bad" leaders. From their personal experiences, they described how they had seen how leaders acting to benefit themselves and act badly towards others and that they could not manage certain situations or themselves. Such experiences led to distrust and disbelief in leaders. Diane's experience illustrates this disbelief. While working as a trainee, as part of an IT group, Diane recalled a situation where a conflict occurred; this situation affected her as well as the whole team. She described how the leader had handled the situation very "badly" and "in the wrong way" as she explained how the leader had not been able to manage his feelings but instead had acted in anger. This had

made her think about the importance of "leaders controlling themselves and not acting in anger". As she concluded:

> Where I come from, we do not have good examples because I think everyone is out for their own gain (Diane).

Another example was given by Albert who had experienced how circumstances during war can influence leaders to behave badly and in turn how "bad" actions of the leader affected the other people involved in the situation. He noted that circumstances can shape and change a leader's actions and behaviours, including their choices. He had also learned that it is not always the formal leader who makes a difference:

> I experienced while working in a residential construction project […] the CEO was treating a colleague roughly; he was pushing him, and a team leader came up and defended the colleague instead of leaving him there with the CEO (paus), for me this is good leadership (Albert).

On the other hand, the three young participants who gave examples of "good" leaders described the "good" behaviours they had experienced in close relationships. Oliver described how a "good" leader must have compassion and pay attention to the needs of others and be reliable and respect others; these were the qualities of his older sister, a primary school teacher. However, he was also of the opinion that only certain personalities that can be leaders:

> But only certain personalities can be leaders … not everyone can be a leader, some lack empathy (Oliver).

Felicia described how her coach acknowledged her and everyone in the team and that they were treated as equals, always "on the same level". Besides her coach, she also described a former colleague she had worked with for a short period of time. She commented that although the colleague was not the formal leader, she was still perceived as the unofficial team leader and as being "better than the official leader". Felicia felt that both her coach and colleague had a similar way of acting as they were both responsive and caring; this made her not "afraid to approach them" when she needed help.

Elsa's account highlights also that "good" leadership does not necessarily refer to a formal leader but can include an informal leader; these behaviours and

qualities are observed in close relationships such as with family members, coaches and colleagues:

> A leader can be a coach, a boss, and a list of various positions. I don't always think about attributes but the function … But when you say "good" leader that makes me automatically think about qualities and so on. I start thinking that a leader can be a parent, a teacher, an informal leader, but also to lead oneself (Elsa).

Moving forward and seeking guidance

According to the young participants' accounts, it seems that their observations and experiences shaped and influenced their views of "good" leaders, especially those in influential positions. They reflect on their experiences as well as their own actions and feelings and their accounts illustrate how reflecting in this way helped them to understand their own thoughts and choices and so be able to learn and "move forward". However, in relation to their own learning and development, a layer of concern was indicated in their accounts: for example, not knowing how to make decisions, feeling overwhelmed at times about which way to go, or knowing how to find balance or a middle ground in different situations and choices. This was expressed as a need for guidance. Hence, a third theme identified was *Moving forward and seeking guidance*. This theme illustrates how the young participants show willingness to learn and progress towards future opportunities, while also seeking advice, support and guidance:

> I think about my leadership qualities and that I am someone who is continuously learning, to correct myself when doing wrong…also, learning through others […] like following footsteps […]. When one is in a leadership position, people think you know everything, but I am also a team person, I also need guidance, it's not that I have the book of life (Diane).

What is also significant in this example is that it indicates that learning happens *through* others, and not *from* others. This was something that was noticed in the young participants' descriptions and their accounts suggested a belief that they learnt best through interactions such as working on a group task where team members can learn from each other, or, by engaging in activities with a coach who guides them and explains things based on personal experiences.

However, some of the young participants also underlined the difficulty of keeping track of their learning. The examples given were: how to know whether

one is progressing, what one needs to improve, and whether one is doing something in "the right way". They also highlighted the importance of and need for constructive feedback as this helps them to learn. For example, Amir shared something he experienced while conducting a leadership programme for younger trainees. When the programme was completed, they were asked to give him feedback and he commented on how much this had helped him. After Amir had received feedback from the participants, he, in turn, shared it with his supervisor. He noted that the supervisor's feedback had provided him with valuable lessons and that this was an additional perspective into the insights he had already gained from the young trainees' feedback.

Another example of the value of feedback while learning is the following:

> Giving clear feedback is essential to make sure you progress […] In my country people are more open to others … have different ideas, opinions, to start discussing and synthesizing together, this is something that helps me to learn, to learn from others … We have talks in cafés … and people appreciate this, it is the way to motivate them to give them a picture of what is to be done but not just for me but for everyone that they can see they have a place in it (Albert).

Yet several of the accounts suggest that they received insufficient feedback about their efforts, such as whether their efforts were "good enough" or how they could further develop a specific skill, including following up and expressing expectations:

> Sure, I can do what is expected of me but then I must know what it is; the leader must tell me what it is … I think a good leader is transparent and has leadership that expresses expectations (Elsa).

There was also an indication that the lack of support and feedback made them feel lonely and discouraged, prompting a need to find own way forward, as this account illustrates:

> No one gives constructive feedback; one must be strong and know what or when one is doing the right thing […] It starts with leading myself before I can lead others (Carole).

Some accounts illustrated examples and situations on how a leader gives feedback through 'shallow comments.' Expressing that they do not tell what way one needs to 'do better' to improve, or what is expected of them, they just simply

say "you are doing good" or in some cases they just instruct what needs to be done. Also, a small yet significant description was found where one of the young participants illustrated the difference between men and women leader (coaches) when instructing:

> And even if it is a senior leader, we must not let the person take over others […] The men are more like the military… shouting, do this and do that … while the women train with me instead of telling me what to do (Felicia).

This account also demonstrates that expressing expectations and giving constructive feedback is not about giving instructions but about showing in a supportive way how to improve, which was also indicated by the other young participants' comments on their beliefs. Thus, the importance of *how* guidance or instruction is given was signalled in their accounts.

Finding balance

While the young participants' accounts indicated a belief that "good" leaders acknowledge others, there were also indications that this is not an easy ability to develop and maintain. It takes time to learn how to acknowledge others and to find the right balance, especially in group settings when dealing with situations where the situation is not clear. For example, this could mean learning how to be attentive and responsive to each person in a group and the whole group during conflicts, and how to not take sides, while still getting things done. This can be illustrated by Diane's experience when she was a team leader. This illustrates how a challenging situation had risen, and how she was expected to manage the conflict as a team leader. This required her to understand and recognize the needs and opinions of each person in her team. She felt it was difficult to know how to acknowledge and encourage each person, and, at the same time, expect of them to continue doing their job and be able to reach the common goals of the team.

There was also the issue of finding and keeping the right balance in one's relationships and interactions with others; for example, the balance of being friendly while maintaining a professional relationship. This was a balance that several young participants highlighted and is exemplified by Oliver's experiences. Oliver described how he often thinks about how he was brought up and how this has influenced him. Although he grew up as the youngest child in a family with a father who was rather strict and was very direct and straightforward, he still felt that he had been spoiled by his parents and that it was time for him to

"grow up" and start learning how to be independent and take responsibility like his older brother:

> I need to learn how to become independent and take responsibility. To develop social skills. During one course, I learned mostly about social relationships, finding balance, how to be a leader and to maintain a professional relationship […]. I want to find balance; it is not easy to show kindness without stepping over the line … One can be responsive and friendly but not be buddies … to be kind but not lose respect […]. The challenge for leaders is finding the middle ground between being a leader and being a friend … I think trying to find that middle ground is difficult but necessary […]. It is difficult to lead because one needs to adjust depending on context and situation. Therefore, it is important to reflect … to understand feelings though it is difficult to talk about them … I am who I am because of how I was raised and that influences how I am as a leader (Oliver).

This example also highlights self-awareness, which all the participants' accounts suggested. This was connected to their thinking and reflecting on their own actions in order to move forward. It also illustrates how their accounts indicated that there is a difficulty in knowing how to express oneself. Some of the young participants stated that expressing one's ideas and feelings through dialogue is not just about talking with others, but is also about having sincere conversations. And furthermore, feeling comfortable enough to share feelings and let others know how one feels, instead of holding back is also important. It was considered important to express one's own thoughts and feelings since this helps them to manage various situations in life, including having a better understanding of the perspectives of others. However, they also felt that it was something that takes time and is difficult to learn. Moreover, they emphasized the difficulty of knowing what the "right" decisions are and understanding the choices one makes. Some described that they hesitated when making decisions since they were worried about offending others. Others expressed the difficulty of knowing how to make choices and having the courage to make choices, as the following examples illustrate:

> To understand the choices, one makes … I think I don't dare to make choices because I don't want to push over someone … for example, when there is conflict … making me question, should I stop them or not? I need to be sure of the choices I make (Carole).

> I want to learn how to make fast decisions … I don't want anyone to get uncomfortable by me taking too long to decide (Felicia).

Thus, their accounts suggested they are looking for guidance and relationships that encourage being independent and developing confidence as this can help them to move forward. However, there were also some indications that they do not like being told what to do and taking orders, but prefer to receive support in the form of recognition for their efforts and feedback for improvement.

Pursuing personal growth

A fourth theme identified was *Pursuing personal growth.* This theme involves the connection between the young participants' experiences from participating in leadership activities and programmes to their self-perception as a developing leader.

Their accounts demonstrated they have a positive outlook on participating in leadership programmes and activities (some had attended several courses and programmes). Yet there was also an indication of concern that the courses they attended were too theoretical and not applicable to real-life situations. This concern is illustrated by the following examples:

> It was a philosophical abstract programme [...] for me who wants to go back and implement something … this was not good … I don't know how I can apply this practically […] For example, if you want to learn how to handle conflicts you need to narrow it down by understanding in depth what it means, not making it broad and general (Amir).

> Theories are interesting, how they are structured and how they can offer new ways of thinking … to understand different perspectives and so theories are no use if they are not applicable … how to relate and adapt depending on context and situation in real life, to be able to adapt according to the people one interacts with (Elsa).

These examples illustrate also what was suggested in other accounts, some disappointment about what to do with the knowledge from the programmes, how to apply or makes sense of it.

If we connect their positive outlook on participating in leadership programmes and their lack of understanding and ability about how to conceptualize the

acquired knowledge from leadership activities, then the following finding is even more puzzling. The young participants' descriptions also indicated they do not see themselves as leaders and have not thought about how they could develop as leaders. The following description exemplifies their responses when asked how they perceive their own leadership development:

> That is a good question! (pause) I must think (pause) I want to get better and better, I don't know what else, I cannot think of anything specific. But thinking about what I want to do to become a leader … the more I develop the more I have the chance. But if I want to become a good leader, I must attend leadership courses […]. It's strange I never chose to become a leader, I hadn't thought about becoming a leader, the opportunity just fell on me. I was offered the opportunity and discovered how much I enjoy leading, and I am happy to be able to develop and lead others (Carole).

Thus, their descriptions indicate that developing as a leader was not part of their social reality when they were growing up. Instead, they were encouraged (by parents, teachers and coaches) to develop skills that would help them find a job in the future. The following account illustrates this:

> No one asks you how your leadership skills are, they ask for other skills but not leadership skills. When we look for a job … parents motivate their children to become doctors but not leaders because what and how can we show our leadership skills? (Amir)

This underlines what has been indicated in several of the accounts, that no one had previously asked them questions about their own development as leaders; instead they had learned that it is important to develop one's personal capabilities for future opportunities, and they had therefore not thought about it. A good example is when Albert responded to this question and answered by explaining the importance of questions and reflection in learning. He shared an experience that had taught him about taking time to think and reflect can help people understand their own thoughts and feelings. Some years ago, while he was working at a company, for a while he had the task of analysing employee evaluations. It became clear to him that the employees who filled in the evaluations did not really reflect on the answers they wrote down. Albert felt that the employees had not been given the chance to reflect. He also believed that if they had been given time to reflect while answering the questions, they would

have had the opportunity to express what they really felt and thought in the reports. He explained that people answer and write down what they believe is expected of them, without taking the time to reflect on their own thoughts. Albert felt that everyone is able to reflect but that it is difficult to do, and that it takes time to learn; it is about prioritizing and making time for reflection. He concluded by saying:

> The way you asked this question (how would you like to develop as a leader?) was a good way for me to reflect on my own learning (Albert).

Although several of the young participants noted that their experiences and various commitments can be perceived as "leadership activities", this was not their own perception. Instead, their descriptions indicate that their commitments and efforts enabled them to develop skills and qualities so that they could influence others towards positive changes. This is illustrated by the following:

> I would like to learn more about leadership. Currently I am studying process management, but I would also like to study and know how to work with inclusion, I want to learn about how we can engage people in our communities […] participating as citizens, including different individuals and groups, empowering them to raise their voices, to create a better society To be part of building platforms and contributing and share that life is not as sustainable as the stakeholders say. Injustice and inequalities are so big. And so, I want to be part of it and be a role model (Leo).

Strong beliefs about leadership, yet lack of direction

As discussed earlier, over thirty years ago, the findings from the study by Karnes and McGinnis (1995) showed that the young participants believed leaders in the new century should have ethical behaviours like honesty and accountability. They also believed that by attaining the best college education and attending leadership programmes would help them develop and "become" leaders. This was a time when ideas of traditional leadership theories were changing towards transformational leadership theories, with more focus on concepts like self-leadership, and abilities like adaptability and collaboration. Today there are new leadership theories that emphasize relational, ethical and moral behaviours, such as authentic leadership, ethical leadership, and servant leadership, theories that

scholars have noted overlap with transformational leadership (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

The findings covered how the young participants perceive "good" leadership and indicated a belief that "good" leaders put people first and act ethically and empathetically. Furthermore, their perceptions of their own leadership development indicated that although they were engaged in various activities that could be seen as acts of leadership, and participated in leadership programmes, they still did not see themselves as developing leaders. Instead, they described their development from a perspective of personal growth as being able to "move forward". In order to gain some understanding of whether these findings indicate a shift in young people's perceptions, I have drawn upon previous research relating to young people and leadership.

"Good" leaders are ethical and empathetic according to young people

The findings relating to the young participants' perceptions of "good" leaders seem to align with previous research involving young people. For example, a study based on the responses from 72 middle school students in Australia, Lavery & Coffey (2020) found that the students perceived "good" leadership as involving serving and putting others first, while "bad" leaders try to control everything and to get their own way. A recent study from Sweden also shows that participants aged 18–28 also perceive "good" leaders as promoting collaboration, have a democratic and fair outlook, and have respect for individual integrity (Svensson et al., 2025). Furthermore, other studies involving young people's perceptions indicate that a leader should be able to inspire, motivate and make other people feel better (Haber, 2012; Karagianni et al 2023; Sherif, 2018). It was expected that a leader should encourage, support, and help others (Zekan et al., 2012; Landwehr & Lloyd, 2019; Sherif, 2018). A leader should be tolerant of others' opinions and be willing to listen to people's opinions through showing compassion. However, they should also set and achieve goals by collaborating, communicating, making decisions, and by being knowledgeable (Haber, 2012; Kumar et al., 2024; Landwehr & Lloyd, 2019; Lee et al., 2021; Perets et al., 2023; Sherif, 2018). Moreover, the role of a leader is not just to guide others but to do this without forcing people to things they do not want to do (Mortensen et al., 2014). A leader should have moral and ethical behaviours like trustworthiness, integrity and credibility (Kumar et al., 2024; Landwehr & Lloyd, 2019; Lavery & Coffey, 2020; Lee et al., 2021) as well as self-confidence and accountability (Zekan et al., 2012).

Thus, leaders must serve their communities, be open-minded, honour their values and be comfortable with change (Caza & Rosch, 2014). Furthermore, leaders who display professional work ethics can be trusted and respected (Bowers et al., 2016). Consequently, the findings from the young participants' accounts and the research mentioned suggest that young people have high expectations of leaders. This is supported by a recent report describing that young people are not afraid to speak up and ask for the change needed relating to the state of the world. Their expectations for business leaders are high and include that societal issues are addressed at workplaces (Deloitte, 2022).

Positive leadership role models are found in close relationships

Five of the eight young participants could not give any examples of "good" leaders. Instead, they showed a disbelief and distrust in leaders by giving examples from their experiences that illustrated "bad" leadership. Gächter and Renner (2018) comment that when people see examples of selfish behaviour (e.g. dishonesty, corruption, unethical behaviour) in leaders (e.g., politicians, governmental officials and managers) this may not only have direct effects on a person but also influence and shape their perceptions so that they believe that other leaders will act in the same way. According to scholars, this implies that young people may find it harder to envision a positive future in leadership, given the limited positive role models in influential positions they have experienced (Bowers et al., 2015). The findings also noted an increased belief that not everyone can become a leader; this belief has been previously found among young people (Sessa et al., 2016).

On the other hand, three young participants did provide examples of "good" leaders by referring to people in their close relationships: a sister, a coach and a colleague. This finding has also been noted in previous studies, showing young people's perceptions of leadership include influences and role models from their own social environments, (Barling et al., 2023; Griffith et al., 2019; Landwehr & Lloyd, 2019; Perets et al., 2023). These can be teachers, principals and close family members (Lavery & Coffey, 2020) or be immediate supervisors and managers (Posner, 2021). These studies suggest that young people define leadership based on displayed qualities and behaviours of a person not just based on a person's formal position. However, according to Johnson et al. (2016), young people also look for role models in their immediate relationships, and for character-related qualities like being good to others, treating others with kindness and doing good in the world. Thus, with reference Bowers et al. (2015) this suggests that qualities displayed in young people's social environments, such as

work ethics and social skills, influence who they perceive as leadership role models. The young people emphasized that parents, family, friends, teachers, coaches and other mentors with whom they had personal relationships were the most influential for their leadership development.

Learning leadership involves seeing oneself as a developing leader

The findings from the young participants' perceptions of their own leadership development indicate that they did not see themselves as developing leaders, despite their engagements in various activities that could be perceived as leadership actions, including participating in leadership programmes. Earlier studies demonstrate that although there is a belief that when young people engage in leadership activities and have significant experience of formal leadership programmes, they will develop leadership skills, they do not necessarily perceive themselves as leaders (Komives et al., 2005; Rosch, 2018). Recent studies such as Barling et al. (2023) and Walker et al. (2024) claim that young people do not develop as leaders merely through the influence of their social environments, or by engaging in various leadership activities and programmes. It is also important that they develop a leader identity. This is something that takes time to develop and starts early in life, according to Liu et al. (2021) and Walker et al. (2024).

However, Perreault et al. (2020) suggest that young people can still develop leadership skills, without necessarily understanding or believing in their own abilities as leaders. According to Karagianni et al. (2023), this understanding can be developed when (and if) young people interact with adults such as educators and coaches who recognize and support them and make them feel capable of their leadership actions and efforts. Furthermore, according to Barling et al. (2023) and Walsh et al. (2018), support and feedback can help young people to develop self-awareness, which may also offer possibilities for considering themselves to be leaders (and to develop as leaders).

