Does gender actually matter?

A qualitative study on the role of gender on school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic

Sahba Sadeghi
Olivia Halling

Bachelor Thesis

Stockholm School of Economics

2022

Abstract

This qualitative study thesis examines the significance of gender for school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews from a sample of 14 mixed-gender principals of Swedish high schools. The *transformational-* and *transactional leadership* models were used as frameworks for grasping a better understanding of the principal's leadership behaviors in response to changes caused by COVID-19. The findings suggest that gender has had an impact on leadership behaviors, with women demonstrating higher levels of transformational leadership than their male counterparts (specifically in regard to the transformational leadership factors of *individualized consideration* and *inspirational motivation*). Female leaders were also found to be more *relationship-oriented* than men, whilst male principals were revealed to be more *task-oriented* than women. Finally, a discrepancy between the perception of effective leadership and actual leadership styles implemented was identified within the male sample. Through an analysis and in-depth discussion of the findings, this thesis helps raise awareness surrounding gender differences in leadership behaviors and contributes to the very crucial and highly contemporary discussion of gender-stereotypic norms in the sphere of organizational leadership.

Keywords: Gender, Transformational leadership, Transactional leadership, High School, COVID-19

Authors:
Sahba Sadeghi (24893)
Olivia Halling (24856)

Supervisor:
Abiel Sebhatu, Affiliated Researcher, Department of Management and Organization

Examiner:
Laurence Romani, Professor, Department of Management and Organization

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the extraordinary principals who took the time to participate in our study – without you, this would not be possible. We would also like to thank our supervisor, Abiel Sebhatu, and our amazing supervision group for their compassion and for all their invaluable insights.

Finally, a special thanks to our families for their unconditional support, and to our significant others for putting up with us and for their unceasing encouragement and guidance despite being miles apart.

Sahba & Olivia

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

COVID-19 has undeniably brought about severe challenges and disruptions in society, with political leaders of all corners of the world grappling to maintain its complications (WHO, 2020). During these critical times, female politicians and world leaders have been particularly praised for their quick and successful handling of the crisis (Johnson et al., 2020). It has been recorded that female leaders have been faster in responding to the outbreak, shown more sympathy in their communication, and had initially lower mortality rates in contrast, male politicians were described as being slower in accepting the existence of the crisis, as well as having had a mentality of blaming others (Wittenberg, 2020; Hong, 2020 Orme, 2021).

Schools specially have been highly exposed to challenges as a result of the pandemic. Due to high rates of absences and the swift shift to online-teaching, many students have been put at risk of educational losses (Skolverket, 2021a). Researchers have found that Swedish principals have devoted much time to addressing the many concerns of employees, students, and parents (Skolverket, 2021b). Thus, it is without a doubt the case that school leaders have played a crucial and societally important role in adjusting the school to obstacles caused by the virus.

1.2. Prior research and research gap

Whilst plenty of research has been devoted to determining how COVID-19 has affected leaders and their leadership style within different fields (eg. Stoker et al., 2021; Permatasar et al., 2021; Rita Men 2022), very little has involved leadership within schools. Schechter et. al (2020) argues that research on educational leadership and the global pandemics is still an unexplored area. Furthermore, to the authors' knowledge, very few studies have focused on school leadership in Sweden during COVID-19. Rodríguez et al. (2021) argue that during the pandemic, school leaders' actions and leadership depend on the regulations from the government, which means that there is a risk of variation between countries. Therefore, the authors of this study aim to further explore the relationship between educational leadership and COVID-19 in Sweden. Furthermore, this is an interesting topic since the schools in Sweden have been open most of the time (Ahlstöm, 2020). Therefore, school leaders in Sweden have been exposed to different types of challenges compared to other countries.

Additionally, many studies that have been conducted concerning gender differences in leadership styles connected to COVID-19 have focused on political leaders at a national level (e.g., Galasso et al. 2020, Windsor et al. 2020, Park 2021). However, no research has been found combining all three components; gender, school leadership and COVID-19.

1.3.   Objectives and research question

Aside from the need to address the current research gap, understanding differences in leadership styles is of utmost importance in respect to establishing gender equality in organizations and beyond. For one, these differences can be consequential, as they can affect public views on women as leaders and whether they should be able to obtain higher positions in organizational hierarchies. Actual differences and/or perceived differences can be used as an excuse to exclude women from leadership opportunities, especially in male-dominated industries. This study assesses whether there are gender differences in leadership behavior and if so, opens up for discussions and future research on whether these differences could be an asset or barrier to women in positions of power. Additionally, understanding the potential differences is important because the leader's own behavior also impacts their effectiveness and possibilities for advancement. Furthermore, by exploring this aspect within the framework of COVID-19, an additional dimension is added which will provide valuable insights about the potentially varying manner by which men and women adapt their leadership during times of crisis.

Using the Transformational- and Transactional leadership models as a framework, this thesis seeks to understand the influence of gender on school principals' leadership behaviors during an ongoing crisis, as well as to investigate the motivators behind these eventual disparities in leadership behaviors. Thus, the research question is the following:

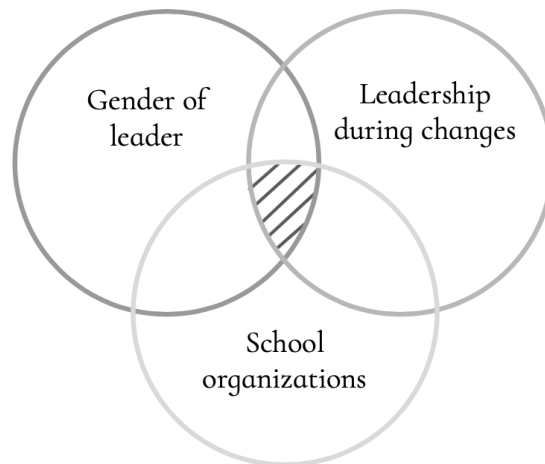*What is the role of gender on school-leadership during COVID-19?*

Figure 1. Visual representation of the merge of components being studied.