The findings also indicate that the young participants seek guidance to learn how to balance various complex situations, like how to develop social skills and decision-making abilities. According to studies, these skills are central in leadership development for young people. Riggio (2024) and Tackett et al. (2023), for example, describe how young people can develop social and communicative skills through feedback. However, engaging in activities in voluntary sport organizations such as those suggested by Darcy et al. (2014) can contribute to a sense of belonging and a feeling of value. Furthermore, although making choices and decisions can be difficult and involve uncertainty about what to do, Hall (2023) and Topel et al. (2023) note that learning the ability to make

decisions is essential for young people. Thus, by engaging in meaningful situations, influencing and making decisions, young people can have opportunities to view themselves as being competent in their own actions (Blanton et al., 2014; Colakkadioglu & Celik, 2016; Siebert et al., 2021; Suhaimi et al., 2018).

At the same time, Bilge et al. (2021) study suggests that today's young people are aware of the need for balance between learning, work and social relationships, even if they ask for guidance on which direction to take and/or which path to follow. This includes requesting role models and adults such as coaches and supervisors who can offer some assistance. Even so, Anderson et al. (2017) suggest that young people (millennials) tend to think highly of themselves and ask for more information and feedback, including recognition of their efforts, when compared to older employees who often seek to improve their own skills by associating with colleagues. Yet, Franceschelli & Keating (2018) describe how the expectations of young people have also changed; they are expected to make their own choices (in a world that is oversaturated with information) due to the process of individualization that has taken place at a structural level which has brought changes where individuals now make subjective choices about their lives in the absence of traditional structures and markers of adulthood. They note, "while individualization frees individuals from old legacies, the very absence of structures creates new structures by dissolving both security and orientation, and fostering isolation and disconnectedness" (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018, p. 3).

Fragments of knowledge

The findings and the studies connected to these suggest a change of outlook, both of young people's perceptions and from the scholarly world. For example, although there is still limited understanding of how young people perceive leadership (Karagianni et al., 2023), studies over the past decade indicate that when it comes to the perception of leaders, young people make reference to ethical and empathetic behaviours and having a people-first mindset; this view is supports by the findings in this study. Secondly, although there is still limited knowledge about how young people develop as leaders (Tackett et al., 2023), there are studies (Walker et al., 2024) that demonstrate that young people do not "become" leaders merely by taking on leadership roles or by engaging in activities and education that promote leadership development at an early age. Rather they must also develop a leader identity that includes perceiving leadership and the role of a leader as relevant and meaningful.

A diversified image of the sincere and caring leader

Viewing the findings from implicit leadership theories (Yukl & Gardner, 2020) helps me to understand why the young participants' perceptions of "good" leadership are based on, and interpreted through their layers of observations and experiences from daily interactions and situations, as noted in previous studies (Karagianni et al, 2023; Marcketti & Kadolph, 2010), including adults both in formal and informal leadership positions. This means that their perceptions involve stereotypes (images) about the qualities and behaviours that they associate with different leadership roles, which, in turn, influences their expectations. Interestingly, the young participants' accounts indicated an awareness of contextual and cultural influences as to how one perceives "good" leadership. Although this awareness was indicated in all the young participants' accounts, it was more noticeable in the accounts of the four exchange students.

Furthermore, a small but significant observation was about gender differences in the way that women and men instruct and express themselves, for example when Felicia said "men are like in military" (see p. 134). This underlines that stereotypes are often associated with masculine traits (Johnson & Lacerenza, 2019). However, Felicia's belief raises also the issue of whether women tend to lead differently than men (Hovden & Tjønndal, 2017).

The findings indicate that five of the young participants could not think of any "good" examples of leaders, while three of them provided examples from close relationships, thus suggesting, together with previous research, that, according to young people, the image (stereotype) of a "good" leader does not necessarily include having a formal role with a traditional, male-centric, and heroic image but rather that it is a diversified image of a sincere and empathetic leader. This is the image that young people identify in their close relationships such as family, friends, teachers, and coaches.

The qualities and abilities that were highlighted in the young participants' accounts are: trustworthiness, accountability and empathy. Communicating clearly (e.g., vision and expectations) was also noted, as well as acknowledging the needs and concerns of others, empowering others, being open-minded, and recognizing difference. These indicate similarities found in four leadership theories: servant leadership, ethical leadership, transformational leadership and inclusive leadership. Servant leadership is an ethical-based leadership theory that explains how servant leaders tend to prioritize the needs of others (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021). These leaders seek to accomplish shared goals by supporting individual and collective growth through empowerment and with a focus on the wellbeing of team members (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). However, Bilge et al.

(2021) explored the applicability of the theory to young people, with the assumption that the theory highlights empowerment, a key element of what young people expect in workplaces from their employees (and which influences job satisfaction). The researchers discovered that both their own findings, as well as previous studies, point to inconsistencies. This is a concern that is shared by others (Eva et al., 2019; Liden & Knippenberg, 2025) who highlight that servant leadership has some limitations and they question how dimensions such as empowerment, accountability and helping others can be combined with perceptions of leadership that refer to both a leader's internal states and efforts and the perception of the person valuing these dimensions. I am sympathetic to this view since the stated descriptions of qualities and abilities also relate to ethical leadership, such as showing trustworthiness, inclusivity, accountability, and empathy, thus demonstrating ethical behaviours instead of just talking about ethics or expressing ethical statements (Brown et al., 2005). This highlights that servant leadership is an "early conception of ethical leadership" (Yukl & Gardner, 2020, p. 260).

Nevertheless, the young participants' descriptions also indicate that the way a person perceives ethical behaviours depends on a given situation; it remains difficult to know or evaluate whether a leader is behaving ethically or not, since, as stated by scholars, a leader can perform the same actions that could benefit followers in some ways but harm them in others, even a later period of time (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

The qualities and behaviours identified also relate to transformational leadership, such as setting and achieving common goals, emphasizing vision and being able to lead people in the right way, morally and effectively, from a relational perspective (Burns, 2003). Despite the difficulty of understanding the kind of leadership, and how to explain the young participants' perceptions, it is notable that their perceptions encompass a leadership that focuses on people and prioritizes the wellbeing, needs and development of others, instead of focusing mainly on tasks, efficiency and achieving results.

The importance of social support in young people's leadership development

The findings indicate that the young participants' perceptions of their own leadership development include a belief that they learn best through social interactions, including reflecting on their experiences, which includes participating in leadership programmes. However, they also felt that the leadership courses and programmes were too theoretical, abstract and not applicable to their own life situations. This points towards an issue that scholars

and practitioners highlight, of models and methods being used for teaching leadership that are often abstract and linear and require further interpretations that include practical aspects (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Furthermore, the young participants they did not seem to view themselves as developing leaders, this gives weight to the lifespan approach that understands leadership development as a lifelong process that starts at an early age and involves a process of leader identity development (Walker, 2024). However, the findings indicated that the idea of developing leadership skills was not part of the young participants' social reality while growing up, and also that no one had previously asked them about their views on developing as a leader. A lack of belief in leaders was also indicated, which may have influenced the fact that the young participants could not envision a positive future in leadership (Bowers et al., 2015). Most importantly however was the indication that they did not feel they received sufficient support and feedback on their efforts, and that this support could provide them with opportunities to become aware of their own capabilities as leaders. Thus, this finding indicates that a young person's social environment and support is essential for developing as a leader.

Equally the findings also suggest that the young participants did not like being told what to do or taking orders. This is connected to an underlying contradiction in their perceptions of leadership, and illustrates that although they expected "good" leaders to be open-minded and to have a collaborative outlook, they also expected "good" leaders to make tough decisions and take action (to take command of the situation) when needed. A similar finding was also noted in the recent study involving young people that was conducted by Svensson et al. (2025). An explanation for this inconsistent view between their perceptions of leadership and how to receive guidance can be found in their own accounts when describing qualities and behaviours "good" leaders display. The young participants also described the importance of clear communication, especially when defining expectations and giving feedback, and that a leader who displays such abilities demonstrates credibility, which, in turn, makes it easier to respect him/her and follow the instructions given. This suggests that the young participants can follow instructions from leaders (e.g. supervisors, coaches and managers) *if* they perceive the leader as being credible and trustworthy. This suggests there is a rather small but notable connection between how they receive support and how they perceive the person giving them support.

Educational considerations

If we begin with John Dewey's (1938/2015) pedagogical ideas about experience and education, this provides one explanation as to why the young participants' perceptions of leaders are formed and made sense based on their daily observations and experiences in their own social environments. Dewey noted that "experience does not go on simply inside a person. It does go on there, for it influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 39), but that it also involves other people. He clarified that experience is an active process that includes social interactions and influences, all part of a person's "shaping of actual experiences" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 40). In each interaction "between an individual and objects and other persons" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 43) a situation is entwined. Thus, a person's needs, desires, purposes, and capabilities are all part of a situation where interactions are taking place. What this signifies is that a person's environment and social interactions are part of his/her development in each given situation. Regardless of whether a person is aware of his/her own development or not, he/she is still influenced and affected by these various situations.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the young participants reflected on their own actions, views, and choices, in order to be able to make sense of their world. According to Dewey, this indicates curious minds that constantly explore and seek "material for thought" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 31) and a willingness to experience and learn unexplored knowledge. However, he was also aware that most people take their mental ideas, and thoughts for granted and unconsciously make judgments of others and their actions without considering what beliefs, and proofs (signs) one's own thoughts are organized and formed by. Hence, Dewey stated that a "training of mind" (1910/1997, p. 28) involves the support of a person's social environment, since developing habits of thoughts and learning how to organize one's thoughts takes time. According to Dewey, since young people's daily actions, efforts, and pursuits, including motivations and beliefs, are momentary and are not as fixed or organized as those of adults, he recommended that adults acting as educators use their influence to encourage students to think. However, he also stated that thinking does not happen "in a vacuum" (1910/1997, p. 52) and that advice and explanations can (should) be offered. My findings indicated that the young participants felt they did not receive sufficient feedback and guidance relating to their own efforts, ideas, and concerns. Looking at these findings that illustrate the challenges of the young participants, such as balancing social relations, situations, choices, including their

own expressivity, this suggests that although they reflected on their experiences, they still did not receive sufficient support for their considerations, and they were not able to make sense of their own experiences. This suggests that they did not have a *trained mind* that was able to deal with complex social and personal situations.

Dewey explained that when a person is faced with unfamiliar situations or does not have any or enough prior experiences in a certain situation, the person cannot know what the consequences of the observed situation will be unless he/she thinks about past experiences in his/her mind. Through this reflection, the person may remember similar experiences that lead to forming "a judgment of what may be expected in the present situation" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 68). According to Dewey, this process is the formation of purpose, which is rather complex process and involves observing one's surroundings, having knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past and making judgments about that specific situation.

Based on Dewey's descriptions, my findings suggest that without much experience in leadership activities, including self-perception of being a leader and having a trained mind (critical and reflective thinking), young people whose minds are overloaded by information from various influences and social communities, both on-and offline, have difficulties in discerning which course of action to take.

The process of learning leadership is made even more complicated by the fact that the young participants did not feel the leadership programmes they had attended were applicable or even relevant to their own life situations. However, Dewey claimed that "experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 25) and stated that there are experiences that may immediately be perceived as satisfactory, and that there are experiences that are not educational. Some experiences could even lead to a decrease in further learning and be so disconnected from one another that it is impossible to know if learning has taken place. Although Dewey maintained that experience is crucial part of learning, he also believed that education, in a formal and organized manner, can offer multiple opportunities and insights. However, he argued that, just like the fragmented experiences young people carry within while they attend educational settings, there is a need to reconsider the education that is provided; it is often fragmented and detached from the learner's own reality and experiences and is "defective from the standpoint of connection with further experience" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 27). This suggests that when leadership education is offered without the consideration of the young participants' prior knowledge and

pre-existing ideas, including their social realities, then learning may be disrupted. Thus, even if the programmes are planned well and implemented well, the knowledge provided may still be experienced as fragmented, with no relevance to one's own social reality.

Furthermore, according to Dewey, when a topic (such as leadership) is taught in isolation and a question is asked (such as what "good" leadership is), can the information provided (during courses and programmes), or that they have experienced be accessed? Where is this information? According to Dewey, the right answer is that it is still there, in a special "compartment" where it was originally stored (1938/2015, p. 48). Yet as further information keeps being added, it becomes harder to access what has been stored, and even harder to know whether anything was stored in the first place. Instead, as Dewey explained, the acquired knowledge remains isolated and disconnected from the rest of the person's experience of learning of this kind.

Leadership courses and programmes are expected to prepare young people for future possibilities; however, according to Dewey, there is a sort of contradiction inherent in this, since because the teaching is future oriented, this prevents a person learning something in the present.

> We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 49).

Thus, this suggests that the present is fundamental for young people, and not the future, which is significantly uncertain. The findings thus indicate that the young participants perceived leadership education as merely being part of their own personal growth and that this makes sense when considering education according to Dewey's description "in terms of life experience" (1938/2015, p. 51).

In this sense, understanding how young people develop as leaders is not an either/or matter (theory/education versus practice/experience) but it is about how knowledge relating to leadership is transferred, and how it is taught to young people. This is the perspective from which I will now continue as I present the findings from the educators' accounts that deal with their perceptions of "good" leadership and their own leadership development.

6 THE EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF "GOOD" LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

A significant step towards understanding how young people develop as leaders is to include the educators who teach them about leadership. Understanding the perceptions of these educators can offer insights into the relationships and practices that have shaped their own process of leadership development, which, in turn, influence their own practices and teachings (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Seemiller & Priest, 2017; Součková, 2020). For example, previous research indicates that while leadership educators strive to find ways of applying leadership theories and concepts to practical situations, at the same time, they are practicing leadership in their everyday lives, a fact that some may overlook (Richardson, 2025). This means that leadership educators continuously learn more about leadership through their daily practices as leaders, while also teaching and engaging in various activities and programmes that promote leadership skills in young people. The educators in this study were practitioners, each one holding a position as a manager or a coach, while also being engaged in activities for young people that promoted leadership development. Their activities included giving lectures and facilitating workshops, activities, and events. Although they were interviewed in their role as educator, their accounts also illustrated that they intuitively included their views and beliefs of what "good" leadership is, as well as their own leadership development, and their practical daily experiences as leaders. However, during the interviews, questions were also asked about their teaching and practices involving the leadership activities and programmes. Thus, the findings from the interviews are divided into two parts; the first part will be presented in this chapter and the second part covering their teachings and practices as educators will be presented and discussed in chapter seven.

This chapter focuses on presenting, analysing and discussing the findings with the aim of understanding, describing and interpreting the educators' perceptions, including beliefs and feelings about "good" leadership, and their own further development as leaders.

The following questions are asked:

1. How do educators involved in the youth leadership programmes perceive "good" leadership?
2. How do the educators perceive their own leadership development?

The presentation of the findings is divided into the three themes that were generated during the analysis process. The first theme is *"Good" leaders build relationships*; the second theme is *Leadership development begins in childhood* and the third theme is *Self-awareness through self-reflection.*

The presented findings are based on the empirical data from the semi-structured interviews with the seven educators, presented in the methodology chapter, including notes from my research journals. After the presentation of the findings in the three themes, there will be a discussion relating to the themes that includes previous research. The chapter will conclude with a discussion using Dewey's theoretical lens, as in chapter five.

"Good" leaders build relationships

The educators responded without any hesitation and with concise descriptions to the question of what "good" leadership is, and did this by defining what leadership is. A theme was identified that was based on their responses: *"Good" leaders build relationships.* This theme can be exemplified by the two following brief statements:

> Leadership is basically about relationships and the people we meet (Louise).

> Leadership is about values and dealing with people (Julia).

According to the findings, the educators' perceptions of "good" leadership include developing and maintaining relationships, and referring to how a leader acts and behaves towards others (followers, team members, colleagues). The behaviours that they highlighted focused mainly on social skills, for example, having clear and transparent communication, actively listening and promoting

teamwork. These abilities were identified as the skills "good" leaders need in order to develop trusting relationships, while also influencing, motivating and achieving common goals with their team and/or organization. This includes creating collaborative situations where everyone in the group feels part of the process and supported, thus showing that input from each member in the group is valued and prioritized by the leader. Furthermore, the educators' accounts indicated that "good" leaders cultivate an environment that enables their team members to grow and to achieve their best work. This is exemplified by the following statement:

> Enabling others to develop and find their own potential, to believe in themselves, and be able to find their own voice in the group (Sarah).

Their accounts also indicated a belief that "good" leaders encourage, support and guide their team members in order to discover and develop their own potential and growth. According to their descriptions, it was important to acknowledge each team member since the growth of each person in a team is connected to the process of getting a group to collaborate well together. For example, a description that was repeatedly used was being "responsive to others"; "active listening" was identified in connection with this, as the following brief comment illustrates:

> A good leader listens … really … we tend to forget to actively listen (Louise).

Hence, according to the educators' accounts, responsiveness involves actively listening to team members and paying attention and engaging in meaningful conversations with them. The descriptions showed that this kind of conversation includes being able to express oneself clearly and having a dialogue that goes beyond "just simply talking" and towards being mindful of other people's thoughts, needs, concerns, and feelings, as well as asking thoughtful questions and having the sincere intention of understanding their views and needs.

Besides responsiveness, the descriptions also indicated that it is essential in relational processes that a "good" leader has an open mind; this was described as "being open-minded", "flexible in one's thinking", "being adaptable", and "having an inclusive mindset". Or, as this account illustrates:

> Being a good leader is about mindset … how the person is thinking and acting that is based on how one thinks (Anna).

This example, as well as descriptions from the other educators, illustrates a belief that "good" leaders understand that people have different ways of seeing and being. However, several of the accounts indicated a belief that although many leaders are aware of the importance of having an open mind to difference but that many leaders still do not have the "right mindset" for managing different perspectives, or for understanding that others can think and act differently to their own way of thinking. Some of the educators commented that "good" leaders "do not judge others", and "do not approach others from their own limited worldview". The following example illustrates how the educators described this outlook:

> A good leader understands that a group includes a diversity of perspectives and takes time to get to know each one in the group (Erik).

While the following comments on keeping an open mind:

> Someone who is responsive (pause), someone who can see everyone in the room and from different perspectives, to understand people's abilities and backgrounds. I am not suggesting that one needs to recognize all needs, just to understand that there are different preconditions and not be narrow-minded about people's differences (Beatrice).

The relational perspective of the educators was also found in their accounts illustrating their examples of "good" leaders. They all referred to personal relationships, like family members and colleagues, except for one, who described a foreign politician. For example, Julia explained how her mother always tries to build relationships and continuously acknowledges and sees others. Others explained this as follows:

> I had a boss … who was pedagogical and had good communication skills just like my grandfather … my grandfather showed accountability, was dependable […] he was a good listener and took the time for conversations and to share, he showed respect to all (Alex).

> I think of my boss, she is a person with heart … can inspire and motivate others. Someone who is good with communication and has the ability to be a leader … who acknowledges and recognizes others … who listens and sees everyone as they are (Louise).

Furthermore:

> I think about a manager I worked with many years ago … She was tough … not afraid of conflicts … I think it is really difficult … people are good in their own ways and in their own roles, but it does not mean that what they do is good (Anna).