1.4.   Delimitations

This thesis aims to understand the role of gender on principals' leadership during COVID-19. The empirical material will be collected through interviews with female and male principals of high schools in Stockholm County. During the interviews, it is possible to receive clarifications about how female and male principals' perceive their leadership and their perception of changes caused by the pandemic. By doing a qualitative study it is possible to interpret and investigate and compare possible underlying ideas of the principals leadership during COVID-19. Furthermore, it makes it easier to compare. The study is limited to Sweden since it is where the authors want to investigate these phenomena because Sweden is one of the most equal countries within the EU (Regeringskansliet, 2019). Furthermore, by narrowing it down to Stockholm County there is a greater chance that the principles will be exposed to the same circumstances which therefore will affect the principles and their leadership equally.

2.   Literature review

2.1.   Introduction to the Swedish highschool system

On 13 March 2020, the Swedish government implemented a temporary school regulation (Regeringskansliet, 2021). The temporary regulation allowed the *huvudman* to, under certain circumstances, make decisions that are not possible with ordinary school legalization.
Thanks to the regulation, *huvudman* has been able to close the schools entirely or partially if needed (Skolverket 2022b). For public schools *huvudmannen* is the municipality and independent schools have a board (Skolinspektionen 2021).

The principal's responsibility is to manage the pedagogical work and decide on the internal organization (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2022). Together with *huvudmannen*, they are responsible for creating good working conditions for teachers (Skolverket 2022a). Within the *huvudmannen* and Skolverket had decided and what the MSB (Myndigheten för Samhällsskydd och Beredskap) had recommended, there was a room for principals to make their own, local decisions.

2.2.   Leadership & gender

As women increasingly obtain leadership roles and rise up in organizational hierarchies, the possibility that women and men differ in terms of leadership styles continues to garner attention. Some researchers argue that gender has little relation to leadership styles and effectiveness, with male and female leaders being equally effective (see e.g., Eagly et al., 1995). Other studies confirm the notion that whilst men and women do not vary in effectiveness, certain situations favor women and others favor men (Powell, 1993)

Considerable bodies of research have found that women have the tendency to lead in a more democratic and participative manner compared to men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990), a style which implies allowing subordinates to participate in decision-making (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Similarly, many findings point to the fact that women are more *relationship-oriented* than men, an approach defined as being concerned with maintaining interpersonal relations by tending to followers' welfare, whereas men are more *task-oriented* than women, an approach defined a concern with accomplishing task through the organization of task-relevant activities (see e.g., Eagly et. al., 2003). Other studies have found this to not be the case, having shown that male and female leaders do not differ in these two styles in organizational settings (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). One possible explanation as to these very different findings is that differences in leadership styles are contingent upon the context in which the leaders work, both in terms of the type of organization (Engen & Willemsen, 2004), as well as based on the particular job role (Eagly et al., 1995).

Furthermore, the congruity between gender roles and leadership roles affect leadership outcomes. It has been found that men are more *task-oriented* and more effective as leaders if the leader role is more congruent with the male gender role. Similarly, women in leader roles that are congruent with the female gender role are more task-oriented than men and more effective. (Eagly et. al., 1995). This finding has important implications because it implies that leaders who occupy *gender-incongruent* roles are more likely to be less effective in terms of organizing tasks. Thus, gender-incongruent leaders, such as male school principals, are likely to lack the skills and/or authority to organize their employees and their resources to achieve the task-related objectives of their organizations (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Some studies have indicated that males and females are similar on most psychological variables such as personality and psychological well being (Hyde, 2005). Given this, an alternative justification for these differences in leadership behaviors can come from the so-called social role theory. The *social role theory* argues that leaders function under the constraints of their gender roles, which is defined as consensual beliefs about individuals on the basis of their socially identified sex (Eagly & Johanssen-Schmidt, 2001). As gender roles are believed to exert some influence on leaders, female and male leaders of the same leadership role are thus expected to behave somewhat differently (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In response to similarities in leadership behavior, the theory says that leadership roles come with sets of norms which regulate the performance of many tasks, which therefore are similarly accomplished by males and females. However, leaders have freedom in the *manner* in which they perform said tasks and activities. The approach may thus differ between men and women as these aspects are not regulated by the expectations associated with the leader role itself, and are therefore susceptible to influence from gender norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Evidence from various research supports this theory, and it is especially prevalent in situations where the incongruity between the female gender role and the leadership role is larger (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

2.2.1. Contemporary research

Most recently, plenty of research has been devoted to the comparison of male and female leaders in terms of full range leadership model, and particularly transformational leadership model, many of which have found female leaders are more transformational than male leaders. (Northhouse, 2019) In fact, a meta-analysis of 45 studies regarding transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles found that, although the differences were small, female leaders were generally more transformational than male leaders, and performed more *contingent reward* behaviors which is a component of transactional leadership. On the other hand, male leaders engaged more in other transactional leadership components, i.e. *active and passive management by exception*, as well as laissez-faire leadership (Eagly et. al., 2003). Another meta-analysis confirmed that women tend to exhibit more democratic and transformational leadership styles than their male counterparts, however, no other differences in leadership styles were found (Engen & Willemsen, 2004). This is a significant finding which further substantiates previous claims and findings that female leaders are typically more transformational than male leaders. However, a factor which could have impacted these results is the diverse role descriptions of the sample of leaders, which included individuals from different levels of management and different functional areas. It is highly likely that the choice of leadership behaviors is contextual, implying that if the research subjects had held the same roles, the differences in the extent of being transformational might not have been as significant. This is because leadership roles come with a set of norms which regulate the performance of many tasks, thus increasing the similarity of the way of work of men and women when occupying the same organizational role (Eagly et. al., 2001). Nonetheless, this issue was addressed by the authors whose data provides evidence that male and female styles differ *even* when occupying the same role.

2.3. Leadership & schools

Sweden is one of few countries globally with a relatively equal distribution between the genders. At a high-school level, the occupation is female-dominated, with 55% women and 45% men (Skolverket, 2020).

Similar to the general findings about gender leadership, several scholars agree that there is a difference in leadership styles between male and female principals. One explanation is connected to the gender role expectations from gender stereotypes. Women are often expected to care more for others than themselves. On the other hand, men are believed to control and lead-based on self-interest. Based on these role perspectives, the male principal should be more task-oriented and women more democratic (Eagly et. al 1992).

Some findings support those previous assumptions and indicate that female principals lead more with a democratic style than with an autocratic style. The explanation is that they see their teachers more as colleagues and further involve them in decision-making. The findings further suggest that men collaborate less and do not let the teacher participate as much in decision-making (Eagly et. al 1992). In contrast, Krüger (1996) found that men tend to include teachers in the decision-making as much as women. However, it's important to note that one study (Eagly 1992) is a meta-analysis whereas the other is only based on data from the Netherlands (Krüger, 1996). Thus, Eagly's study can be seen as more credible since it covers a broader perspective.

Furthermore, Eagly (1992) found a significant slight difference that women were more task-oriented than men in the school setting. A second finding could explain that female principals apply a higher degree of instructional leadership than their male counterparts (Hallinger, 2016). Instructional leadership means support for students' learning and education development, which could be associated with being task-oriented. The problem with this finding is that it does not concretize how the genders actually apply instructional leadership.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Transformational leadership

First set forth by Bass in 1978, transformational leadership is one of the current and most popular approaches to leadership. As implied by the name, this leadership style is about transforming people and encouraging their individual development. (Northhouse, 2016). Transformational leaders enhance the interests of their followers by emphasizing acceptance of the purpose and mission of the group (Bass, 1990). These leaders have a strong influence, set high standards of behavior, and act as role models by gaining the trust and confidence of their followers (Eagly et. al., 2001). By mentoring and empowering their followers, these leaders motivate them to go beyond their individual self-interest and do more than expected, (Northhouse, 2016), and thus, these leaders typically achieve higher performances (Bass & Avolio, 2001). A purely transformational culture has a sense of purpose and a feeling of family, and an impression of interdependence between leaders and followers (Bass & Avolio, 1993).

Transformational leaders work to achieve results beyond expectation, by employing one or more of the four factors of transformational leadership:

1) Idealized influence
Transformational leaders act as role models for their followers. Followers identify with the leaders and aim to emulate them (Northhouse, 2016). One reason for this is that these leaders typically consider the needs of others over their personal gains. These leaders are admired and respected, and demonstrate high standards of ethical and moral conduct (Bass & Avolio, 2001).

2) Inspirational motivation
This component describes leaders that communicate high expectations to followers and motivate them to become a part of the organization's shared vision (Northhouse, 2016). These leaders inspire their followers by providing meaning and challenge to their work, and consequently raise the team spirit (Bass & Avolio, 2001). They stimulate the need for growth and offer direction to followers through a shared vision of a better future outcome (Bass & Avolio, 1995).

3) Intellectual stimulation
By questioning assumptions and reframing problems, these leaders challenge their followers to be innovative and creative. Followers are included in problem-solving processes, where they are encouraged to contribute with new ideas and suggestions for solutions (Bass & Avolio, 2001). These leaders present difficulties as problems to be solved, and emphasize rational solutions (Bass 1990).

4) Individualized consideration

This factor depicts leaders that recognize and pay attention to each followers individual needs. They do this by providing a supportive climate for followers and acting as their mentors (Northhouse, 2016). Furthermore, these leaders exhibit behaviors which demonstrate acceptance of individual differences, and their interactions with followers are personalized (Bass & Avolio, 2001), as what is seen by individualized consideration by one follower may be viewed as a lack of consideration by another (Bass & Avolio, 1995). Tasks may also be delegated so as to help followers' personal growth, and leaders act as mentors to those needing help (Bass, 1990).

3.2. Transactional leadership

Transactional leadership is a broad term for a series of leadership models (Northhouse, 2016) which emphasizes the transaction- or exchange-like relationship between leaders and followers (Bass & Avolio, 2001). A transactional leader does not focus on the individual needs of the followers and their personal development Instead, these leaders simply aim to clarify the followers' tasks and responsibilities, monitor their work, reward good performance and correct failures to meet goals (Eagly et. al., 2001). Whilst transformational leadership aims for performances above expectations, transactional leadership leads to expected outcomes (Northouse, 2016).

Transactional leadership occurs by contingent reinforcement, either by the positive contingent reward factor or negative management by exception factor.

1) Contingent reward

The leader appoints assignments, and rewards followers in exchange for satisfactorily carrying out the task (Bass & Avolio, 2001). Failure to meet a specific standard implies punishment in the form of correction or discipline. The impact of rewards or punishments is dependent on the follower's valuing of the anticipated effect (Bass & Avolio, 1995)

2) Management by exception

This factor may be carried out in a passive or active manner. When active, the leader actively monitors the follower's work to detect mistakes or deviations from the standards in the follower's tasks, and takes corrective action as necessary (Bass & Avolio, 2001). When passive, the leader awaits for errors to occur and intervenes only when standards are not being met (Bass, 1990).