Although abilities such as social skills, including acknowledging others, were found in the educators' accounts, several of them, based on their experiences, commented that it was not easy to develop social skills. It takes time and involves years of practice and experience to manage different complex social and relational situations. Nevertheless, one of the educators underlined that not everyone has the ability to be responsive and to actively listen since it is not easy to be an open and approachable person. Some of the educators also highlighted that it is not easy to acknowledge and encourage others, especially those who are quiet in social settings and tend to keep their thoughts to themselves.

The findings also indicated a belief that to be able to manage various difficult and unexpected situations a leader must have practical tools. This was expressed for example as "good" leaders "collecting tools" and "having practical tools", and "having a toolbox". The following were identified as practical tools: skills related to how "good" leaders manage conflicts, and making decisions and solving problems in various situations. Some noted that practical skills (tools) are needed in order to know what the right decisions and choices are in different complex situations. And, equally, being confident enough in those situations to make tough decisions, or as Louise expressed it "someone who is comfortable in their own skin". Moreover, practical skills or tools were also referred to in connection with organizational and strategic planning skills; the educators' descriptions suggested that being organized enables a leader to manage unexpected situations or be flexible and adapt if it is required in unfamiliar situations.

"Good" leadership is reflected in body language and in actions

Although initially the educators responded to the question of what "good" leadership is with no hesitation, several of them emphasized that it is not easy to define what "good" leadership is since it involves a combination of skills, behaviours and qualities, and is therefore difficult to pin down with a definition. Despite the difficulty of articulating what "good" leadership is, their accounts did not make any great mention of various ways of perceiving leadership or the aspects and influences that can shape a person's perspective. Instead, there were two brief comments in the accounts, one commenting that there can be contextual

and situational differences, and the other educator saying that there is no right or wrong way to answer the question, and that it depends on the person doing the defining.

However, it was noted that the educators highlighted that "good" leadership is reflected in a leader's body language. This body language was identified using their descriptions from daily experiences when leading teams, managing various tasks and responsibilities and explained how a leader's actions, intentions and attitudes are often reflected through his/her body language. This included the way that unconscious feelings and intentions are signalled through nonverbal cues like posture, facial expressions and other gestures and that this can influence how a leader is perceived. For example, while listening to someone "sitting down with focus and attention", or "making eye contact" in conversations or making "affirmative expressions" when instructing. One educator noted that a leader showing charismatic body language can help in some situations. The following account exemplifies this:

> Good leadership is shown through one's actions … a sort of embodiment, it shows on the body, in interactions with others. One can say one thing, but the body, the eyes, the gaze, and gestures can show something else (Anna).

Furthermore, in connection with body language, several accounts also highlighted that a leader's actions are more important than his/her words. The following exemplifies this:

> I think it is not what one says that matters but what one does […] for me it is important that one shows in action and not just what one says for example, how we talk to each other, how we listen to each other, to include […]. Leadership is about leading the way but not necessarily to be the first in line but walking beside the group (Sarah).

Leadership development begins in childhood

It was difficult for the educators to describe what "good" leadership is, and this was also identified in their accounts describing their own leadership development and the ways in which they continued developing as leaders. Several pointed out that this is not easy, since their learning involves various leadership experiences, roles and knowledge, which, in turn, is connected to years of accumulated

practical and theoretical experience. The following examples illustrate this outlook:

> One day you realize that you are a leader, and you do not know what your own leadership style is (Louise)

However, the findings show that after the initial statements of not knowing, the theme of *Leadership development begins in childhood* was identified. This theme covers how the educators demonstrated a belief that leadership development starts early in life. This was identified based on the educators' descriptions referring to early experiences in childhood and during adolescence, for example. This theme could be exemplified by the following description:

> One can see a person's preferences early in life. One develops and collects the tools for one's toolbox for managing situations […]. Developing leadership skills starts in pre-school when one learns to take responsibility for own actions … to lead oneself and not expect that someone else will do this … we start in pre-school when we speak of leadership (Julia).

According to their accounts, several of the educators described experiences at an early age that had enabled them to start developing skills, like being attentive, recognizing differences, taking initiative, and working on assignments together with others. Some of the educators described early experiences that helped them to understand themselves and their actions. Some also shared experiences from their teenage years. For example, attending leadership programmes (in public organizations), had helped them to develop skills for leading various teams together with peers. Furthermore, by engaging in various social activities, they had started developing abilities that they continued to develop later on through practical experiences: abilities like collaboration, awareness of multiple perspectives, and being able to delegate and manage conflicts. Some of the educators described how their experiences during their teenage years had helped them to develop skills such as recognizing and encouraging team members in their efforts and attaining personal and shared goals. Lastly some descriptions described early workplace experiences. For example, Alex described that he had the opportunity at the age of 25 to initiate and lead a leadership training programme at an international organization. He had faced various challenges during this experience, like how to manage conflicts in the group, how to meet the needs and expectations of the participants, and how to identify problems. Alex

explained that by being goal-oriented and organized he was able to find ways of handling difficult situations. He also highlighted that his boss had supported him in his choices. Despite this, he had still felt there was one challenge that could not be surmounted, that of his age, and leading others who were much older than him, as well as their perceptions of him.

This process of development from a young age was highlighted by their accounts about how they had learned from others in various situations and processes, for example, learning from the experiences and stories of others, observing the choices and actions of others, and including the consequences of actions. The educators had not always observed people in leadership positions; they included people from their personal relationships. According to the educators' accounts, learning from and through others helped them to adapt intuitively and implement the lessons learned to their own context and circumstances. The following exemplifies this:

> One develops continuously because one encounters different people … automatically (Sarah).

Their accounts also illustrated that they had participated in leadership courses and programmes in their various roles as leaders. This was in various settings like higher education, sport contexts and organizational settings. Connected to these accounts was the indication that even although they believed it was important to participate in leadership programmes, they also believed that leadership must be practiced and that it cannot be learned from theory alone. Some descriptions noted that they were not sure of the outcomes of the various leadership courses they had attended were connected to their own role and position. Several educators described that they had gained knowledge and inspiration from new studies and methods by continuing to attend leadership courses, which, in turn, they could apply to their own practices and training courses. However, some also expressed that they were not sure if leadership programmes could offer them anything useful. This indicates a belief that a leader develops instead from and through various experiences, as exemplified by this account:

> Only the tough school of life …. Seriously, I have not considered taking any additional leadership courses … I see my own development as a journey … my experiences teach me to manage certain things along the way … leadership is about leading … a practice (Louise).

Self-awareness through self-reflection

Another theme that was identified in the educators' accounts was *Self-awareness through self-reflection*. This theme relates to the previous one and illustrates how the educators practice self-reflection in order to develop and increase self-awareness, as exemplified by the following description:

> I usually take time to think about everything that has been said to me […] I hope I can develop qualities and not just compare myself to others but my own development (pause) to know my weaknesses and strengths … to invest time and energy to become and do the best I can (Sarah).

Their accounts indicated a belief that in order to continue developing as a leader, one must develop self-awareness by reflecting on experiences, personal beliefs, values, and actions. This outlook was connected to the view that leadership development goes beyond one's role as a leader and involves the whole person and the ability to lead oneself. It was also noted that reflecting on experiences had helped them to understand how to manage various challenges, including new and unexpected situations. According to their descriptions, this is process that involves intuition and learning to trust oneself as well as relying on past experiences, as the following description illustrates:

> It is important to have an intuitive instinct when dealing with people […]. One should be able to adjust and change according to given situations and contexts […] To lead is a learning process … I would have not been able to lead by following a template; it requires intuition as opposed to the Machiavellian way of leading […]. One should reflect on chosen paths to be able to work with different people. To learn by challenging oneself and learn from different social interactions …. One can learn from anything. But in everything and always, there is a need for reflection (Alex).

This example illustrates also another view from their accounts: reflection helps us to recognize mistakes, including from the choices that were made, in order to learn from those experiences. This process requires having the courage to make mistakes in the first place. The following comment exemplifies this:

> The courage to make mistakes and make decisions, and at that moment to feel good about it, but this is based on daring to do so (Louise).

Their self-awareness was also present in their accounts in the way they perceived themselves as a leader. For example, one educator described themselves as follows "I am a laidback person with clear expectations of what needs to be done". Another described that growing up in a cross-generational family, interacting with various perspectives in different settings, including being a child of refugee parents, had shaped their leadership abilities. Four of the educators described themselves as not being authoritarian, but that they followed the rules and were clear in their expectations, acting in a kind way, with warmth and attentiveness.

One of the educators described that being persistent and goal-oriented during childhood had not been difficult but that this had changed during their teenage years. They explained that during those years they had managed feelings of not being good enough and always wanting to do more. They were always thinking about being "the best" and about not making any mistakes. However, over time and through various experiences, the educator had learned that instead of focusing on "winning", they had "recognized that the journey is the process". According to the educators' description, this means that it is important to set realistic goals.

There were also some accounts that illustrated feelings of how being a leader and influencing others is "fun". However, there were also descriptions of feeling lonely and that being a leader involves continuous and various challenges.

It is not easy to describe what leadership is

To understand the educators' perceptions and gain insights into the experiences that have shaped their own process of leadership development, I asked them what "good" leadership is, and then asked how they view their own leadership development.

The educators indicated a belief that "good" leaders build relationships and cultivate an environment for growth and trust, while also embracing diversity. Their perceptions include a belief that social skills like active listening, communicating, and collaborating are essential for developing relationships. Furthermore, the findings indicate a belief that leadership development begins in childhood and evolves throughout one's life with the addition of more experiences and practices as a leader. They highlighted social interactions and self-reflection as part of their learning process.

In order to attain greater better understanding of these findings in relation to existing research, I have drawn upon previous research on theories of leadership and leadership development, as the experiences of educators teaching leadership

has obvious limitations. Furthermore, viewing the findings from Dewey's theoretical lens has offered me a continued discussion on education and experience, including on reflective thinking.

"Good" leaders have social and practical skills

While leadership research has grown significantly over the past century (Liden et al., 2025); Northouse, 2022), scholars continue to discuss what leadership actually is, yet without reaching a consensus. If we view the findings from the elusive idea of leadership, it is not surprising that the educators had difficulties in describing what "good" leadership is, even though they all had years of practical and theoretical experience as leaders. Nevertheless, there is a rather clear suggestion that their perceptions of "good" leadership can be understood from a relational (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) and an inclusive leadership perspective that focuses on people (Benmira & Agboola, 2020) and also does this from a pragmatic and realistic outlook in order to be able to function in daily situations (situational leadership). Their outlook includes embracing diversity and relying on qualities like honesty and accountability for one's actions and mistakes. It also entails having an adaptable mindset, which is key for any pragmatic outlook, as this acknowledges that having a clear vision is important, yet must be balanced with a realistic understanding of challenges, resources and potential outcomes (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). At the same time, the stated abilities and qualities can also be understood as being transformational leadership (Burns, 2003). If we then include the findings that demonstrate that the educators continuously reflect on their experiences to be able to develop self-awareness and live by their values, their perceptions can also be understood from the perspective of authentic leadership theory (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

It is nevertheless interesting to note that the qualities and abilities highlighted in the findings all point towards the common, yet complex situations that leaders face in their daily realities, as suggested by the educators' accounts. These are situations that require social and practical skills, according to the educators. These skills include the way that "good" leaders interact with individuals and groups, how they treat team members (followers), and how they build and maintain relationships by acknowledging, encouraging and supporting team members (through genuine dialogue) to grow and attain personal and common goals. These descriptions can be found in recent studies, both in the sport context (Groves & Clements, 2023) and in business settings (Gilli et al., 2024). Relational processes which require "to be more sensitive to the opportunities of the moment" (Jones & Ronglan, 2017, p. 906).

Moreover, "good" leaders have practical skills and habits that can support decisions and help to manage complex situations. These include actions that involve trusting one's intuition and having the courage to make mistakes, adapting to and navigating difficult situations by relying on previous experiences. This also includes being able to organize, having a clear vision and leading people in the right direction.

Looking at the combination of skills and qualities that the educators highlight, makes me wonder where I could find such leadership in earlier research and what theory could explain the educators' views. Despite the numerous approaches that have emerged since the start of the 21st century, the theories that explain leadership from a certain perspective focus on certain challenges and needs found in organizations (Northouse, 2022), I have discovered that even if I were to combine various approaches and theories, there is still something complex but also practical in the educators' accounts that cannot be explained by existing theories. Furthermore, to my knowledge, there seems to be a tendency in previous research of often categorizing leaders by being either a relationship-oriented or a task-oriented leader, although some recent studies do point out the synergies between them (Rahaman, 2024). This categorization points to a sort of simplification of what leaders face in their daily realities, but is also a consequence of the lack of theories that are broad enough to capture the complexities of leadership as suggested by leadership scholars (Riggio, 2019; Yukl & Garnder, 2020).

It is somewhat remarkable that, despite the immense knowledge produced, there are still no general theories that include the qualities and skills needed to manage daily realities; the findings suggest that this simplification of understanding leadership may be due to methodological issues. For example, even though the educators did not hesitate to answer the question of what "good" leadership is, they still had difficulties in articulating their thoughts and views on the topic. They instead shared their ideas based on personal experiences in an oversimplified manner in order to attempt to make sense of their complex daily realities. This suggests that in order to explore and gain understanding of complexities in the daily lives of leaders, the limitations of some of the methods and approaches being used to better describe the experiences of leaders (and educators) need to be highlighted and need to be acknowledged, as some leadership scholars (Riggio, 2019) are already doing.

Are "good" leaders born or made?

There are also some indications in the findings that not all people can be "good" leaders, as some lack certain qualities. This finding relates to the ongoing discussion in leadership research as to whether leaders are born or made. For example, Boerma et al. (2017) conclude that leaders are most likely made from a combination of genetic tendency and development through various environmental factors that contribute to leadership development, despite the fact that there is a leadership industry committed to purposefully "making leaders". There are other scholars who consider that leaders are born with certain qualities but also conclude that leadership qualities can be developed over time through learning (Asselmann et al., 2023; Sposato, 2024). This discussion also points out that, despite the idea that leaders display certain traits and skills having been challenged, and the existing critique within leadership studies of scholars continuing to study special types of leaders, instead of questioning what we know about their direct experiences of leadership (Ciulla, 2020), studies still continue to examine the combinations of traits found in leaders (Parr et al., 2016) as well as the preferred personality traits (Calluso & Devetag, 2025). Thus, it is not strange that the educators' beliefs of leadership includes contradictory ideas of whether leaders are born or made.

However, the inconsistencies found in their perceptions can be understood from their examples of "good" leaders. All but one of the educators referred to examples of leaders who were people in their close relationships, such as family members and colleagues (former bosses). This suggests that leadership is not about position or power but is available to everyone and not just formally selected leaders. Thus, according to the findings, it is the behaviours and actions displayed that make a person a "good" leader. This implies that even although the discussion about whether leaders are born or not is referring to leaders in formal roles or influential positions, the findings hint towards a possible alternative direction of focus that would aid the understanding of the kinds of qualities and skills "good" leaders need to develop, and that research could focus on these qualities and behaviours found in families and workplaces, on the people in our everyday lives.

Developing as a leader is an ongoing process

The findings from the educators' accounts about their own leadership development demonstrate that they had difficulties identifying and explaining how they had developed as leaders and what had influenced their learning

processes. They implied that their learning is an accumulation of years of practical and theoretical experiences; this type of knowledge is difficult to define. Yet, it is interesting that the findings indicated a belief in leadership development beginning in childhood and that it continues to evolve throughout life with ever more additional experiences and practices. According to the educators, this process includes learning from the experiences and stories of others, and through various interactions. However, it also involves the habit of reflecting on one's experiences in order to be able to improve and gain more self-awareness. This belief can be understood from the categorization of leadership development of Kjellström et al. (2020) who suggest that one way of perceiving leadership development is from a personal development perspective, which includes a belief that one does not become a leader at a certain point in time but rather that it is a continuous process of learning and goes beyond the formal role that the person holds. According to Kjellström et al. (2020), this outlook means that a person moves beyond skills and competencies and places emphasis on reflection and the importance of knowing oneself, which can be developed through reflection; this view can be supported by a recent study (Ohlsson & Sjöstrand, 2025) done in a Swedish context that focuses on leadership development through reflective practices.

This outlook aligns with recent studies emphasizing that leadership development should be viewed from a lifespan approach, a process that also involves the development of a leader's self-identity over time (Liu et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2024). This approach is connected to approaches that highlight leadership as being experienced from within, and that there is thus a need to know oneself and one's beliefs, values and commitments in order to be able to grow as a leader (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004); this also includes self-awareness and self-leadership (Manz, 1986). This way of understanding leadership has grown through the promotion of a variety of efforts towards developing physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of inner awareness (Bennis, 2009). Thus, the discussion as to whether leadership can be learned by attending courses and programmes has intensified in multifaceted discussions as suggested in research on leadership development (Snook et al. 2012). In the last decades there has been an expansion of leadership training programmes that focus on developing leaders with various effects and outcomes (Northouse, 2022). At the same time, there are studies pointing out that current leadership development activities still focus on the same concepts and techniques that were being applied as far back as 40 years ago (Murphy, 2019). This debate is reflected in the findings, as the educators' accounts indicate inconsistencies regarding their beliefs on whether participating

in leadership programmes can offer anything useful or not. Their accounts noted that they had participated in leadership courses and programmes in various settings (higher education, sport contexts, organizational settings) in their various roles as leaders. However, there were some indications connected to these descriptions that even although they believed it is important to participate in leadership programmes, there was also a belief that leadership must be practiced and cannot be learned merely from theory. Equally some explanations suggested that although the educators were not sure what they had learned from leadership courses, they still attended courses connected to their own role and position. Others were even unsure as to whether leadership programmes could offer them anything useful at all.

The findings covering the educators' perceptions, and the existing research highlight key issues within leadership. There is a lack of overall understanding of the daily complexities that leaders face, as well as the qualities and skills needed for managing situations. Furthermore (as suggested in the findings) questions arose about whether some skills and qualities can be developed or not, like open-mindedness to various perspectives, have a caring outlook, and practical and efficient communication skills expressing vision and leading the way towards common goals. However, the findings, supported by previous research, also suggest that developing as a leader is a lifelong process that starts at an early stage in life and occurs via various experiences that help to develop a leader's identity. This is a learning process that involves learning from and through others, and from self-reflection. The findings make me wonder what the implications of the educators' perceptions are in their practices and educational engagements.

Educational considerations

Learning through experiences and social interactions aligns very well with Dewey's theoretical lens (1938/2015). He noted that each experience is built upon a previous one and involves social influences. In every situation, the present experiences have an effect, for better or worse, the attitudes that influence further experiences. For example, he wrote that if an experience encourages curiosity, this will strengthen and influence future experiences. When viewing the educators' accounts from this lens, it appears likely that their experiences from an early age influenced and shaped their outlook on the perception of leadership as well as encouraging them to develop qualities and skills for future leadership roles (as indicated in their accounts). Yet their experiences also suggest that during their young years and/or after reaching a certain age, they had developed a habit of reflecting on their experiences and on their own understandings, beliefs,

and feelings. According to Dewey's lens (1910/1997), their accounts suggest that this helped them to train gradually their minds in order to deal with complex social and personal situations, applying fragments of knowledge that were part of their experiences while growing up. This process helped them to develop reflective and critical thinking especially when facing unfamiliar situations. According to Dewey, this reflective process helps a person to find similar previous experiences that lead to forming "a judgment of what may be expected in the present situation" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 68). This learning includes understanding that when something or a situation is uncertain, there are several possible interpretations, and therefore one needs to make a judgment. At the same time, in every case and on every occasion, there are many details to consider. Thus, the process of being able to separate what is significant and what is valuable information from that which is not relevant to that occurrence requires a practice of reflection.