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP
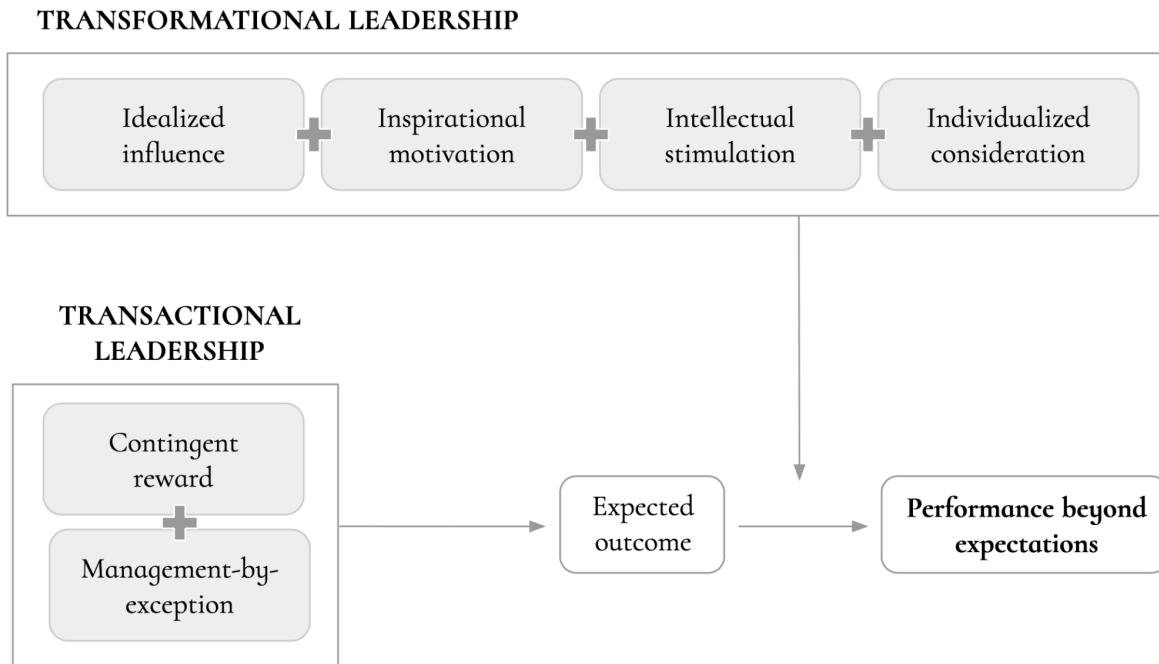
Figure 2: Visual depiction of the transformational- and transactional leadership models, their respective components, and the components' additive effects (Northhouse, 2019).

3.3. Full range of leadership model

The model was further expanded by Bass in 1985 when he placed transformational-, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles as parts of a single continuum (Northhouse, 2019). The laissez-faire style represents an avoidance or absence of leadership; this type of leader evades responsibility and postpones decision-making (Bass & Avolio, 2001). Naturally, this type of leadership is ineffective (Northhouse, 2019).
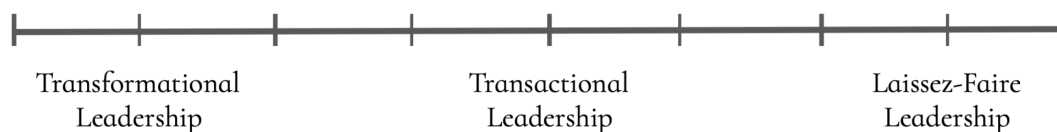
Figure 3. Leadership continuum from transformational to laissez-faire leadership (Northhouse, 2019)

Leaders can adopt more than one of these styles, but one is usually more dominant than the rest (Bass & Riggo, 2006). Since the 1980s, much research has shown that transformational leadership is more effective than transactional leadership in terms of raising commitment and satisfaction. However, it has also been found that whilst the best leaders employ mostly

transformational leadership, they also employ some level of transactional leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2001).
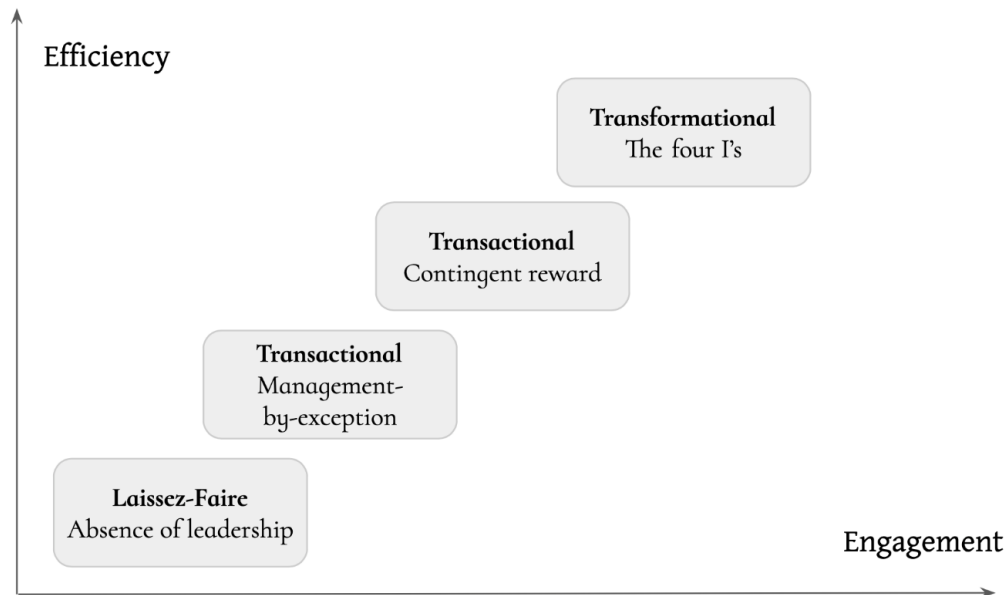
Figure 4. Full range of leadership model (adapted from Bass 1990)

3.4. Theory discussion

As discussed earlier, much of the recent research surrounding gender and leadership styles has concerned itself with transformational and transactional leadership models. These leadership styles are also somewhat prevalent in studies about school leadership, with scholars arguing that transformational school leadership leads to increased employee satisfaction and heightened organizational commitment. In contrast, transactional leaders are thought to perform worse in respect to those factors (Koh et al., 1995; Leithwood et al., 2006; Nguni, 2006). Given these prerequisites, the authors' found it to be suitable to use these theoretical frameworks when researching the fields of gender and school in combination.

Despite its popularity, transformational leadership has some weaknesses. It has been found that the factors of transformational leadership overlap, suggesting that they are not distinctly demarcated (Tracey & Hinkin, 1998). Thus, it may be hard to determine the exact factor being applied. Furthermore, the authors are also critical of the fact that the model only incorporates four factors, which arguably provides a too simplistic view and does not encompass the many dimensions of actual leadership behavior. However, given the fact that the model is so well-researched and well-renowned, it was deemed to be a suitable choice.