Dewey also highlighted that there are no rules that enables a person to select or reject given information. This comes from a person's good judgment, which is developed instinctively and is formed from previous experiences and outcomes. These are experiences that have involved exploring and testing actions and choices with attentiveness, adaptability and curiosity, all essential qualities that are part of the process. Hence, learning is not wisdom, and information does not guarantee good judgment, but rather people develop certain modes of understanding that encapsulate stored experiences and meanings, enabling a person to make good or bad judgments.

Consequently, as Dewey's explains, while people go around and perform daily actions in various situations, there are certain actions of which they have knowledge but cannot describe. This explains why the educators had difficulties in describing their own learning processes and daily performances, especially in relation to complex situations. Instead, their accounts suggest what Dewey called "over-simplifying" (1910/1997, p. 216). This refers to them being able to share their ideas based on personal experiences in an oversimplified manner in order to make sense of complex daily realities. This suggests that the knowledge they had acquired over many years and through various complex situations remains tacit. This is knowledge that teaches about making good judgments by trusting in one's intuition and past experiences, including having the courage to make mistakes and embracing these as learning opportunities. This is also knowledge that is difficult to transfer.

The educators' accounts also suggest that they had participated in leadership programmes and activities during their younger years, which, according to the

findings, indicated that they believed these opportunities were part of their learning process. However, at the same time, the findings suggest that there were some contradictory beliefs as to whether leadership programmes can be useful or not. This indicates a change in their outlook, which is possibly influenced by their ongoing experiences in various leadership roles, enabling them to develop through practice. Dewey explained that there is an assumption that education must be applicable for future possibilities and that education can offer certain skills and knowledge for future purposes. However, although he upheld that every experience holds a learning opportunity and is part of a person's growth, these concepts can still not be learned merely through instruction, since what is taught and learned during education is done in isolation. This isolated knowledge suggests fragmented knowledge and a lack of sense-making, which is part of the learning progress. Based on this view, education without practice is not sufficient for learning to take place. Thus, again, this emphasizes Dewey's claim that "experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other" (1938/2015, p. 25), as both are part of a person's growth. However, education does not have a function if it is not connected to the everyday realities that are relevant to the learner in the given present moment and situation.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to what kind of learning takes place when teaching is future-oriented. This question leads me into the next chapter in order to present the findings from the observations of the leadership programmes and the young participants.

7 LEADERSHIP EDUCATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

As described in chapter two, although the topic of leadership has been studied in many ways and from a multitude of perspectives, there is very limited understanding of leadership educators (Jenkins & Owen, 2016; Seemiller & Priest, 2017). In recent years, however, interest in how leadership educators prepare and design leadership programmes and activities has increased (Pierre et al., 2020), with findings showing that educators teaching leadership base their teaching practices on their own experiences in their leadership roles or experiences of leaders, for example, by sharing own personal stories during activities. In this way, the educators can illustrate the various leadership concepts that are being taught (Priest & Seemiller, 2018). There are also studies that point out challenges the educators face, for example, deciding what educational methods to use when teaching young people, since much of the teaching is drawn from the field of adult education (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Furthermore, when planning and conducting leadership programmes, educators must take several aspects into consideration since many young participants participating in the activities have no prior leadership experience, yet still hold strong beliefs and ideas about leadership (Caza & Rosch, 2014).

In order to be able to understand how young people develop as leaders, it is fundamental to gain insight into the experiences of the educators teaching leadership, their outlook when planning and conducting their leadership activities for young people and the challenges connected to their practices.

This chapter focuses on presenting, analysing and discussing the findings with the aim of understanding, describing and interpreting the key considerations that the educators highlight when planning their activities for young participants, including insights drawn from my observations during the leadership activities, as well as interactions and responses from the participants.

The following questions are asked:

1. How do the educators design and implement leadership activities for the young participants?
2. What pedagogical challenges do the educators face?

The presentation of the findings is divided into three themes that were generated during the analysis process. The first theme is *Leadership: a "space to learn"*; the second theme is *Future-oriented outlook*; the third theme is *Playfulness and stories inspire participants.*

After the findings are presented, I will discuss the themes, including previous research. The chapter will conclude with a discussion using Dewey's theoretical lens, as in previous chapters.

The presented findings are based on empirical data from the focus group interview and the semi-structured interviews with the educators, as well as the observations from the leadership training programmes, including notes from my research journals. Some of the accounts presented are extracts from my field notes; during the observations I made some brief analyses on the observed situations while taking these notes.

Leadership: a "space to learn"

In order to understand how the educators plan and implement their leadership activities, I asked them to share some of their considerations while preparing these activities. During the analysis process a theme was identified, *Leadership: a "space to learn"*, which was based on the educators' rather harmonious outlook on the primary purpose of the activities they prepare. The theme can be illustrated by the following account:

> I have heard many young people say that they want to be leaders, but they don't know how […]. It is to offer a place to meet and develop in their own way […] together with the perspectives of others (Sarah).

The analysis showed that the educators' outlook when preparing their leadership activities, as described above, was based on the assumption that young people in general have access to information, and that what is important is instead to provide a space for dialogue for them (one educator commented on "planting

a seed") and also to support them in order to develop their own ideas about leadership by inspiring them in various ways.

Their accounts also highlighted that young people need space to develop relationships by interacting with others in "real life". The following is another example of this theme:

> To create a space for learning where the participants acquire knowledge, sure … knowledge is power, but it is also about finding inspiration … to hear other people's life stories, experiences … to meet others […]. It is easy to find information in society nowadays … my own journey as a leader has taught me that social skills and to maintain relationships is most important (Louise).

As indicated above, the findings indicated that the educators prepared their activities based on their own knowledge, accumulated from practical and theoretical experiences. As mentioned in the previous chapter, their accounts also indicated that their ideas for exercises, what questions to ask and the various methods used were all drawn from their own experiences of participating in various leadership courses and programmes, including reading different reports, literature and research studies. The following illustration clearly suggests that the educators based their teaching practices on their own experiences:

> I have planned and designed many programmes about leadership […]. I like adjusting according to given situation … but my teaching must be based on my experiences (Julia).

Their accounts also show that when they prepare activities, they try to move away from theoretical descriptions and instead create space for discussions, questions and interactions. The following two accounts exemplify their outlook and why they considered that it is important to create space for dialogue:

> To find ways to create safe spaces and trust with young people … It is not easy to talk to adults when one is not used to doing so […] adults need to pay attention, listen and not just position themselves […]. We must support them … strengthen their self-perception (Alex).

> I think it is incredibly important to show compassion … build their self-esteem … to let them express their thoughts and tell them that their ideas are important […] We should not put the words in their mouths […] they are our future (Beatrice).

The above examples illustrate what was identified in the educators' accounts, creating a space for dialogue provides the young participants with opportunities to express themselves and to develop and understand their own thought processes. This view was based on a belief that young people are not comfortable enough to approach adults. It takes time to understand one's own ideas and feelings and to have the courage and the trust to express these feelings and thoughts, especially when interactions are usually only for a short period of time. Thus, the educators considered that dialogue can provide opportunities for young people to learn how to express themselves. Furthermore, the educators indicated that by approaching the activities from a dialogical perspective, this provided opportunities during the activities for paying attention to the young participants' questions and ideas. It was also important to acknowledge and support the young participants by "seeing them", "listening to them", encouraging and "being there" for them.

Moreover, the educators highlighted that young people need to learn how to reflect on their experiences and several commented that they need to "find their own voices". This was a key ability according to the educators since they believed that to lead others, one must first learn to lead oneself. And to lead oneself, one must understand own thoughts, emotions, actions, strengths, weaknesses and to recognize the influence one has on oneself and others. The following example illustrates the educators' accounts regarding the importance of encouraging young participants to reflect more. Yet it also demonstrates, as suggested in the findings, that the educators base their activities on their own experiences:

> Encourage the young participants to reflect and find answers on their own such as, why did this happen? Why did this turn out well? Why did it turn out wrong? […] this is something I learned from one of the courses I attended (Louise).

Thus, when the educators prepare their activities, they aim to create space for learning through dialogue and sharing ideas and thoughts, with a focus on social interactions and reflection, including opportunities for questions.

Their accounts also show when they prepare their activities they begin with a plan that defines the aim and goals of a specific activity and/or the training programme. By doing this, they prepare activities (exercises) that support the aim. Furthermore, according to the educators, when meeting a new group, time is needed to get to know each participant and understand their differences. Thus, they try to make space for some flexibility in order to recognize these needs and adjust in each situation, as the following account illustrates:

> In structured and organized sessions, it is important to be able to be flexible and share with the group what is expected of them, but also that the group members feel they are part of the group, a sense of belonging. […]. Especially when one meets a new group for the first time … having clear communication, getting everyone engaged, and knowing what is expected of them is crucial […]. A good training session must be prepared and organized…to be able to manage unexpected situations … enable a sense of belonging […]. I prefer workshops instead of lectures. Asking questions creates space for thought and connects them to their reality (Erik).

Thus, the above example demonstrates what was suggested in the educators' descriptions: it is important to have a clear idea and structure for activities as this can provide opportunities for creativity and improvisation where personal experiences can be used as resources in teaching.

The topics (Figure 15) that I identified during the sessions from the educators' accounts as well as from the field notes focused mainly on social skills and self-awareness.

Figure 15

Showing the identified topics during the observed activities

These topics were considered by the educators, based on their descriptions, as essential knowledge that young people need to learn as part of their personal growth and also that these are key issues and abilities in leadership.

Furthermore, I identified three pedagogical approaches during the activities from their accounts and my field notes. One approach was based on short lectures during the activities, which lasted approximately 10–25 minutes. The lectures where organized as presentations with main points and descriptions relating to the topic during the activity. On all occasions when a lecture was given a visual aid was used (PowerPoint: texts and images). During the lectures, except on a few occasions, the young participants were not asked any questions, nor did any of the young participants ask any questions.

Workshops were another approach and this was identified as the most common method during the observations. The workshops that were more interactive included discussions, group exercises and activities, including individual exercises like having time for reflection. A further interactive approach was group dialogue, which I associate with "campfire" conversations where the whole group sits in a circle and shares stories and experiences. In the various accounts from the observations, it was noted that several situations included group discussions with the whole groups of around 15–20 participants, while at other times the groups were divided into smaller groups with 4–6 participants. There were no occasions with discussions in pairs.

Before presenting key findings from the observations during the activities, an important finding must be highlighted, that of the educators' accounts indicating some concerns. Their descriptions showed that they were aware that many of the young participants, for various reasons, did not engage in the discussions and exercises during the activities. The educators gave a repeated example like "they do not answer or ask questions and some remain quiet". They also indicated that it is not always easy to take time and pay attention to all participants, and to respond to their needs and concerns. Some expressed that they often want to do more but they feel that it is "difficult to always find the time".

Another significant concern identified was that the educators did not receive sufficient feedback from the young participants during or after an activity or when a programme finished. Two of the educators explained that when they receive feedback, it is usually a short response such as "it was good". This short feedback made it difficult for them to understand in what way the activities were good, or to know what kind of improvements are needed. Sometimes when feedback was given by the young participants, which according to the educators' descriptions could be a few months after an activity or a programme had ended, they merely received short comments like "thanks for the opportunity", making it very unclear what the young participants had actually learned. The following account

exemplifies their concern. While second example describes how they follow up the activities:

> I can teach them about it … but I don't know how much and if they make sense or implement what they've learned (Anna).

> We follow-up and talk to them … ask them about their experiences, how they feel about the activities … if the activities are good … not so good … what can be improved. But in general, to have an open dialogue and talk to them whenever the opportunity is given, like in the hallway, during the breaks and so on (Louise).

A future-oriented outlook

The analysis from the field notes covering the observations identified a theme of the activities; *A future-oriented outlook* that covers the activities when the topic of leadership was discussed in various ways, and that the discussions, questions (Figure 16) and exercises were all future-oriented. For example, the accounts suggested that when the educators talked about the role of leaders that included key abilities like collaboration, taking responsibility for one's actions, having an awareness of cultural differences and influencing others, the educators connected these aspects by asking the young participants how they perceive themselves as future leaders, including the kind of values and beliefs they would include in their leadership roles.

Figure 16

Showing examples of questions asked by the educators to the young participants during the activities

What kind of impact do you want to have as a leader?

What kind of leader do you want to be?

What is your image of the leader you want to be?

What do you need to become the kind of leader you imagine yourself to be?

The following account from the field notes exemplifies the theme by illustrating when the young participants were asked about the kind of leader they would like to be:

> The educator gives instructions to the groups to take time to reflect on their own ideas of *the kind of leader they would like to be*. The participants are given 30 minutes to reflect on these questions and if there is time to also engage in dialogue and share some thoughts. I am interrupted as I hear a participant asking "but what does this mean" Another in the group explains rather quickly and quietly as I change my focus to another participant who says "this is so difficult". I notice how the sound in the room is now almost unnoticeable and I take a deep breath as a thought crosses my mind: am I missing something? (field notes).

As demonstrated, the educator gave the group instructions about reflecting on the kind of leader they want to be, in other words, envisioning themselves in the future. The group had 30 minutes to reflect on the question, with no further instructions, except that when the participants felt they were finished with the reflection, they could continue discussing in their groups about their own thoughts relating the question. However, as noted above, several participants expressed out loud that it was difficult and they did not understand what the exercise was about. There were several accounts where the participants expressed difficulties in understanding the questions and about what was expected of them during the exercises.

The following account exemplifies another occasion when the participants had difficulties in understanding the questions and the exercise. It describes a situation when the educator presented a "model for identifying values". Before this the educator had explained the importance of having and knowing one's own values as a leader. The model presented had bullet points on one page, with various values and questions. The educator explained the model as a tool that can help to identify one's own values, values that can point towards future leadership roles:

> The educator presents a model that is a tool for leaders to help them identify their own values, which is "the backbone of leading oneself". […] They will now focus on issues that can guide them in their understanding of the values they hold and their expectations […]. The participants at each table are asked to start sharing and comparing some ideas with one another by discussing the questions "how do you get motivated?" They are asked to discuss similarities and differences. I see several

> staring eyes, several of them are quiet; some are engaged in the discussion, the same participants as always. […]. I continue observing some have written or at least scribbled a few words on the papers that were handed out while some papers are still blank (field notes).

Thus, the above account describes a situation when the participants were asked to identify their own values that could help them with self-awareness about leading themselves. This account also points out that all the participants were not engaged; some were quiet while others were active. This was suggested in the other accounts as well, a noticeable lack of engagement during the group exercises when the topic of leadership was discussed, including how the participants envision themselves as leaders.

The lack of engagement was noted by recurring descriptions illustrating that some are active, some are looking at looking at their cell phones, while others are quiet. One account is described as follows:

> I see some are active, speak out loud, socializing […] some are looking at their cell phones. Some have been quiet during the discussion. Some even have their jackets still on, looking down at their cell phones as if they were on their way out (field notes).

The above account, which exemplifies the participants' disengagement, was found in connection to a discussion regarding what expectations the participants have of their future roles as leaders: a question that was repeated in other sessions. This highlights that the participants were asked various questions (Figure 16) during the activities that are all connected to the kind of leader they want to be, and/or envision themselves to be. They were also asked about the kind of impact they want to have as leaders.

The question of what motivates them or the kind of leader they want to be was highlighted several times. The observations show that when the questions were asked no hands were raised, nor were any responses given. Some educators asked the young participants to reflect on the questions, while others stated that since it is not easy to come up with answers, they could reflect on the questions at home, write down their thoughts and hand the notes in.

The following account illustrates a situation when the young participants were instructed to reflect on the kind of leader they would like to be:

> Describe who you are today, and how you hope to be in a year. Reflect what you have learned today but do so at home and then write it down and hand it in next time (field notes).

In connection with the questions (Figure 16) the young participants were also asked to discuss and share personal experiences, such as giving examples of situations where they could identify leadership qualities and abilities. The findings show that the young participants had difficulties giving examples, and when they did, they gave examples of situations and experiences involving family members and/or friends.

Besides difficulties relating to questions, it was also noted that during the activities relating to how one envisions oneself as a leader and what it required of a leader, the participants expressed that it was difficult to understand some words and phrases such as "self-leadership", "leadership tools" and as the following account exemplifies, the word "target image":

> I observe and can barely hear the discussions around the tables, fragmented sentences such as "who can help me?" …." this is so hard" …" what is a target image?' […] As I continue listening to some parts of their discussions, I hear a participant comment "I am good at saying no to my sister" while another says "I simply say no". The educator walks around and makes sure that they all understand the questions and makes some clarifications. I notice that this creates a more relaxed feeling in the room, and the discussions are now becoming louder and happier […].There are some participants who still have not stopped looking at their cell phones while others have hardly been quiet as they comment how they have not had the time to write down any of their thoughts. The group sitting closest to me continues discussing. Again, one of them asks "what is a target image?" (field notes)

The above account illustrates a situation, involving expressions of not being able to make sense of what they are doing and indicating that several participants had difficulties in understanding words and phrases. Many of them did not engage in the discussion. However, it also illustrates, as noted during other times, that when the educators followed up and made sure that the participants had understood the question and/or the exercise, several of the quiet participants then engaged in the discussion.

But there was another issue identified during these discussions: the pace of the discussions and the exercises. In the following account, I notice as I myself take

notes, how fast the tempo of the various parts of the exercise are. The account illustrates an exercise where the participants were asked to prepare a presentation regarding how they would solve a certain problem. They are given five steps to follow in the instructions. Each step involved the group identifying a situation involving the problem and planning how to take the next step in the process:

> "Time is up!" the educator says … Wow, I hardly had time to write down my observations ..." Who wants to start?" the educator asks. It is quiet […]. The educator continues "now we need to be strategic … how will you present your solutions following the five steps?" … Now it is even quieter. I see and hear that the participants are speaking very quietly, hearing … "It is so difficult" … "What should we do?" … "Where are we headed?" … Total quiet … "Time is up!" "What!" "But we are not done yet" ... Again "Time is up!" (field notes).

Playfulness and stories inspire participants

During the analysis from the field notes covering the observations, I identified another theme connected to the activities: *Playfulness and stories inspire participants*. This theme covers activities that indicated that the level of engagement increased during certain exercises with more playful elements and when the educators shared personal stories and experiences. This implies that these situations inspired the participants. For example, certain expressions of joy and enthusiasm were identified, with participants more engaged than usual; this included participants who were in general quieter and more inactive.

One part of the stated theme is the *stories* and experiences the educators shared during the sessions. The findings from the observations during all seven occasions showed that the educators shared personal stories and experiences of being a leader, including their learning process. They described events, challenges, including, thoughts feelings, expectations and goals while also describing their own roles as leaders. Several of the educators described that there are different ways a person can develop as a leader, and various events and experiences that can lead to various leadership positions and roles. On six out of seven occasions, the educators highlighted and explained the importance of leading oneself.

The accounts from the observations showed also that when the educators shared their personal stories, the participants asked the educators questions. This was not observed on other occasions, only during the situations when personal experiences were shared. The questions related to the personal feelings of the

educators and about knowing how to make the right choices and what to do in difficult situations (Figure 17). However, during these situations there was another kind of dialogue and exchange between the educators and the participants, which resulted in greater discussion. The following brief account illustrates the replies of one participant during one of the discussions:

> The educator asks if anyone wants to share any thoughts. One participant says "I want to get to know myself", while another says "to be inspired by others and to inspire others" (field notes).

Thus, this account exemplifies the comments the young participants expressed when the educators shared their stories. The accounts indicate that their comments illustrate how they were able to relate to the stories but also that stories inspired them into asking questions (Figure 17).

Figure 17

Showing examples of questions the young participants asked the educators

What have you done in your life to get to this point as a leader?

What has been the most challenging thing?

Why is it fun to be a leader and what kind of challenges have you experienced?

Is it not stressful being a leader?

The above questions are examples of questions the young participants asked the educators, indicating that they were curious about personal feelings and thoughts about what it is like to be a leader and what it takes to be a leader.

The following account is based on my field notes from the observations (Figure 15) exemplifies a story shared by an educator during a workshop (she was not interviewed as described in the methodology chapter).

Ayla shared her experiences while growing up to make a point that it is important that one can learn that despite difficulties and even through challenges, and that it is possible to reach personal goals. However, this requires getting to know oneself and to learning how to lead oneself (Figure 18).

Figure 18

Description of an educator's personal story shared during an activity

Ayla

Ayla had experienced inequalities and not experienced much tolerance, which made her often reflect on injustices in society. During her teenage years she also met people who inspired her to engage in various after-school activities. During secondary school something changed in her and she decided that she would not study economics but become a social worker since she wanted to help others, especially those who were less fortunate. Besides her studies at the University, Ayla started working on various projects to gain leadership experience. She described how being outside her own comfort zone and doing things she was not good at or prepared for helped her to take responsibility and learn.

After her studies and degree in social work, she was offered an opportunity to lead a project within an international children's organization. She described that this work meant a great deal to her as she wanted "to do good in the community". Her experiences in this position taught her that she must do what it takes to become the leader she wants to be. She explained that being open-minded and flexible is central in leadership. For example, she said "If it's necessary to paint walls, play with children, move around furniture or build things, I will do it".

Ayla had also experienced that as a leader it is fundamental to "let go" sometimes, since it is important to let others help, even although she likes to oversee things and make sure everything gets done.

Ayla underlined that to be able to lead others one must lead oneself. However, this takes time as it is not easy to know what one wants or where one is headed. Still, it is important, especially as a leader. She ended by saying one thing we cannot forget is human dignity. So, to be a good leader I must learn to be more inclusive (field notes).

The second part of the theme covers exercises and situations within which I identified included playful elements. The following is an example of a playful exercise during a workshop, which exemplifies one part of the theme, playfulness:

> The educator instructs the participants to stand in line according to the month they are born. Says with a laugh "you are not allowed to speak or ask questions, but by mimicking and using facial expressions". As the participants start moving around in the room trying to figure out how to find out everyone's month of birth, it becomes apparent rather quickly that participants born in January have found a good place to position themselves as the first month […]. It did not take long time … a group of participants have positioned themselves on the other side of the room, leaving space for 10 months. "This was not easy" says one participant … everyone is laughing […] struggling … they now stand in line, hoping they've got it right […]. The educator now asks the participants "What did you feel? Was it easy? What thoughts went through your mind? Was it awkward? What irritated you? You don't have to answer, just reflect on how this short activity made you feel; therein lies some of the answers of being a good leader". A participant comments straight out "it was difficult to not be able to communicate and express without using words". While another participant says quietly "all I was thinking of was I need to develop patience and cooperation" […]. The educator explains "this exercise shows how communicating and understanding one another can be difficult and how easily misinterpretations can arise, especially when we do not communicate or express ourselves clearly" (field notes).

The above account illustrates an exercise that involved 20 participants. They struggled for a while to find their positions according to their birth month. The accounts afterwards describe all the participants being engaged in discussions, in small groups as well as in the whole group. This also indicates that several of them, especially the ones who did not engage in discussions or communicate any thoughts, expressed spontaneous feelings during these exercises. For example, in one account when the educator asked the participants after an exercise how they felt, one of the participants who had previously been quiet, said out loud "I feel wonderful!"

In another account when a session was almost done, one participant looks at the cell phone and says out loud "I can't believe time's up already!" while another participant says "I was tired when I came here, I am not anymore".

The following account illustrates another exercise with some element of playfulness and the participants' responses:

> "A quick icebreaker to get to know each other a little better". The educator instructs the participants accordingly, while throwing the ball to each other, the one who catches the ball shares something good about their day but also how one feels being here. As the first participant catches the ball from the educator, she comments quietly "all I can think of is how tired I am, and I can't think of one positive thing right now". After a pause, she throws the ball to the next participant who comments without hesitation "I feel good, and I am glad that the sun was shining today!" (field notes).

The comment above where the participant expresses how good it felt was articulated by a participant who had not spoken nor expressed anything during previous exercises.

"The present" can create learning moments

Studies show that educators teaching leadership make use of numerous approaches, and that each programme takes a different point of departure in the pursuit of teaching leadership (DeLong & Hill, 2012). This suggests that there are multitudes of ways of approaching the concept of leadership and how this is taught by educators. Yet, despite scholars (Pierre et al., 2020) highlighting that leadership educators play a crucial role in the process of leadership, there is not much knowledge about how they approach and implement their teaching practices. The studies that do exist on leadership educators focus foremost on leadership educators in higher education. Nevertheless, these scholars stress that in order to support educators teaching leadership in their practices, it is important that we understand their experiences and how they approach their craft (Jenkins, 2019). I agree with this view since, as the findings suggest, there are significant insights to be drawn from the educators' perceptions and practices in relation to the way that young people develop as leaders. At the same time, I must highlight that the gap in knowledge on leadership educators was evident when I began to situate my findings within existing knowledge. Therefore, in order to gain some understanding of the findings, I have drawn upon previous research that relates to the following findings.

Teaching leadership to young people

The findings covered how the educators prepare and implement their leadership activities and indicate that the educators plan the activities based on their own practical and theoretical experiences as practitioners (managers and coaches). They have a focus on inspiring young participants by creating space for learning leadership through dialogue and by organizing activities that enable flexibility and opportunities for recognizing the needs of the young participants, and adjust accordingly to the situation. Furthermore, the findings also indicated that several activities had more of a future-oriented outlook that involved exercises, group discussions and questions about the role of a leader and the kind of leader the participants envisioned themselves being, and the kind of impact they hope to have as leaders. According to the accounts, the level of engagement was lower than in activities that had more playful and personal elements. Moreover, the findings indicated that the educators were aware that many of the young participants were not engaged in the discussions and exercises during the activities, yet the educators did not really understand why this was the case since their accounts also indicated that the educators did not receive sufficient feedback from the young participants during or after activities.

Leadership activities based on personal experiences

The findings on the educators' experiences indicated that they prepared and implemented their leadership activities based on their own practical experiences. It is interesting to note that they specifically highlighted how they draw their inspirations from the leadership courses and programmes they participate in and from their own roles as leaders; a perspective I have not been able to find in previous research. On the other hand, Priest and Seemiller's (2018) study demonstrates some similarities in the way they describe how educators teach leadership based on their experiences and by sharing personal stories, and do so as a way of illustrating various concepts and issues concerning leadership through making meaning and communicating about past experiences that the educators have been reflecting upon.

The findings also indicate that the educators used pedagogical approaches such as lectures to present brief introductions to a topic. Furthermore, their workshops used dialogical methods based on situational needs and which had the aim of engaging the young participants in various exercises and discussions. The findings also indicate a belief that well organized activities can provide flexibility and offer creative teaching strategies to meet every young learner's personal

needs. These approaches and ideas reflect previous work in the field of education (Lundgren et al., 2014).

The educators' outlook was that young people need space to learn and that dialogue is a fundamental method for teaching leadership; this is interesting as it suggests that the young participants can express themselves, develop and understand their own thought processes through dialogue. This view is based on the belief that young people are not always comfortable enough to approach adults. Similar findings from a community leadership development programme for adults suggest that the programme provided the participants with space for dialogue. For example, the participants in the study expressed that dialogue provided them ways of viewing things differently and that it also offered them opportunities for becoming aware of their own strengths in relation to others' experiences, and that this included opening their minds to different perspectives (Majee et al., 2024).

Creating a space for dialogue for developing relationships by interacting with others was also indicated in the findings. The view that young people need to develop social skills was highlighted in the educators' accounts; however, this could also be connected to the educators' beliefs (as described in previous chapter) that social skills are essential and learning how to develop and maintain social relationships by interacting with others, is an essential ability for leadership. Using dialogue as method in leadership education can also provide opportunities for young participants to develop communicative skills, abilities that scholars highlight are important for responding to social change, which is expected of many leaders (Riggio, 2024; Roper, 2019).

Nagda and Roper (2019) state that many educators and scholars have pointed out that traditional models of leader education overemphasize the development of individual and personal qualities at the expense or exclusion of relational, collective, and societal qualities. This suggests that even though it is important for young people to develop personal leadership abilities, it is crucial to not overlook relational abilities. Nagda and Roper (2019) explain that although it is easy to consider individual capabilities, dialogue is an important instrument for group learning, relationship building, and aligning diverse individuals for shared action through the fostering of common understanding of important social issues. At the same time, they point out that bringing dialogue practices to self-leadership entails listening to oneself without judgment and bringing meaning and purpose to one's life. Deeper reflection can also help develop awareness of how the mind makes assumptions, attaches meaning to emotions and sensations, and infers value or meaning to different behaviours. By slowing down the mind's tendency

to make inferences and jump from observation to conclusion, one can shift perspectives to understand situations and oneself in the context of these situations. This view was also indicated in the findings, as the educators underlined the importance of reflection and integrated reflective exercises during the activities. However, teachers and trainers in the field of leadership and management development Reddy and Srinivasan (2015) discovered that for more than two decades leadership development programmes have tended to focus less on leadership theories and more on developmental processes. They propose that one must ask whether the methods and approaches one is deploying will facilitate the desired outcomes when thinking through goals and aims of leadership programmes. This means coherent models are necessary, for example, if the aim is more in-depth learning that leads to changed behaviours, this involves changing emotional structures, and there is also a need for practice and practical experiences with long-term support and commitment. Yet in short classroom-based programmes, cognitive (thinking exercises) understanding can take place and can be learned more easily. Although group learning approaches are important, Reddy and Srinivasan (2015) state that short duration programmes are not enough and require a (peer-to-peer) support group pursuing a similar learning process so that peers can meet regularly, spend time and ask questions such as what have you done, how did you succeed, and so on.

Challenges and possibilities

Although the observations of this study were not conducted with the aim of evaluating the programmes, it is difficult to not touch upon the subject of the outcomes of leadership programmes. This is especially the case, since the findings indicated that the educators did not have sufficient understanding of the outcomes and effects of the activities and programmes they are involved in. One reason that was indicated in the findings was that they do not get much feedback from the young participants during an activity or a programme or once it is over. Furthermore, the findings indicated that, due to time limitations, the educators felt it was not easy to respond to the needs and concerns of the young participants or to follow-up during and after activities, despite their desire to do so. This insufficient feedback and lack of follow-up opportunities suggest that it is not surprising that several of the educators find it difficult to understand why the young participants were not as engaged as expected. The findings indicate that overall, the level of engagement varied during the sessions. Although some young participants were active during the activities, many were not and remained quiet and rather inactive throughout almost all the observed sessions (except during the

more playful exercises). Instead of paying attention to the educator or engaging in group discussions, for example, they continuously looked at their cell phones.

The educators' approach indicates a social component where dialogue is at the heart of the activities and gives the young learners opportunities to talk and express themselves. Yet, when looking at this within a context of disengaged young participants, the question arises of how dialogue can foster engagement. Based on the findings (presented in chapter five) from the young participants' accounts that demonstrate strong beliefs and views on leadership, as supported by previous research (Caza & Rosch, 2014), and given the assumption that most people like to talk and share their thoughts with others, what is often needed is the opportunity to think and talk in a space where one feels comfortable enough to do so. This was also indicated in the educators' accounts and was something they aimed to do during the observed leadership activities. A possible explanation as to why the young participants were not engaged could be that they could not relate to what was being taught or shared, and also that they might have had difficulties following along what was being taught. This implies that although young participants hold strong beliefs and opinions about leadership, they do not necessarily understand leadership concepts without having prior experience. And although some of the young participants had practical experience that can be related to leadership experience, as has been previously described, it is important to underline that they did not recognize their own actions and experiences as acts of leadership. This means that my assumption that young people who are involved in various commitments and who participate in leadership activities and programme should be able to relate some of the learned lessons to their own life situations was incorrect. This realization also occurs in the accounts from my field notes as follows:

> I think the workshops were well organized and good […] but maybe because I have experienced this kind of workshop, I recognized so many parts, and I have even conducted these kinds of workshops in different contexts and workplaces. Does this familiarity affect my perception and understanding of what I observed? Again, I ask, how does one get participants engaged, and curious? Do I and others take leadership activities for young people for granted, believing they learn just because they show up? And that they are comfortable enough to share personal thoughts, feelings, dreams and expectations with people they do not know? I have seen so many adults not wanting to share and express themselves including their personal experiences in group settings, and here I am believing that the young participants want to share and express themselves (field notes).

This account, along with the findings from the observations, indicates that the young participants lacked the relevant experience for recognizing and relating to what was being taught and shared. Some of the vocabulary used during the workshops and lectures makes this difficult to disregard. The findings indicate that the young participants experienced many of the exercises involving words/phrases and questions such as "target image" (a visual representation of a desired future goal, i.e., a vision for the future) and which are used to motivate in management contexts as being very vague and unclear. Furthermore future-oriented questions as to what kind of leader they envision themselves becoming, make it rather obvious that they could not relate to the questions without having prior experience that they recognized as being leadership experience. This implies that, despite educators preparing and conducting well organized activities, they still face the challenge of not being able to engage the young participants in activities since the young participants build their activities based on their own experience, both theoretical and practical. Although the educators approach activities with the intention of creating space for learning leadership through dialogue, much of their pedagogy derives from own experiences, including influences drawn from adult learning, as highlighted by Guthrie and Jenkins (2018).

Equally the findings indicate also that the level of engagement increased during more playful exercises and when the educators shared personal stories and experiences of being a leader. This points towards the possible explanation that the young participants felt the educators' stories where meaningful and that the young participants could relate to them, and at least some of the stories could guide them in their own thought processes. This way of making meaning in leadership programmes that steers away from traditional models of leadership towards the practice of arts-based leadership development has increased in recent decades (McGregor, 2012; Schrier et al., 2023; Wang & Chia, 2019). Here the scholars emphasize that activities using playfulness develop the ability to improvise and be spontaneous in a safe space in collaboration with the other participants. The practice of play and art-based methods is situated in the realm of experiential learning and provides ways of connecting mind and emotions, as well as providing ways of challenging norms and assumptions (Sutherland & Jelinek, 2015). Thus, participants can move beyond that which cannot be expressed with words using creativity and improvisation. This experiential learning approach can promote confidence (Peña & Grant, 2019; Wang & Chia, 2019) and openness to failure, trust in oneself and others and techniques for reflecting on experience (Hobson et al., 2020). This suggests that the young

participants could relate to playful and personal activities and then feel confident enough to express their thoughts and feelings, creating a sense of belonging in the group and believing that their thoughts mattered.

Sandberg's (2024) literature review focuses on outcomes of art-based leadership development over a span of almost twenty years (2004–2023) illustrates that, despite the need for further empirical validation of the effectiveness of art-based leadership development methods, very few findings demonstrate this and that the most frequently cited effect of arts-based methods in leadership development is an increase in reflective and reflexive practices. This links to the findings that, according to the educators' accounts, reflection is essential ability for promoting self-awareness and that this ability should be developed from a young age, as discussed in previous chapter. However, although the educators included reflective exercises in their workshops, the idea of reflection remained rather abstract since the young participants did not understand or know what they were supposed to do when they were instructed to reflect without any further instructions. Although there is agreement about the importance of leaders having reflective skills, and of the various benefits (Chang, 2019; Roberts, 2008; Wei, 2024) one explanation for the young participants disengagement during these situations is provided by Daff et al. (2024), besides students lacking reflective skills, educators also lack understanding of how students learn to reflect, and what fosters the habit of reflective practices. According to Daff et al. (2024), a reason for this is the methodological challenge of teaching and learning reflective practices that go beyond superficial reflections; other reasons are the challenge of the demands of outcomes and time limitations.

Educational considerations

If we consider the findings from Dewey's theoretical lens (1938/2015), this makes the tendency that young people are imposed with adult standards, subject matter and methods much more evident. Dewey explained that the gap between the experiences of adults and the abilities of the young is so wide that teaching situations actually hinder participation. And yet, we tend to forget that despite this gap, young people are expected to learn concepts based on methods that are suitable for adults, and that these are beyond their existing capacities and their experience. Dewey noted that young people are taught with a "finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future" (1938/2015, p. 19). With this in mind, according to Dewey, it is not surprising that much of education is associated with

boredom; he explained that the problem is not that the young learners do not have experience when participating in educational settings, it is about connecting the concepts that are being taught, and the way they are taught so as to enable them to relate and connect the learning with further experiences. However, Dewey underlined that it is not enough to just promote experience, there is also need to consider the quality of an experience. It is therefore important that young learners can have experiences in the present that can promote subsequent experience. Dewey called it the "experiential continuum" (1938/2015, p. 33).

It is within this experiential continuity that intellectual and moral growth lie, which is also important to consider when talking about experiences and growth. For example, Dewey explained that a person may grow in efficiency and yet still be (perceived as) a corrupt politician, despite the politician's efficiency being considered as growth. Therefore, since there are experiences (education) that can promote growth, while others can hinder it, Dewey argued that it is important to understand the kind of growth one is seeking through education and to ask "what is the effect of growth in a special direction upon the attitudes and habits which alone open up avenues for development?" (1938/2015, p. 36). Although, according to Dewey, this question is rather contradictory as it assumes that young learners acquire skills and knowledge for future possibilities, still he maintained the importance of the present in education. However, he also highlighted that in a sense experience in the present does influence the future and what becomes fundamental for educators is "to see what direction an experience is heading" (1938/2015, p. 38). According to Dewey's descriptions, the purpose of leadership activities and programmes should be to create space for learning where a young participant draws from an experience everything that is useful for him/her at that moment. According to Dewey, this means "that attentive care must be devoted to the conditions which give each present experience a worthwhile meaning" (1938/2015, p. 49).