4. Methodology
4.1. Choice of Method
4.1.1. Research philosophy

This paper takes a constructivist interpretivist approach. The purpose of interpretivism is "to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts", by studying the perspectives of different groups of people and the meanings which they create, and as a result, the different social realities which they experience (Saunders et. al., 2019). Similarly, this thesis seeks to investigate the potential differences between the leadership of male and female leaders, which is arguably a direct cause of the way these leaders see, experience and assign meaning to the same circumstance (COVID-19 pandemic). By investigating the research subjects' interpretations of what on the surface appears to be the same crisis, an understanding can be gained of the differing perspectives in which the leaders experience reality, and the measures they take to address that reality. Thus, given the purpose of the thesis, this approach is deemed to be suitable.

4.1.2. Research approach

Due to the study's interpretivist nature which entails making sense of subjectives and social constructions, a qualitative research method was chosen (Saunders et. al., 2019). Furthermore, an abductive approach was taken, implying that data was collected in parallel to theory generation (Saunders et. al., 2019). Firstly, data was collected to explore the research phenomenon in an overall manner. Next, the recurrent themes were identified which induced the emergence of different theories, which were then further tested using subsequent data collection.

4.1.3. Cross-sectional method

This thesis is conducted through a cross-sectional research design since the purpose was to examine multiple cases at one point in time (Bell, Bryman, et al., 2019). Furthermore, this research method was preferred by the authors since it enabled them to see repetitive patterns in the leadership across schools, which should not have been possible with a single case study.

4.2. Data collection
4.2.1. Interview sample

This study is based on fourteen interviews with different high-school principals across Stockholms Län. The respondents were randomly selected and contacted through email (see appendix 1). During the selection of individuals to contact the authors tried to keep all variables as constant as possible in order to see the effects of only gender. Examples of variables are age,

years of experience and school characteristics (number of students and teachers). However, it was not entirely possible because the authors did not receive as many responses as they hoped for. A presentation of the respondent and their school are presented in *table 1*.

FEMALE RESPONDENTS				MALE RESPONDENTS		
Nr	Respondent alias	High school		Nr	Respondent alias	High school
1	Alice	A		1	Hans	H
2	Bella	B		2	Ian	I
3	Carla	C		3	John	J
4	Dora	D		4	Karl	K
5	Emma	E		5	Liam	L
6	Fia	F		6	Mark	M
7	Greta	G		7	Nick	N

Table 1. *Overview of respondents*

4.2.2. Interview process

Based on the preliminary literature review and previous theories, concepts were identified which helped construct the interview guide. Since this thesis is based on an abductive method, the authors were aware that the initial theories and concepts could be replaced after the interviews. The authors did a pilot interview and afterwards the interview guide was slightly adjusted to make sure it covered the right focus (see appendix 2). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were held which allowed the interviewee to freely speak about the subject and the researchers to ask follow-up questions to better understand the subject (Saunders et. al., 2019). Furthermore, the interview guide was constructed with open questions to cover a wide range of aspects.

Out of fourteen interviews, twelve were conducted online (via Zoom or Microsoft Teams), and two physically. The interviews varied between 27 and 57 minutes, with an average of 40 minutes. During the interviews the authors were able to identify certain similarities and differences in the empiric data and after fourteen interviews, empirical saturation was achieved. For more detailed information regarding interview subjects, see appendix 3.

4.3. Data analysis

Each interview was recorded and further transcribed upon the respondents' approval. When the 14 interviews were done, the raw data was analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. The first step was coding, the authors were able to identify around 45 first-order concepts. Next step was to create second-order themes based on the concepts. Due to the abductive characteristics of

this study, the themes examined were both chosen based on existing theory, as well as derived from data.

The purpose of this type of analysis is to map recurring themes in data sets in aims of identifying rich explanations and theorizing (Saunders et. al., 2019). As this is an interpretivist study, thematic analysis can be used to explore different interpretations of a phenomenon; more specifically, this type of analysis can help in pinpointing how males and females differ in their interpretations of change and their choice of leadership style in those situations.

SECOND-ORDER THEMES	CONSTRUCTS
Perceived challenges	Perception of change
Perceived stress	
Initiatives and activities	Strategies to address changes
Inspirational motivation	
Individualised consideration	
Perception of effective leadership	Perception of optimal leader-follower relations
Perception & expectations of employees	

Table 2. Overview of the empirical data and identified themes and constructs

4.4.   Ethical considerations and implications

One of the most important parts was to increase the study's dependability and authenticity during the process. In order to maintain this, the collection and analysis of the empirics became a critical part. Along with this process, different ethical principles were considered (Saunders et. al., 2019). First and foremost was the *privacy of those taking part*, which means maintaining anonymity and promising confidentiality. The participants were informed about this several times, in the first email and at the interview's beginning. Two more ethical principles were *the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw* and *informed consent of those taking part*. The participants were told that they could withdraw from participating at any time without an explanation. Additionally, to create informed consent, a participating information sheet and a consent form were sent to all participants before the interview to be signed. The paper consisted

of what type of personal data to be processed, how the data will be stored and analyzed, the participant's rights, contact information in the course of concern, and general information about the study.

4.5.   Method criticism

Through a cross-sectional study, it is possible to observe a relationship between two variables. Bell and colleagues (2019) argue that a cross-sectional method decreases the study's credibility. However, credibility and ecological validity were accomplished since the interviews were conducted in a familiar environment for the respondents (ibid). All fourteen interviews were done with the respondents being present at their school or home. Even if the study only consists of a small sample, the authors have tried to increase the *transferability* by providing a *thick description* of the respondents and the contextual nature of COVID-19.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish since it was the respondents' native language. Therefore, the audio recordings had to be transcribed and translated into English. Since there is a risk of linguistic difficulties where words and expressions cannot be translated into English (Bell et al., 2019), direct translation was not always possible, and therefore complemented with oblique translation to ensure that the meanings still were reproduced authentically into English.

Finally, given the subjectivist nature of interpretivism, the authors were careful to recognise that their interpretation of the empirical material will be influenced by their subconscious values and beliefs, and will thereby play a part in the research process. As a means to counteract this, the authors ensure to maintain an empathetic stance through the data collection and analysis process.

5. Empirics

With the exception of a few, the sample was mostly homogeneous with respect to school size in terms of number of students and number of employees and the respondents' organizational role and age. Despite the variables being held mostly constant, some differences were identified between the female and male principals' responses across varying themes. The analysis of these differences in the later chapters will provide valuable insights as to the role of gender in school leadership during COVID-19.