To conclude, from Dewey's lens, the findings in this chapter highlight that young people's capacities, needs and past experiences are fundamental when preparing and implementing leadership activities. Opportunities for interactions with relevant topics in "the present" can create opportunities for learning moments. These moments can be referred to as an event that stands out in one's memory. But this can also be referred to as an experience such as how one experienced a situation. In any case, according to Dewey, in any experience there is a flow "from something to something" (1934/2005, p.38). And in all this, our thinking goes on in "trains of ideas" (1934/2005, p. 39) that are connected to various entwined phases of emotional and practical branches of thought.

8 DISCUSSION

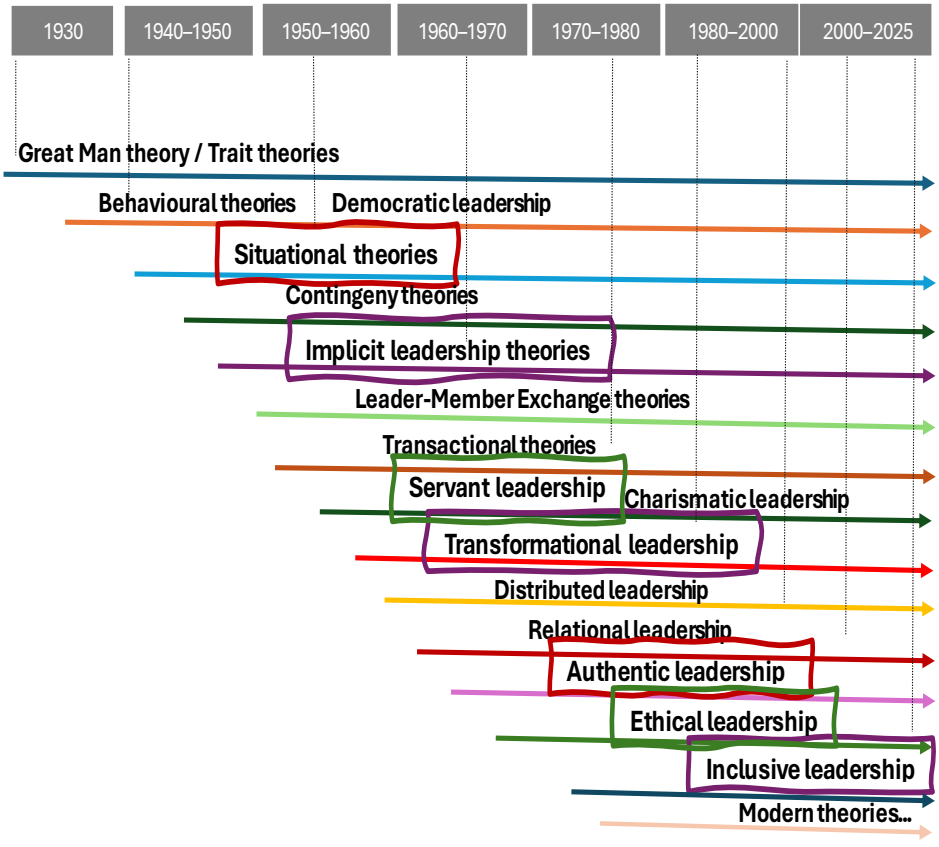
The twofold aim of this dissertation has been to study perceptions of "good" leadership and the leadership development of young people and their educators. This includes the way that educators prepare and perform their leadership activities and the pedagogical challenges they face. In order to gain a better understanding of this, and based on my research questions, I conducted an exploratory case study involving two leadership programmes in Sweden that are designed for young people: one in a sport context and the other in a higher education context. The study involved observations conducted during activities and interviews with young participants as well as educators connected with the programmes.

With the overall purpose of gaining better understanding of and contributing new knowledge about how young people develop as leaders in a changing world, in this concluding chapter, I will present and discuss some of my key findings and their implications, based on a theoretical framework that is built inductively on leadership theories and concepts together with Dewey's pedagogical ideas. In conclusion, I will look through the lens of Bauman's "liquid" world and its implications on the findings.

Perceptions of "good" leadership

It has been rather problematic to try and understand the findings from the interviews covering the young participants' and educators' accounts on leadership, mainly because of the difficulty of understanding and relating to the various existing leadership theories and concepts.

Figure 19



Note. Illustrating the findings on the participants' perceptions of leadership. Theories marked with green are leadership theories I associate with the young participants' descriptions of "good" leaders. Theories marked with red, are theories I associate with the educators' descriptions. Finally, theories marked in purple are theories that I associate with and found in both the young participants' and the educators' accounts.

During the analysis process, I learned that the choice of leadership theory not only influences the results, but also shapes my understanding of how young people perceive "good" leadership. Equally I discovered that there are some differences in what the theories aim for, despite the various leadership theories tending to focus on exploring the qualities, characteristics, skills and behaviours of leaders, including what makes leaders efficient and successful. Some leadership theories, like trait theory, are more descriptive as they explain what a

leader is, or what a leader does (e.g., understanding a leader's characteristics). Some theories, like servant leadership, are primarily prescriptive, focusing on the ideal behaviours of what a leader should be like (e.g., guidelines of how a leader should act). However, there are also theories, like transformational leadership and authentic leadership that are both descriptive and prescriptive: they identify key characteristics of leaders and offer guidelines on how to develop these qualities and behaviours. However, there are also explorative theories, like distributed leadership that demonstrate the link between leadership behaviour and performance outcomes, including how follower behaviours and characteristics influence leadership outcomes (e.g. how leadership functions in complex interconnected systems of relationships).

Despite the complex ways of approaching and understanding leadership, I have aimed to understand the participants' perceptions of "good" leadership based on my theoretical framework, which is a holistic perspective covering various integrated leadership theories and concepts and has overlapping themes (Figure 19). From this perspective, the young participants' perceptions, including the image of a "good" leader as a person who is sincere and caring, suggests associations to leadership theories like servant leadership, ethical leadership, inclusive and transformational leadership. These theories (partly) include the characteristics found in the young participants' accounts, such as trustworthiness, accountability, and empathy. Also important is to communicate vision clearly, express expectations clearly, acknowledge the needs, concerns and perspectives of others, to be open-minded and recognize different perspectives. This hints at what young people in today's world expect of "good" leaders: they have ethical, caring and inclusive mindsets. In comparison, the educators' perceptions, including the image of a "good" leader as a person who is responsive and pragmatic, suggests associations to leadership theories like transformational leadership, authentic leadership, relational leadership, situational leadership, and inclusive leadership. These theories (partly) include characteristics found in the educators' accounts, such as honesty, accountability, inclusive, supportive, and responsive. Also important is to communicate vision clearly, build relationships and manage complex situations that require good judgment, adaptability and collaboration. This suggests that the educators' perceptions reflect their own practical experiences as leaders (managers and coaches) and how leadership it is displayed in various practical situations.

If one views my interpretation of the participants' descriptions and the associated leadership theories from the illustrated palette of leadership theories and concepts, this illustrates that there are differences in the perceptions of the

young participants and the educators, as well as some similarities. And although interpretations and the way we associate to the various theories and concepts can vary, what makes this illustration, which is based on the findings, very significant is that the participants' perceptions include a relational and inclusive outlook on leadership, (and includes all people), suggesting an obvious move from a leadership that includes the image of heroic "great men". This also suggests that leadership theories and studies have moved away (partly) from the idea of "great men" leading and influencing their followers towards an inclusive leadership.

It is interesting that there seem to be some similarities between the young participants and the educators, based on the qualities and behaviours highlighted (also presented in chapters 5 and 6). For example, honesty is highlighted in both groups as a key quality. This similarity between the perception of leadership of the adults and young people, which has been noted in previous research (Morris, 1991; Sessa et al., 2007) implies that people of all ages want their leaders to be honest. If we consider Kouzes and Posner's (2011) immense empirical study on leadership qualities that covers three decades of research with data from all over the world, we note that since the beginning of their studies in 1980, no matter where their studies were conducted, regardless of country, geographical region or type of organization, the most important leadership attribute people seek in their leaders has always been *honesty*. Further similarities are: actively listening to team members (followers), focusing on the wellbeing, capabilities and growth of team members (followers), being open-minded and recognizing needs and various perspectives and lastly communicating a clear vision. Based on these similarities, the perceptions of the educators and the young participants are connected to a view that encompasses an inclusive and relational leadership that encourages mutual influence rather than hierarchical approaches.

Kouzes and Posner's relational view can also be linked to their examples of "good" leaders as they mainly refer to close relationships such as family members and colleagues when describing the key leadership qualities and behaviours that their examples display. However, five of the eight young participants could not name any examples of "good" leadership because they could not think of any. This indicates a disbelief in leaders and suggests that the mental representations they hold about the kind of qualities and behaviours "good" leaders have, or should have, cannot be associated to any of the leaders in formal or informal positions that they have observed or are aware of. It also signifies that both the educators and the young participants demonstrate a belief that leadership is not about position or power, but rather that which makes a person a "good" leader is based on displayed behaviours and actions. However, this modern way of

defining leadership as involving a leader's actions and the perceptions of the followers who interpret what is taking place in a situation (highlighted by Mindeguia et al., 2025) raises a problematic issue: what happens when formal leaders do not display the expected qualities and behaviours? (i.e., when a leader's behaviours do not correspond to a follower's implicit leadership theories?). How does this view influence a leader–follower relationship in a workplace? Although these are not questions I can answer currently, they might still shed a light on a critical issue that further studies could explore since although I consider that many of the newer leadership approaches are relevant for today's workplaces, and move away from the hierarchical approaches, I have not found any studies that raise this point: if leadership is in the eye of the beholder, then how does leadership function in real-life situations? Although newer leadership theories and concepts are more people-oriented and humanistic, they still do not explain how they are applicable in complex real-life situations. The findings covering the participants' perceptions also point to that which is already known: one theory of leadership is not sufficient to understand the complexities of leadership. However, they also clearly indicate that to understand the perceptions of leadership of young people without oversimplifying their views, we need new theories that are based on their experiences. This means that perceptions of leadership are based on the lack of or inadequate practical real-life experiences of leadership. This emphasizes that, young people's perceptions of leadership include experiences and insights that are crucial to our understanding of how they can be supported in their leadership efforts.

Perceptions of leadership development

Gaining a better understanding of how the young participants and the educators view their own leadership development has been challenging. As described in earlier chapters, there is limited understanding on leadership educators, including their professional development and how they view their own role as educators, except for a few studies such as Seemiller & Priest (2015). There is also limited knowledge on how young people view their own development as leaders, since many of the studies on youth leadership development are based on the perspectives of adults, as Sherif (2019) highlights. Nevertheless, based on approaches in leadership development, I have tried to gain some insight into the participants' accounts on their own leadership development.

I looked first at the findings from the educators' accounts; these illustrate that they had difficulties in describing their own leadership development. This

emphasized, that it is not easy to know how one learns and develops as a leader, even with years of accumulated practical and theoretical experience. Yet based on their accounts, the findings show they hold a view that leadership development is a lifelong process, which starts in childhood; a view which can be understood from Liu et al. (2021) and their work on leadership development from a lifespan approach, as described in earlier chapters. The findings also indicate that the educators continuously reflect on their experiences and actions in order to develop self-awareness and improve behaviours and choices. Their development also includes learning through interactions and from others. The findings also indicate a crucial insight that the educators underline: developing as a leader requires acknowledging challenges and difficult choices as learning opportunities; this has also been noted in earlier studies (Bolander et al., 2019). This belief was also linked to their accounts that described a sort of practical and tacit knowledge that cannot be articulated nor taught but must be practiced and experienced through daily complex actions and situations and requires trusting one's own intuition and judgments and adapting to each given situation, based on previous experiences, and involves accepting that learning from mistakes is part of the process. This finding points to practical knowledge that is based on good personal judgments, and is described by scholars and philosophers as *phronesis* (Allen et al., 2022b; Bornemark, 2023; Flyvbjerg et al., 2012). Although this practical wisdom is crucial knowledge that should be transferred to young people, there are many considerations to be made before understanding how this can be done. According to Eriksen (2021), although the ability to exercise good judgment is increasingly recognized as essential in leadership, there is no consensus of what the exercise of good judgment is or how individuals can develop it.

However, looking at the educators' accounts also makes me think about what Jarvis (2009) underlined: when a person describes his/her own learning process, what is highlighted is the person's own perceived content of that process, in other words, what is shared retrospectively is the outcome of a person's own construct of their own biography. This implies that the educators highlighted learning experiences that were based on their accumulated understanding and what they perceived to be important in leadership development at the time of their sharing. This leaves out significant knowledge about the various choices and considerations they made during their leadership development process. Based on the findings from the educators' accounts about their leadership development, together with related studies and theories in leadership, I ask the question: If there is a belief in leadership studies that leadership starts in childhood, why is

leadership often taught to young people as a "finished product"? This is a point that I will discuss later from the perspective of Dewey.

When comparing the findings from the educators' accounts, I note that the findings from the young participants are more fragmented, and that there are two issues that I want to highlight. The first is that when I asked the question of how they perceive their own leadership development, I assumed that the young participants had some kind of understanding of how they want to develop as leaders since they had attended leadership programmes. However, to my surprise, the findings indicate that they did not see themselves as developing leaders, despite their engagement in various activities that could be perceived as leadership actions, including participating in leadership programmes. This puzzling finding pointed me towards the works of Komives et al. (2005), Rosch (2018), Liu et al. (2021) and Walker et al. (2024) who explain that young people do not develop as leaders merely through the influence of their social environments or by engaging in various leadership activities or programmes, but they also need to develop a leader identity. When connecting this explanation to research by Schyns et al. (2020), which illustrates that people's perceptions of leaders are an important part of their own leadership development, especially in regard to developing a leader identity, several possible explanations arise. For example, there is a possibility that the young participants' implicit leadership theories include expectations and behaviours of leaders that they do not feel they possess, that is, they do not see themselves as being capable leaders, indicating a lack of confidence. Another explanation is that since many of the young participants could not provide any examples of "good" leaders, and of those who did, the examples came from close relationships, there is a possibility that their lack of leadership role models in formal positions, including the negative images of leadership that they had been exposed to, has influenced their desire to seek leadership roles, and/or to consider that leadership is something desirable, as previous research has highlighted (Atif et al., 2022; Bowers et al., 2015). Atif et al. (2022) also propose that when young people lack examples of leaders making good choices and displaying ethical behaviours, this may also influence their own choices. Furthermore, the support for their personal development that they seem to have received from families and close relationships may also include negative consequences relating to their development of leader identity as the findings also indicate that developing as a leader was not part of their social reality and while growing up. This can be connected to the second issue identified in their accounts on leadership development: they did not feel they received sufficient support and feedback on their efforts. This points more clearly to a significant insight that

although young people engage in activities that are perceived as acts of leadership, and/or participate in leadership activities and programmes, including having supportive close relationships, this does not mean they purposefully strive to develop as leaders or are aware of their own leadership experiences. They need people in their social environments who can help and support them to recognize and acknowledge their efforts and point out the qualities and abilities they are developing and their capabilities as developing leaders.

The findings also indicate that there is a rather small but notable connection between how the young participants receive support and how they perceive the person giving them support. This means that it is possible that the young participants were thinking about feedback and support from educators and coaches that they feel confident with. This is proposed by Griffith et al. (2019) who comment that trust is a key aspect that influences the way that young participants experience the guidance they receive. However, as indicated in the findings from the young participants' accounts, when feedback or guidance was given, it was in a superficial manner that made it difficult for them to understand how they could improve and what they needed to learn. Thus, this suggests that the young participants were probably seeking personalized feedback with clear directions based on their needs, as discussed by Lim et al. (2020). On the other hand, according to Fischer et al. (2025) and Hankins and Harrington (2022), when educators and coaches give superficial and impersonal feedback and guidance, this is often the result of time limitations, something that was also noted in the educators' accounts.

Designing and implementing leadership activities has its challenges

As discussed, the perceptions of the educators reflect their own practical experiences as leaders (managers and coaches), which means that their outlook on leadership is from that of a practitioner. This outlook is quite clear when we observe the findings from the educators' accounts about how they plan and perform their leadership activities and programmes: this is derived from their own experiences as leaders. These experiences built on their practical daily insights, together with ideas gained from attending various leadership courses and programmes. Thus, they design and implement leadership, based on the theoretical and practical experiences that they connect with a purpose and theme. This finding is supported by recent studies showing that practitioners and

educators develop training based on their experiences in leadership roles or experience as leaders (Friesen et al., 2024).

The findings also show that the educators plan their leadership activities and programmes from the outlook that young people need a space to learn leadership through dialogue and by interacting with others in real life. This is based on the belief that young people need to learn leadership from a range of perspectives and views of others, but also that they need to develop social skills and abilities like expressing themselves and building relationships in real life. Furthermore, the educators' accounts indicate a belief that young people need to first develop the ability to lead themselves before learning how to lead others. According to the educators, this is something that can be done through self-reflection and is a process that includes recognizing the influence one has on oneself and others. These beliefs connect to the somewhat contradictory accounts relating to the usefulness of leadership education with the possible explanation that the educators imply that young people cannot develop as leaders without practical experiences, a belief that is based on their own experiences.

Since the educators had different backgrounds and experiences, the observed activities included three different pedagogical methods: lectures, workshops and participatory methods. The activities involved elements that were connected to the level of engagement during the sessions. For example, exercises that involved a future-oriented outlook on learning leadership using questions about how the young participants envision themselves as leaders in the future. The findings highlight the challenges related to this aspect, such as the use of vocabulary and the difficult leadership concepts and issues presented to the young participants. On several occasions it was noted that the exercises were experienced as vague, unclear and open to subjective interpretations. Although these accounts included group discussions that had the purpose of introducing the young participants to alternative viewpoints from their peers, the findings still indicate rather low participation during these occasions. On the other hand, participation increased when the activities involved storytelling and elements of playfulness. This implies that the young participants could create meaningful associations and relate to their own social realities, as supported by previous research (Sutherland & Jelinek, 2015; Sandberg, 2024).

It is important to underline that there are countless studies focusing on the reasons why students lack engagement in learning contexts (Hennessy & Murphy, 2025) such as in classrooms (Subramainan & Mahmoud, 2020), in higher education settings (Li & Xue, 2023; Schnitzler al., 2021) and in online lectures (Bergdahl, 2022; Istijanto & Christabella, 2024). There are also

numerous studies showing how teachers can foster student engagement during lessons (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2021). Yet since there is limited research addressing the level of engagement in connection to choice of pedagogical approaches and leadership activities and programmes, the findings from the observations suggest that there is a need for further research and understanding of the kind of pedagogical approaches that can have positive influence and enhance young people's participation and learning.

However, there are some studies that highlight the challenges that can arise during training. For example, in a recent study (Peretz et al., 2023), the young participants attending a leadership programme expressed disappointment and that the training was inefficient, boring and taught in an unconvincing way. Some of the young participants in the study even mentioned that they had not heard leadership mentioned during lessons. Although these indications were not found in this case, the issue of leadership programmes being too abstract and not applicable was noted. This implies that the young participants could not create meaning from nor relate to the knowledge that was shared. This highlights that educators must take into consideration what previous research has observed about the pre-existing beliefs and knowledge that young participants hold when attending courses (Caza & Rosch, 2014).