5.1. Perception of change

All respondents were asked about their general perceptions of COVID-19 and its significance for their schools. Whilst all principals perceived COVID-19 as an unexpected crisis which led to inevitable changes in society and the education system, they were somewhat divided in regard to the challenges and matters of stress which resulted from these changes.

5.1.1. Perceived challenges

When asked about challenges, all respondents described difficulties in revising new schedules, implementing digital systems and handling general uncertainties as a result of changing governmental restrictions to varying extents.

Many female respondents discussed challenges revolving around their employees.

> *"The biggest challenge has been balancing the different wishes and views on the pandemic, because there have been differing views on how dangerous it has been, how risky the job is, and so on. There have been many different points-of-views and balancing between them and taking into account everyone based on their standpoints, that has been the most difficult aspect I think."* – Fia

> *"The challenge has been to manage one's leadership from a distance. School institutions are not meant to be conducted from a distance. We need to meet each other. To make sure that everyone is on board the train. One doesn't know how everyone [teachers] is feeling mentally. Some feel better when a structure exists, and that is something which students and even teachers can lose [due to this]."* – Carla

The male respondents often described their concerns through a practical view. The perceived challenges were generally regarding the difficulties with online-teaching and the lacking quality of education as a result.

"What has been challenging is when we have had staff who have been absent due to illness. The study results have been a challenge too, to try to motivate students who have been shy about education. The students who have been home a lot, they have been difficult to reach. But this personnel situation has been challenging for me, because I have had to make decisions and take measures for it" – Nick

"The biggest challenge has been to always keep to different alternatives and balance those, to consider society's recommendations about keeping distance. It's about the measures when we are on the spot; How do we organize the lunches so it's not too crowded? How do ventilate? And to always balance the learnings of students and study results with measures to reduce the spread of the pandemic" – Ian

5.1.2. Perceived stress

Both male and female respondents expressed heightened levels of stress amongst themselves and/or their employees to some extent. It was more common for female respondents to have experienced stress for their employees' sake.

"Facing the reactions in the very beginning of the pandemic was difficult, because I had my own anxiety, and it was very hard for me to receive their [teachers] fear of getting sick or infecting someone. We tried to talk about this but it was important not to go too deep because then you can end up escalating the fear. I tried ensure that we remained factual [...] but more stress arose from the feeling of doing something wrong but at the same time it was hard for me to do the right thing in that situation" – Dora

"You are constantly stressed...obviously there has been a little extra stress surrounding this [COVID-19] but I have been pretty calm anyway. You have to be a role model somewhere. You have to instill calm in your personnel. Listen to them but also be clear. They stayed calm because I was quite calm. I was mostly thinking about the students' education, but I was also worried about my teachers' and students' health." – Nick

Some respondents discussed not being that stressed at all. The majority of these respondents were male.

"I took it quite calmly. Of course, I could be worried sometimes for myself and my family and friends, but that anxiety never came to the school" – John

"I am not a person who gets particularly worried, for better or for worse. Maybe it makes me underestimate the risks. But I think that as a person I have an advantage that I do not worry unnecessarily. In that way, I think I have handled it well because I have been able to stay calm and not make decisions based on my own worries." – Ian

5.2.   Strategies to address changes

Certain actions were required to be taken by the government and by the school *huvudman*, however, the principals had the liberty over the manner in which they implemented these actions. One such initiative implemented by many respondents was introducing extra meetings, social activities and collection of surveys.

5.2.1.   Initiatives and activities

Most women stated that their extra meetings and activities served the purpose of supporting the personnel and minimizing their concerns.

> *"We had weekly catch-up meetings, where there were opportunities to get support and help but we also had occupational healthcare for those who needed external help. We may not have the solutions but at least we can talk about it and share our concerns, so it does not escalate. It is important that we take the concerns seriously."* – Dora

> *"Almost every afternoon we had a meeting just because so much was happening, and the personnel were worried. So I think it was important conversations that I had with the personnel a couple of times a week, just to inform and tell them that there was nothing new right now or if they had any questions."* – Alice

A few women deviated from this.

> *"We have not worked much with stress management directly for the teachers, but rather indirectly through the students, I would say. We have had the original meetings we have had, with the same regularity as before COVID-19, but remotely. We have had two meetings a week."* – Fia

It was generally less common for male respondents to enforce extra meetings. For those that did, the purpose of the was often student-related or for planning ahead.

> *"No extra meetings, we have had our regular weekly meetings. No additional surveys were conducted to follow up on specific questions about COVID-19. We have been quite informal on that aspect and worked with the channels we already have."* – Ian

> *"Every meeting each week has been about the COVID-19 situation in some way. We have had two regular meetings a week and during both we took the time to plan ahead. Extra meetings have not really been needed, rather with the two meetings in the beginning of the week we were able to plan 1-2 weeks ahead all the time"* – Liam

5.2.2.   Inspirational motivation

Most respondents said that it is important to motivate the employees during an organizational change. Women more often did it by communicating a shared vision and using encouraging words. Among men this was not as common.

> *"It is important to support the teachers so that the students can get a good education. Oftentimes you must praise and encourage the teachers, that is very important. Verbal communication. It is also important that they have someone to brainstorm ideas with."* – Emma

> *"You also need to be brave because education is an important part of society, and we need to take it very seriously. We have received a mission from the government to fulfill [...] We haven't just given up; we have continued working. We have something to work towards. That lighthouse is shining in the distance, and we have to navigate towards it. It may get stormy on our way, but the goal is still the same; the students must graduate"* – Emma

> *"We have a strong shared culture among the personnel. A shared culture which is quite tangible"* – Bella

Male respondents did not talk as much about creating motivation, but rather talked about the importance of the employees being part of the change.

> *"I think that you are very naive if you think that you could get through such a change from one day to another if the teachers are not a part of that process themselves. They are the ones who work with it, so to speak."* – Liam

> *"You realize that there are many people who can do things much better than yourself, so if you just manage to convince them to also believe that this is the right way to do it and let them blossom, then things will usually become much better than if you had done it yourself."* – Hans

A small sample of men did not have the same approach as the rest, in terms of motivation or the view of the mission.