A further challenge identified during the activities was the methodological challenges connected to concepts that are difficult to understand when one has limited knowledge and experience. For example, previous research shows that academic leadership programmes provide opportunities for students to reflect on their leadership learning as part of their leadership development process (Beatty et al., 2021). The findings show that though the young participants were offered time and space to reflect on the questions, they were not instructed on how to reflect, but rather they were given a question with the assumption that they already knew what was expected of them. While prior to the activities there may have been young participants who had a preunderstanding of what reflective thinking is, there were also those with no experience at all, as indicated in the findings. This underlines what previous research has highlighted, that although reflection is an essential pedagogical tool for leadership educators (Chang, 2019; Hartman et al., 2023; White & Guthrie, 2016) and that it is important to have a reflection activity built into courses, including time for feedback on reflections (Daff et al., 2024), scholars still highlight that it can be problematic for educators to provide general directions for thought processes. At the same time, reflection at the individual or group level can be challenging (Roberts, 2008). Thus, highlighting, as Daff et al. (2024) suggest, educators do not know how to teach

the ability to reflect, and there is no understanding of what fosters the habit of reflection. Therefore, there is a need to explore pedagogical techniques about the way that young people develop this skill. One final but very significant finding is that the educators lacked understanding of whether the young participants are learning anything during the leadership activities. This finding aligns with previous research that demonstrate the lack of understanding of how efforts and development programmes can support young people in their development (Rydh, 2024). This lack of understanding can be understood with the help of previous research that shows how many young people lack engagement in giving feedback to their educators as they do not understand the value or purpose of feedback in relation to learning processes (Mag, 2019; van der Kleij, 2019). This implies that educators should integrate and train young people in how to give feedback by emphasizing the value of giving feedback; it is a crucial piece of the puzzle for understanding how they develop as leaders.

Learning moments

From Dewey's perspective (1938/2015), the findings, along with related previous research provide some significant insights. Young people do not magically start developing reasoning abilities about abstract concepts like leadership. This implies that although they may have strong beliefs about leaders and leadership, this does not mean that they think about what leadership is nor do they understand what it is. Furthermore, just because they are engaged in various leadership programmes and commitments, this does not mean they are consciously developing leadership skills or view themselves as developing leaders. Furthermore, the various leadership activities and programmes offered to young people are mainly built on the views and experiences of adults as being those of a "finished product" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 19). Yet the question of how young people develop as leaders is not a matter of an either/or perspective as to whether they learn through theory or practice, but is about the way that knowledge on leadership is shared and transferred to young people (Dewey, 1938/2015). This suggests that even if leadership activities and programmes are well planned and implemented, there are two significant aspects that must be considered in relation to leadership education designed for young people.

First and foremost, from Dewey's perspective (1910/1997), most people take their mental constructs and concepts for granted and unconsciously make judgments about others and their actions without considering what their own beliefs are nor how their thoughts have been formed. People perform daily actions

in various situations without being able to describe certain actions of which they have knowledge about, as seen in the findings that mention the practical knowledge that the educators were not able to articulate. However, as found in this study, reflective practices and habits can offer insights on daily experiences. When a person is faced with unfamiliar situations or does not have any or enough prior experience in a certain situation, reflective thinking (reasoning) may help the person to remember similar experiences, discern what is valuable information and what is not, and make judgments about these choices, and take actions by trusting in their own intuition and abilities. This reinforces the habit of having the courage to make good decisions (Dewey, 1910/1997).

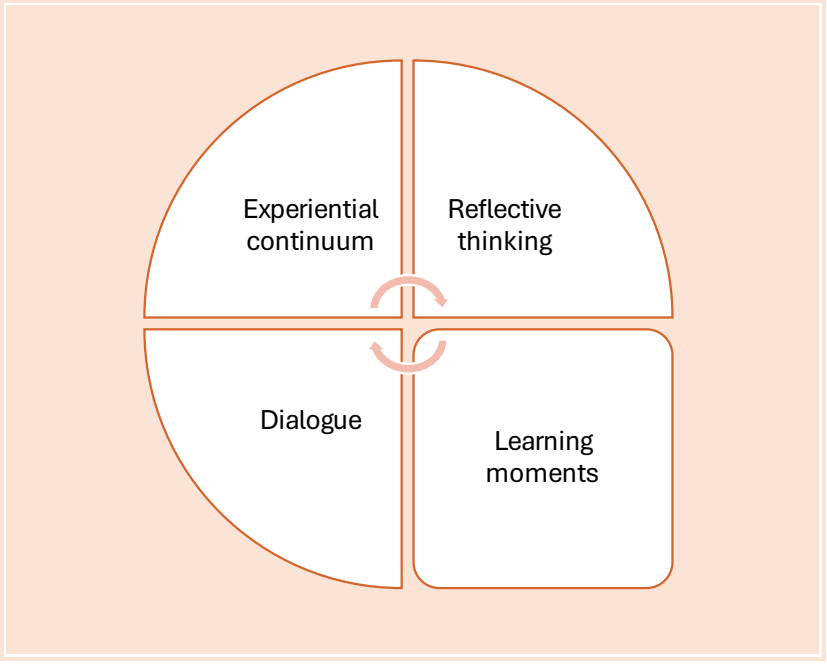
Yet, much of our knowledge gained from real-life complex situations is transferred to young people through oversimplified descriptions (Dewey, 1910/1997), leaving valuable knowledge out of reach. Since most people take their own thoughts and actions for granted, they unconsciously overlook the thought processes of young people. This underlines that it takes time for young people to process and organize impressions and to make sense of their own thoughts, actions, beliefs, choices, and feelings, especially since their daily activities are not in a stable mode but continuous flux; this is clearly a process that varies from one person to another. Yet adults tend to overload young people with information in the hope of "covering the ground" (1938/2015), although their minds are already overloaded from other influences and social communities, both online and offline.

Furthermore, many young people lack social environments that encourage them to investigate new perspectives. Thus, when faced with numerous choices and interpretations, it is not surprising that young people who lack experience and have not yet fully developed a trained mind (Dewey, 1910/1997) in order to understand and know how to identify or a situation, have difficulties in discerning which course of action to take. As a result, they seek support and guidance, as seen in this study.

Looking at the findings and my educational considerations through Dewey's pedagogical lens has helped me understand the importance of experiential continuum, reflective thinking, and dialogue, as these three elements, as suggested in the findings, are learning activities that focus on the here and now. Thus, I have added to the theoretical model *learning moments* which occur through a process of reflective thinking, dialogue and being in the present moment (Figure 20).

Figure 20

Learning moments occur through a process of reflective thinking, dialogue and being in the present moment



With this in mind, I believe that thinking (reasoning) processes must be followed up by educators, coaches and other adults who are engaged in young people's development. Young people must be encouraged and supported to carefully look into things and access their own thought processes and experiences through reflective practices. This process could enable them to develop habits and patterns of thinking that may lead to self-awareness and the ability to make good judgments and choices (Dewey, 1938/2015). This suggests that part of the process of young people developing as leaders in a changing world involves supporting them in developing reflective thinking and self-awareness that are part of leading oneself, as indicated in this study.

Secondly, there is a need to highlight that even when leadership programmes are well organized and implemented, they tend to be fragmented and isolated from real-life situations, as indicated in the findings. The idea of Dewey's "experiential continuum" (1938/2015 p. 33) is interesting and offers an

alternative way of thinking about leadership education. It goes beyond the somewhat odd assumption that the activities and knowledge provided in the present must be relevant for future possibilities and therefore must be organized and offered in a way that it can lead to the development of certain skills and knowledge in the future. This future-oriented outlook is odd because how can a young person participating in an educational activity understand that what is being taught or shared is relevant for the future, when the knowledge that the young person is offered is not relevant to the present? When leadership activities and programmes are approached from a future-oriented perspective, with activities that are often isolated from real-life experiences, this limits and even excludes the very conditions by which a young person could be prepared for future possibilities. Hence, even if the programmes were well planned and implemented, the findings indicate that in several situations the young participants could not make any meaning from what was being taught or shared. However, the findings also highlight that when young people are offered space for learning moments that create meaningful experience for them, and are relevant to their own social realities in the present, then they can be encouraged to take a step towards the next learning moment. Although there is obviously no clear agreement as to what "good" leadership is, young people can still be offered opportunities to test their ideas, beliefs and draw their own conclusions through various activities that cultivate thinking habits. This includes developing an understanding that there are variations as well as observers holding different perspectives. In this sense, when an educator creates a learning moment through an activity that is meaningful for the young person in the present, then the educator can see what direction that experience may be heading towards.

This emphasizes that education is regularly referred to as activities that are formally planned and taught and are expected to bring about learning. This includes an ongoing evaluation process that is based on the assumption that learning can be reduced to simple measures without considering that such evaluations are not based on reality, but instead merely represent structures in reality (Pring, 2021). Thus, there is a need to move away from the kind of thinking that growth in certain direction can be built into education based on certain assumptions, when it is evident that no-one knows what lies ahead. This study indicates that growth in a certain direction occurs when learning lies in the present (Dewey, 1938/2015). When educators create space for learning moments that include dialogue and social interactions that are meaningful, useful and relate to the young participants' own experiences and social realities, then these moments can promote the kind of attitudes and habits that can encourage growth.

Furthermore, when ideas and concepts of leadership are transformed into symbolic representations, playfulness becomes a central activity that involves mental processing, since playfulness is an attitude that opens the mind and offers freedom to explore through flexibility and curiosity (Dewey, 1934/2005). Thus, instead of approaching leadership activities and programmes as if leadership were a "finished product" that can be taught, and is a motionless, static, and predictable reality, leadership education should include inviting and introducing young people to the many various ways of engaging as a leader in the world through making the concepts of leadership applicable and making them visibly relevant to young people in the present.

Developing as young leaders in a changing world

If we situate the findings in Bauman's metaphor of "liquid" modernity (Bauman, 2012), this adds a further layer of understanding as this supports the idea that the present moment is fundamental for young people in their process of developing as leaders, and not the future, which is fundamentally uncertain. Being in the world for young people means a process of learning and modelling the ways of the world through creating patterns of behaviours and adapting to the world. In the current uncertain times, developing as a leader is not a matter of following certain rules but instead of having an outlook that anything could happen and that nothing can be done with certainty. One needs to be constantly on the alert and also flexible and be able to adjust according to the changing patterns in society, while at the same time choosing the best course of action by learning from experiences and adjusting expectations by keeping track of outcomes and changes in those outcomes over time.

Young people have started to see and experience this uncertainty and do not believe that anything will last. This includes the process of identity formation and the issue of belonging since young people continuously change and compromise to fit in. This prompts them to seek examples and not leaders. Consequently, they describe role models, not formal leaders: people who can show them what matters now and how things are done in ethical and caring ways. Thus, leadership has been replaced by what is actually being displayed since people's actions have become more important and show more about who they are than what they believe and what they say.

The current state of the world is rather obvious: wars and military conflicts, social injustices, climate change, poverty, pandemics, gender and economic inequalities, and political agendas where democratic values are being replaced by unethical games (UN, n.d.). As technology advances, it offers significant benefits

to society, but also brings significant challenges and risks. One example is the way that AI impacts and transforms leadership and perceptions of leadership. Equally relevant is the way that AI is rapidly learning to perform tasks that will enable leaders to be more effective, making human care, human thinking, and human interactions more uncertain (Madanchian et al., 2024). These are challenges that must be addressed since there is a need to understand how young people can prepare and increase their knowledge of these issues. Yet, in this space of fluidity, each person is expected to know what needs to be learned and how to acquire new knowledge. After all, as Bauman described (2012) young people are told daily that what is wrong with their own lives is a result of their own mistakes, and is thus their own fault. Therefore, they must fix it with their own tools and by their own efforts and know how to manage these challenges and consequences. These uncertain expectations drive young people to search for answers and guidance.

When thinking about uncertainty, there is a need to clarify that there are many types of uncertainty (Topel et al., 2023). A general way of understanding is that uncertainty is a mental state experienced when attempting to decide between two or more competing choices (Keller et al., 2020). However, studies indicate that when referring to uncertainties in society such as environmental and socio-economic changes, including climate change, automation (AI) and urbanization, these are described as situations of "deep uncertainty" since it is difficult to agree on the relationships between the key driving forces of change over the long-term. This leads to difficulties in making decisions since outcomes cannot be reasonably predicted nor can the desirability of outcomes be agreed on or valued (Stanton & Roelich, 2021).

Consequently, living in an uncertain world challenges young people in their choices as they search for information and signs (Keller et al., 2020), only to discover that there are endless competing opinions and options. Some young people are driven to search for change, while many search for stability, security and belonging, wishing to live a good life (Matera & Matera, 2022). It is crucial to highlight how fear and the feelings of anxiety that come in uncertain times have affected young people in a negative way, with a wide range of changing attitudes, values and behaviours; there is one clear change of focus: being in favour of what matters in the here-and-now.

According to the educators' accounts, young people need to develop social skills, this finding aligns with Bauman's descriptions. If we note how young people in this "liquid" society miss social cues because they are too engrossed in the digital world and how relationships in virtual life matter more than real-life

relations, we then argue that young people experience the world in the realm of superficial and disposable, moving from the offline to the online world where personal and social relationships are "momentary snapshots" in a constant state of flux (Bauman, 2009). The public space has become "a giant screen" for people to share their private worries, secrets and intimacies; the line between public and private has diminished and there is a stage on which private dramas are put on public display and publicly watched (Bauman, 2012). At the same time, the emotions of fear have become rather privatized, with everyone experiencing them in their own way. These can be fears that involve threats to our bodies and possessions, including financial, technological, ecological, medical, terrorist, and societal dimensions. Thus, despite more people being organized in social networks, communicating and interacting globally through modern techniques, there is an increased sense of loneliness and exclusion; in parallel, people are leaving the shared spaces where people interact with one another through dialogue and meetings, creating a void (Bauman, 2012).

It is crucial to understand the rapid changes that society is going through, including social and contextual challenges since these stresses the need for reconsidering education and the process of learning (Lauder et al., 2006). This includes questions such as how young people will develop as leaders in their own contexts and communities (Allen et al., 2022a), or how educators and adults working with young people can help and support young people to express views and concerns through dialogue (Cunningham et al., 2024). As suggested by Bauman, we need to let go of fixed ways of approaching young people in their development as leaders and replace the maps for the time ahead with new navigational tools since the norms that control and create people's experiences and behaviours are changing, with uncertainty at their core. We need to cast a light on the educators teaching leadership as they are part of the change. This points to a leadership education that encourages curiosity and dialogue, enabling the unique, creative voices of young people to develop instead of mainly using a "one-size-fit-all" model of teaching leadership regardless of the participants' experiences (Murphy, 2019). Teaching leadership cannot merely focus on "reproducing" the world through descriptions, theoretical models and various activities, all referring to something in the real world but are not "real-life" situations.

There is a need to question whether young people are adopting the concepts and ideas presented to them during leadership activities and programmes. We cannot expect that young people will implement the presented concepts and ideas if they simply participate without first understanding their meaning.

Moreover, we cannot simply invite young people to be a part of a leadership team and believe that they will understand what leadership is, or improve their leadership skills, without offering them opportunities to participate in decision-making processes (Strittmatter et al., 2024). Emphasizing that the majority of higher and influential positions in the world continue to be held by older men, as seen in a recent comprehensive review by Stockemer and Kolodziejczyk, (2025) which covered a dataset from more than 200 countries between the years 1945–2023. The authors (Stockemer & Kolodziejczyk, 2025) highlight the near complete absence of young leaders.

There is also a need to question whether the highlighted abilities and skills are relevant to the leaders of today. For example, in this "liquid" existence, recent studies indicate that although leadership literature continues to highlight the importance of empathy in leadership, this characteristic cannot alone transform systems and structures of oppression and injustice. Thus, young people must be offered opportunities for critical social analysis and consciousness-building, in order to cultivate self-awareness and curiosity (Allen-Handy et al., 2021). It is not enough to ask young people to think reflectively about various issues and assume that they know how to do this; there is a need to consider the questions they are being asked to reflect on. There is also a need to consider the consequences of not paying attention to the methodological limitations that exist, for example, how to teach and learn reflective and critical thinking. These limitations may result in a generation of leaders who have not learned "how to think" but instead ask AI to think on their behalf and provide them with the required answers.

The question of how young people develop as leaders in a changing world raises a fundamental issue that must be addressed. Taking as the point of departure the idea that the leader identity of young people is influenced by their own implicit leadership beliefs, it is crucial to understand the kind of leadership (role) models young people observe. The findings in this case indicate that young people's perceptions include leaders who have a great deal of influence, are in higher positions and are guided by their own needs, seeking personal gain rather than responding to the needs of their followers and working for the good of others. Hence, the world continues to be flawed by examples of bad conduct and a lack of ethical and caring behaviours, with daily impressions of dishonesty, injustice, and a lack of integrity, responsibility and, compassion (Newstead et al., 2020).

Although some believe that there are universal ethical behaviours (Brown & Treviño, 2006), the importance attached to ethical behaviours may still vary, depending on the cultural context that the leader and the followers are situated in

(Lee et al., 2021). Even if people want to believe that their leaders are honest, in this "liquid" world, issues of what is truthful and correct are questionable. Nevertheless, it is still important to highlight that honesty and integrity are key elements in developing trust, and, in turn, trust is a key element in establishing credibility, which is the heart of being able to influence others and lead the way; in other words, trustworthiness is a consequence of a person's actions.

Based on the findings and with the presented previous research, I conclude that a "good" leader in a "liquid" world is someone who is perceived as trustworthy and has the courage to lead the way by being straightforward and adaptable in any given situation, with compassion as their guiding light. This implies that when designing and implementing leadership programmes for young people, educators should include space for dialogue and the training of minds with a focus on discussing, questioning and learning ethics and how to make good judgments, today, and not in the future.

Limitations and future implications

This dissertation contributes insights into young people's perceptions of leadership, including their experiences, beliefs, attitudes and views on leadership. This highlights that although existing leadership theories and concepts can offer some knowledge, studying their perceptions holistically by integrating different theories can offer a better and more nuanced understanding of their views, including their limited experience of leadership.

The findings also highlight that it is not enough for young people to engage in leadership activities or have significant experience of formal leadership programmes, they also need to develop leader identity. This is a growth process that takes time and requires support and guidance from the social environment, such as educators, coaches and other adults engaged in young people's development who can acknowledge the efforts and leadership capabilities of the young person.

Furthermore, the findings highlight knowledge about how educators design and implement leadership activities and programmes for young people based on their own theoretical and practical experiences as leaders (managers and coaches). It also underlines how their perceptions of leadership influence their own practices such as content and methodological choices. Furthermore, the educators face pedagogical challenges that are not necessarily addressed, especially in cases where leadership activities and programmes are time-limited and take place over short periods of time. Challenges like time limitations may

result in superficial support and feedback to young participants. If they do not understand why they are doing something, many young participants do not engage during activities, despite attending the programmes voluntarily. Furthermore, educators do not receive sufficient feedback from the young participants during and after the programmes. They also have methodological difficulties such as how to instruct young participants in reflecting on given questions.