> *"You sometimes cannot motivate people. You might discuss something, and you come to the agreement that you are not in agreement, and that you will never be in agreement. And then you just have to say "listen, this is how it is in this workplace and there is a mission which everyone else also has. You cannot just skip a task or something."* – Karl

5.2.3.   Individualized consideration

Multiple women expressed concerns about employees on an individual level, stressing the need to listen to their employees. This notion was much prevalent among male employees.

"There are a number of teachers that are not seen or heard as much, or that don't have as many years of experience and thus don't view themselves as having the same legitimacy to put forth their opinion as the other more experienced group. We know from our meeting platforms that these individuals don't always make their voices heard, and so I try to capture their voices via other forums" – Bella

"I try to put together a work group and a workplace and at the same time take into consideration every individual's right to their worries and their views" – Fia

Some women shared more practical examples of how they ensured that the individual needs of their employees were being met.

"Just to ensure that there would be some scattering in public transport, they [teachers] could come and go essentially whenever they wanted, as long as they held their lessons"– Alice

Although less common, a few men also expressed concerns for the individual needs.

"The idea was that it would not be 'one size fits all'. So, we were very aware on an individual level of who it was that was suffering the most and how we could handle that. And that was then about individual solutions, 'what works for you and how can we solve this?'" – Mark

Mens' responses showcased tendencies of individual consideration to a much lesser extent. Some men even expressed contradictory views, e.g. insisting that the teachers continue working on-site.

"Everyone took it pretty calmly. We also clearly decided that we would be on the site at school. The teachers were present at school. All the tools were here. Some had the possibility to work from home but we decided 'no, we are on site', because then we can talk to each other and we also have all the tools here." – Nick

It was common for most respondents to express that their employees were somewhat worried during the pandemic. A few men expressed dissatisfaction with the heightened stress-levels.

"There were many reasons why they were worried. These weren't always rational so at some point you just have to refer to the fact that this is what society has decided. They have decided that we are to have school now and I am not the one expecting you as a teacher to work, its society [...] We tried to be quite flexible, but more towards the end I would say. Because that's when we realized that this had actually negatively affected the teachers too" – Karl

5.3. Perception of optimal leader-follower relations

All respondents were asked to describe their perception of effective leadership and their relationship with their followers.

5.3.1. Perception of effective leadership

When asked about what would compromise effective leadership during the crisis, the respondents shared similar views. Frequently mentioned characteristics of effective leadership were, for example, availability, considering the perspectives of employees and the importance of communication. This notion was prevalent within both samples, the female and male principals.

> *"I never want to be the leader of an organization that just stands still, for every employee that joins you to get new ideas and thoughts and it is important to take advantage of this. To include everyone in that construction, that everyone should thrive, be satisfied and safe, and feel seen, and that you make use of their ideas and thoughts. That, I think is super important"* – Bella

> *"The most important thing is being available for your personnel"* – Alice

> *"The ability to see the entirety and quickly put myself in a situation. Above all, to have a holistic perspective and be clear in communication. Be able to listen and understand the organization. Put it in some way forward. Having a holistic perspective and not just taking my own perspective."* – Ian

> *"You have to be a role model. You need to be calm. Instill calmness and safety in the personnel and not stress yourself. Be clear. Listen, and be clear."* – Nick

5.3.2. Perception and expectations of employees

The previous sections reveal some differences in the way the leaders perceive their followers. These differences were also identified when the respondents were asked about their employees directly.

It was common for women to highlight personal relationships with employees and the importance of being available.

> *"I would describe the relationship as very good, and I think they would too. We have a very close contact; I am very available as a principal and I think they too think that I am an available principal."* – Greta

"If you reach out too much then you can definitely be perceived as controlling, which I do not want to be perceived as. If you are reaching out [to employees] then you should actually have something important to stay because you are basically taking their time." – Carla

"They [teachers] are looking for authority in society, someone that can be clear and give answers, and principals tend to be such an authority sometimes. So, I'm always trying to be as accommodating and solution-oriented as possible for my employees." – John

"The teachers want to do something, but we cannot do that and we do not have the liberty to do that. Being able to explain that is important. To understand the context" – Ian

6. Analysis

This analysis will consider how male and female principals responded to the COVID-19 crises in regard to their choice of strategies and their overarching leadership behaviors. Based on the exhibited leadership styles, the respondents have been categorized across the *full range leadership model* scale. Figure 5 summarizes the differences in leadership behavior between male and female principals, as well as possible determinants for said differences, as interpreted by the authors.
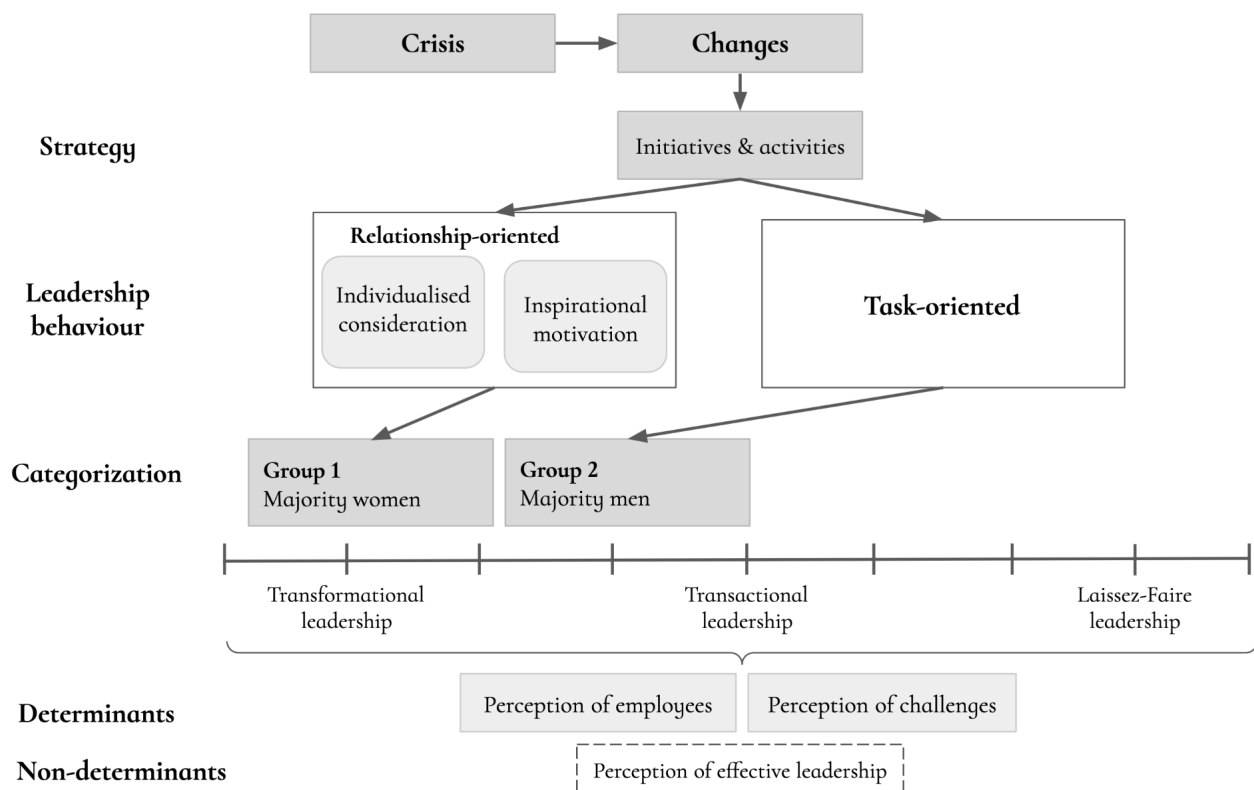