Limitations

At the same time, the dissertation has several limitations, a key one being the sample size of the empirical data, which covers only two leadership programmes, with a limited number of interview participants. There is also the choice of methods since using qualitative approaches when collecting and analysing data is inherently subjective and involves the researcher's own biases and preferences. Consequently, my own subjectivity has probably influenced the study's design and interpretations of the findings. Moreover, although it has been highlighted that there is limited existing research on the research questions, this limitation may have influenced the theoretical understanding of my findings. Another key limitation is the lack of an analysis of gender which is part of leadership. This limitation has affected the findings as they have not fully captured the complexities of leadership for different genders.

Future research

Consequently, although there is a critical need for understanding how young people develop as leaders in a changing world, there is still much we do not know. For example, while this dissertation sheds light on two fundamental unexplored areas – young people's perceptions of leadership and their educators' perceptions and experiences in teaching leadership – the findings suggest that future research should focus on gaining more knowledge about young people's experiences and views on leadership and their own development as leaders, and doing so through their own stories. This includes exploring whether there are gender differences among young people and whether there are differences between young people in different cultural contexts. This emphasizes that scholars must consider voices that are not regularly included in leadership studies in order to create a more inclusive leadership perspective and curriculum.

Future research also needs to include more qualitative approaches to provide more nuanced information about the learning and experiences within leadership programmes for young participants. This needs to address questions like: How

do we foster the kind of decision-making in young people through asking the right questions? How do we support young people to practice making informed and good judgments? How do we follow young people's experiences of the choices and decisions they make in a way that enables them to grow from those experiences? How do young participants take in and make sense of the stories and experiences educators share during the programmes? How can the young participants move beyond that which fits in with their own existing frames of reference? Lastly, what about the language and concepts used during the training: Is there a shared vocabulary that can be used and is not based on management literature?

There is also need for much more research on how educators teach leadership to young people, how they approach their activities and programmes, the pedagogical methods they use and the choices they make. It is also important to understand the pedagogical challenges they face, such as how to give support to young people, including personalized feedback despite time-limitations.

Recommendations for leadership education based on the findings

With this dissertation I hope to contribute with insights to existing knowledge on the topic and provide new knowledge that can be used for theory development by future researchers, students and academics.

The findings of this study can also benefit practitioners and educators engaged in activities and programmes to promote young people' development.

Based on the findings, I suggest the following recommendations:

1. The presented model illustrates that *learning moments* can be used as guidance when planning leadership activities, including elements of reflective thinking, dialogue and activities that are meaningful and relevant for young participants who have little or no prior experiences of leadership.

2. The illustration of *a palette of leadership theories* can also be used as a guide in discussions of the many ways of understanding and perceiving leadership. It is a practical guide that can be used to ask questions like "What is the difference between relational leadership and inclusive leadership?" or "Why do I believe leaders are born and not made?"

3. When teaching young people, educators should reflect on their own leadership development to understand their own values and beliefs. This can be done through reflective journaling in connection with the design and

preparation of activities and after completion of the activities. Besides writing down aims, choice of methods and content, educators can also write down their beliefs as to why the chosen topics are important, and what the choice of approach can offer the young participants. Writing reflections before and after activities and/or completion of programmes can serve as a basis for self-reflection and evaluation of chosen topics and approaches. It can also provide opportunities for re-evaluating one's beliefs and choices. It is also a way of keeping track of one's own development, and also for gaining insight into one's own practices by adjusting and making improvements through the identification and documentation of one's own pedagogical choices and implementations.

4. It is also important to support young participants to reflect on their experiences by providing them with questions that relate to situations in their own lives and realities. This could be questions relating to their upbringing and development, which can help them identify and understand ways in which their leadership ideas could be developed. Also relevant are questions about what they are thinking in the present moment, including beliefs and feelings about observation and experiences that may relate to leadership. Also important in reflective thinking for young people is that they understand their own thoughts, feelings and actions and how these are connected to each other. This should include questions like: What are you thinking about now? What feelings do you connect with your thoughts? Can you think of anything different in your thoughts or feelings compared to before and after an event or an activity?

5. There is a need for dialogue about ethics in leadership programmes. Since ethical values can be used and perceived in various ways, and people most often use words like honesty and accountability without really questioning what they really mean, it can be helpful to ask simple questions like: What is honesty? What are the signs and motives that you associate with honesty? How can you put this in your own words and in an everyday situation? These questions can provide young people opportunities for reflecting on the question in the given situation and also for recognizing signs and motivations in real-life situations. Ethical discussions can also refer to one's actions and values with questions like: How do you know what is best thing to do when you face a situation that you consider is unethical? How do you recognize your own values and why do you think you have those values?

These suggestions are based on the idea that in order to be able to move forward (as expressed in the young participants' accounts), there is a need to focus on the present. This obviously means all the experiences and images from the past that form the present also exist in the present. And since the past will be interpreted and judged based on one's understanding in the present, there will always be some references and knowledge that cannot be accessed but will nevertheless influence us. This means that learning to be in the moment, in the context of one's social environment and understanding how one thinks and feels are fundamental to the social process of creating the next present moment. In brief, dialogue and reflective thinking are key concepts in growth.

SAMMANFATTNING

Trots vetenskapligt intresset för ungt ledarskap, samt ett ökade antal ledarskapsutbildningar för unga, finns det en brist på teoretisk förståelse för hur unga utvecklas som ledare. Den teoretiska förståelsen är nödvändigt för att förbättra och utveckla effektiva ledarskapsprogram för unga. Denna avhandling utgörs av en explorativ fallstudie i vilken unga människor uppfattning om ledarskap och sin egen ledarskapsutveckling undersöks. Vidare utforskas hur utbildare som lär ut ledarskap till unga människor uppfattar ledarskap och sin egen ledarskapsutveckling, samt, hur de utformar och genomför ledarskapsutbildningar. Empiri har samlats in genom observationer och intervjuer från två ledarskapsprogram; den ena i en idrottskontext och den andra i en högre utbildningskontext.

Resultaten visar att

1) för att studera ungas uppfattning om ledarskap behövs ett holistiskt perspektiv där olika teorier kan integreras och ge bättre och mer nyanserad förståelse för ungas perspektiv och åsikter.
2) även om ledarskapsprogram och aktiviteter är välplanerade och väl genomförda, tenderar de att vara fragmenterade och isolerade från unga deltagarnas verkliga situationer.

Det är grundläggande att unga erbjuds utrymme för dialog och tid att utveckla sin förmåga att tänka reflekterande och att få en djupare förståelse för begrepp, situationer och insiktsfulla val. Avhandlingen understryker att det inte räcker med att unga engagerar sig i ledarskapsaktiviteter eller har betydande erfarenhet av formella ledarskapsprogram, de behöver även utveckla ledaridentitet. Detta är en utvecklingsprocess som kräver stöd och vägledning från deras sociala nätverk, såsom pedagoger, tränare, och andra vuxna som är engagerade i unga människors

utveckling och som kan bekräfta deras strävan och ledarskapsförmåga. Avhandlingen presenterar en modell som vägleder hur reflektivt tänkande, dialog och aktiviteter som är meningsfulla i nuet skapar *lärande ögonblick*. Därtill en modell som illustrerar *en palett av ledarskapsteorier* som kan användas i diskussioner och som kan bidra till en djupare förståelse för de olika ledarskapsteorierna.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Consent form, observations

Samtycke för Hållbart ledarskap

Presentation
Presentation – Matilda Mettälä (MM) som intervjuare/doktorand/forskare och det planerade projektet *Hållbart ledarskap*.

Frågeställningar som MM kommer att ta upp inkluderar inga personliga frågor/uppgifter.

Observationer som sker och antecknas av MM kommer inte inkludera beskrivningar och/eller information som kan härledas eller vara identifierbara fysiska personer.

Datainsamlingen sker via intervju av MM som också kommer att föra anteckningar och ingen ljudinspelning eller fotografering.

Data/informationen som skrivs ner kommer att behandlas och bevaras av MM.

Kontaktuppgifter

Matilda Mettälä
Doktorand i pedagogik
Matilda.mettala@mau.se
Malmö Universitet
Fakulteten för Lärande och samhälle
Institutionen för idrottsvetenskap
Telefon: + 46 40 665 70 87
Mobil: + 46 727 33 90 66

Information och rättigheter vid behandling av personuppgifter vid Malmö universitet

Personuppgiftsansvarig	Malmö universitet Malmö universitet, 205 06 Malmö, telefon 040-6657000
Forskningshuvudman	Malmö universitet Malmö universitet, 205 06 Malmö, telefon 040-6657000
Dataskyddsombud	dataskyddsombud@mau.se
Rättslig grund för behandlingen	Samtycke. Detta innebär att du när som helst, och utan att ange orsak, kan återkalla ditt samtycke. Vill du återkalla ditt samtycke kan du kontakta Matilda Mettälä
Huvudansvarig forskare	Susanna Hedenborg, susanna.hedenborg@mau.se
Ändamål med behandlingen	Kontakt och samarbete kring projektet.
Mottagare	Uppgifterna endast behandlas inom det egna projektet.
Överföring till tredje land	Ingen överföring till tredje land"
Lagringstid	Personuppgifterna kommer att sparas tills projektet är avslutad innan de antingen raderas eller anonymiseras.

Dina rättigheter

Du har rätt att få ett utdrag av de personuppgifter som behandlas. Kontakta MM om du vill ha ett sådant utdrag.

Du har rätt att få felaktiga uppgifter rättade och skulle du vilja få en uppgift rättad kan du kontakta MM.

Du har rätt att begära att få dina uppgifter raderade genom att återkalla ditt samtycke. Vill du begära att få dina uppgifter raderade kan du kontakta MM.

Du har rätt att få ut dina uppgifter i ett digitalt format så att du kan överföra dem till någon annan, så kallad dataportabilitet. Om du önskar få ut dina uppgifter på detta sätt kan du kontakta MM.

Du har också rätt att få behandlingen av dina uppgifter begränsad vilket innebär att de endast får lagras tills dess att man har undersökt om de får användas eller inte. Tänk på att du vid en behandling som bygger på samtycke alltid har rätt att återkalla ditt samtycke och få dina uppgifter raderade. Om du vill begära begränsning av behandlingen av dina personuppgifter kan du kontakta MM.

Du har rätt att klaga till tillsynsmyndigheten som i Sverige heter Integritetsskyddsmyndigheten (tidigare Datainspektionen). Du hittar dem på www.imy.se

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Samtycke till att delta i forskningsprojektet *Hållbart ledarskap*

Jag har fått information om studien och jag har haft möjlighet att ställa frågor. Jag har även fått en kopia av forskningspersonsinformationen och informationen i denna samtyckesblankett.

□ Jag samtycker till att delta i, och att mina personuppgifter behandlas i studien *Hållbart ledarskap* på det sätt som beskrivs i forskningspersonsinformationen och denna samtyckesblankett

underskrift

namnförtydligande

ort/datum

Appendix B

Consent form, focus group interviews, and individual interviews

Samtycke för att delta i avhandlingsarbetet Hållbart ledarskap

Presentation
Syftet med avhandlingen är att generera kunskap och förståelse kring unga människors syn på ledarskap och hur ledare och praktiker inom ledarskapsfältet resonerar kring unga och ledarskap.

Datainsamling som sker genom intervju kommer att genomföras av doktoranden Matilda Mettälä (MM) som dokumenterar intervjun med anteckningar och därefter transkriberar och bevarar insamlade data digitalt.

Intervjun behandlas konfidentiellt vilket betyder att intervjun kommer att avidentifieras och behandlas i enlighet med bestämmelser i Sekretesslagen. Frågeställningar som MM kommer att ta upp inkluderar inga känsliga personuppgifter.

Medverkan är frivillig och kan när som helst avbrytas.

Data/informationen som skrivs ner kommer att behandlas och bevaras av MM.

Kontaktuppgifter

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Information och rättigheter vid behandling av personuppgifter vid Malmö universitet

Personuppgiftsansvarig	Malmö universitet Malmö universitet, 205 06 Malmö, telefon 040-6657000
Forskningshuvudman	Malmö universitet Malmö universitet, 205 06 Malmö, telefon 040-6657000
Dataskyddsombud	dataskyddsombud@mau.se
Rättslig grund för behandlingen	Samtycke. Detta innebär att du när som helst, och utan att ange orsak, kan återkalla ditt samtycke. Vill du återkalla ditt samtycke kan du kontakta Matilda Mettälä
Huvudansvarig forskare	Susanna Hedenborg, susanna.hedenborg@mau.se
Ändamål med behandlingen	Kontakt och samarbete kring projektet.
Mottagare	Uppgifterna endast behandlas inom det egna projektet.
Överföring till tredje land	Ingen överföring till tredje land

Lagringstid	Personuppgifterna kommer att sparas tills projektet är avslutad innan de antingen raderas eller anonymiseras.
Dina rättigheter	Du har rätt att få ett utdrag av de personuppgifter som behandlas. Kontakta MM om du vill ha ett sådant utdrag. Du har rätt att få felaktiga uppgifter rättade och skulle du vilja få en uppgift rättad kan du kontakta MM. Du har rätt att begära att få dina uppgifter raderade genom att återkalla ditt samtycke. Vill du begära att få dina uppgifter raderade kan du kontakta MM. Du har rätt att få ut dina uppgifter i ett digitalt format så att du kan överföra dem till någon annan, så kallad dataportabilitet. Om du önskar få ut dina uppgifter på detta sätt kan du kontakta MM. Du har också rätt att få behandlingen av dina uppgifter begränsad vilket innebär att de endast får lagras tills dess att man har undersökt om de får användas eller inte. Tänk på att du vid en behandling som bygger på samtycke alltid har rätt att återkalla ditt samtycke och få dina uppgifter raderade. Om du vill begära begränsning av behandlingen av dina personuppgifter kan du kontakta MM. Du har rätt att klaga till tillsynsmyndigheten som i Sverige heter Integritetsskyddsmyndigheten (tidigare Datainspektionen). Du hittar dem på www.imy.se

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Samtycke till att delta i forskningsprojektet *Hållbart ledarskap*

Jag har fått information om studien och jag har haft möjlighet att ställa frågor. Jag har även fått en kopia av forskningspersonsinformationen och informationen i denna samtyckesblankett.

□ Jag samtycker till att delta i, och att mina personuppgifter behandlas i studien *Hållbart ledarskap* på det sätt som beskrivs i forskningspersonsinformationen och denna samtyckesblankett

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Appendix C

Information, and invitation to participate

Informationsbrev och förfrågan om medverkan i en intervju för avhandlingsarbetet *Hållbart ledarskap*

Doktorand projektet (doktorand Matilda Mettälä)

Rekrytering av nya ledare är en avgörande faktor för att bibehålla och utveckla samhället. Offentliga och privata organisationer samt civilsamhället behöver ledare, men unga berättar att de sällan blir tillfrågade om att leda, de får lära sig om ledarskap men inte praktisera ledarskap, dessutom tas det inte vara på det ungas erfarenheter. För att skapa hållbart ledarskap behövs forskning. Vi måste veta mer om vad unga själva säger om att leda – och ledarskap, och förstå hur ledare och praktiker inom fältet ledarskap resonerar om unga och ledarroller i olika kontexter.

Syftet är att generera kunskap och förståelse kring unga människors syn på ledarskap och hur ledare och praktiker inom ledarskapsfältet resonerar kring unga och ledarskap.

Datainsamling sker genom semistrukturerade intervjuer av unga vuxna (18–30 år) samt ledare och praktiker från ledarskapsfältet.

Inbjudan att delta i studien

Deltagandet i studien innebär en intervju som kommer att genomföras på gemensam vald plats. Intervjun beräknas ta omkring 45 - 60 min.

Hela intervjun kommer att dokumenteras genom anteckningar som därefter transkriberas och analyseras löpande och påverkar processen. Intervjun kommer inte att spelas in. Intervjun kommer att behandlas konfidentiellt vilket betyder att intervjuerna kommer att avidentifieras och behandlas i enlighet med bestämmelser i Sekretesslagen. Medverkan är frivillig och kan när som helst avbrytas.

Doktorand: Matilda Mettälä, matilda.mettala@mau.se

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Appendix D

Interview guide, individual interviews

The educators

Intervjuguide : Utbildarna (ledarna)

Introduktion

Presentera projektet

Informerat samtycke

Frågor kring projektet

Frågor

1. Vad/hur tycker du är en bra ledare?
2. Ge exempel på en bra ledare/någon du tycker är en bra ledare?
3. Hur tycker du goda ledarskapsförmågor yttrar sig?
4. Hur ser du på din egen ledarskapsutveckling? Hur skulle du vilja utvecklas som ledare? Har du gått ledarskapsutbildning? Hur var det? Vad tar/tog du med dig från utbildningen/kursen?
5. De ledarskapsutbildning du håller i/planerar hur har du tänkt kring utbildningen, berätta mer om hur ni/du lägger upp och olika områden som ni/du har med?
6. Vilka förväntningar har du? Vet du vilka förväntningar deltagarna har? Hur brukar du göra för att veta vad/om deltagarna har ”lärt” sig något?

Avslutning

Har du något att tillägga?

Appendix E

Interview guide, individual interviews

The young participants

Intervjuguide : Unga deltagarna

Introduktion

Presentera projektet

Informerat samtycke

Frågor kring projektet

Frågor

1. Vad/hur tycker du är en bra ledare?
2. Ge exempel på en bra ledare/någon du tycker är en bra ledare?
3. Hur tycker du goda ledarskapsförmågor yttrar sig?
4. Hur ser du på din egen ledarskapsutveckling? Hur skulle du vilja utvecklas som ledare? Har du gått ledarskapsutbildning? Hur var det? Vad tar/tog du med dig från utbildningen/kursen?

Avslutning

Har du något att tillägga?

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Despite the increasing scholarly interest and the growing number of youth leadership programmes, there is still little theoretical knowledge on how young people develop as leaders: this is knowledge that is necessary for improving and developing effective leadership education for young people. In order to move towards a better understanding, this exploratory case study focuses on how young people perceive leadership and their own leadership development. Furthermore, it explores how the educators who train and teach leadership to young people perceive leadership and their own leadership development, including how they design and implement their activities.

This dissertation emphasizes the importance of holistically studying young people's perceptions of leadership by integrating different theories that can provide better and more nuanced understanding of their views. Furthermore, even when leadership activities and programmes are well planned and implemented, leadership programmes tend to be fragmented and isolated from the real-life situations of young participants. It is fundamental that young people are offered space for dialogue and time to develop their ability to think reflectively and to train their minds towards deeper understanding of concepts, situations and insightful choices. This dissertation highlights also that it is not enough for young people to engage in leadership activities or have significant experience of formal leadership programmes, they also need to develop leader identity. This is a growth process that requires support and guidance from their social environment, such as educators, coaches and other adults engaged in young people's development who can acknowledge their efforts and leadership capabilities.

We live in a world of rapid changes, with webs of relationships stretching around the world. In the current uncertain times, the present moment is fundamental for young people in their process of developing as leaders, and not the future, which is uncertain. Emphasizing the importance of reflective thinking, dialogue and being in the present moment.

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