Figure 5. *Analytical framework (Sadeghi & Halling, 2022)*

6.1. Changes in leadership behavior

The empirical data indicates that both female and male principals have, to some extent, changed their leadership styles in response to changes caused by COVID-19. Although the data cannot confirm any clear distinctions between the genders, such as one group being fully *transformational* and the other fully *transactional*, there is some evidence that overall, women placed closer towards transformational leadership than men on the *full range leadership model* scale. Similarly, women were more *relationship-oriented* than men, and men were more *task-oriented* than women. It is also worth noting that neither men nor women showed signs of the transformational leadership factors of *idealized influence or intellectual stimulation,* or the transactional leadership factors of *contingent reward* or *management-by-exception.* Rather, all the differences in leadership behaviors between men and women boiled down to the extent to which the genders conducted *individualized consideration* and *inspirational motivation.*

6.1.1. Leadership behavior amongst women

Whilst much of the past literature supports the notion that women are more *relationship-oriented* than men, some studies have found the opposite to be true in school settings (Eagly, 1992). However, the empirical findings of this study support the former findings, suggesting that women are indeed more *relationship-oriented* than men even in school settings. Female principals were more available for their employees, showed greater concern for their physical and mental wellbeing and introduced more initiatives so as to tend to their satisfaction and needs, which are typically considered to be *relationship-oriented leadership* (Eagly et. al., 2003).

Furthermore, many of the female respondents also expressed the importance of communicating the mission and encouraging their employees to become a part of this shared vision. They did this by being vocal about the school's mission, framing the employees' work during the crisis as meaningful and clearly expressing the employees' important role in achieving said mission. This behavior is an epitome of *inspirational motivation*, which is a critical part of *transformational leadership*. Additionally, they also to a greater extent prioritized the teachers' personal wellbeing and expressed their desires to attain to their individual needs during the changes. Hence, they also showcased *individualized consideration.*

6.1.2. Leadership behavior amongst men

The empirical data suggests that male principals were less *relationship-oriented* compared to women. The majority of men did not express their employees' situations as a main concern but rather, focused on clarifying assignments, instructing on tasks that needed to be completed to achieve certain performance parameters (such as reduction in absences, better study results etc.) and planning ahead. Men were consequently regarded as generally more *task-oriented* than women.

Whilst men also displayed *transformational leadership styles*, this generally occurred at a lesser scope, both in terms of *inspirational motivation* and *individualized consideration*. Many male respondents expressed the importance of involving the employees in the change and saw that as a way of creating motivation. However, this was not elaborated on nor necessarily concretized. Similarly, none of the male respondents mentioned communicating a shared vision or inspiring the teachers to work towards a grander purpose. Furthermore, it was relatively rare for the male principals to display concerns for the individual employee, who often made decisions based on their perception of what was good for the group as a collective.

Finally, although male principals for the most part showed a lower degree of transformational leadership, no male respondent exhibited any particularly transactional leadership traits such as *contingent reward* and *management by exception.*

> **Proposition 1**: In combating the changes induced by COVID-19, female principals showed higher levels of transformational leadership than male principals; specifically, higher degrees of *individualized consideration* and *inspirational motivation.*

> **Proposition 2**: Female principals were generally more *relationship-oriented* than men, whereas male principals were generally more *task-oriented* than women.

6.2. Discrepancies between perception of effective leadership and leadership behavior

As discussed earlier, female principals were found to be more relationship-oriented and more transformational than their male counterparts. Interestingly, the empirical data illustrates that despite differences in leadership behaviors, men and women shared similar opinions of what constitutes effective leadership.

When asked about the 'effective leader', some traits were frequently mentioned: being inclusive, available and calm, having good communication skills and being a good listener, involving the teachers in the decision-making processes, ensuring that everyone thrives and is satisfied, that all opinions are valued and so on. Women did in fact implement many of these elements in their actual strategies and initiatives, as well as in their behaviors towards employees. A large proportion of the men however, did not do so despite claiming those aspects to be valuable.

> **Proposition 3**: Women and men share similar perceptions of effective leadership behavior. Whilst women's perception of effective leadership was more in-line with their leadership behavior, this was not the case for a large proportion of the male sample. A discrepancy exists in the perception of effective leadership and actual leadership behaviors amongst men.

6.3. Determinants of leadership behavior

Despite being faced with the same crises and mostly homogeneous circumstances, it has been established that female and male principals differed in their choice of leadership behavior during COVID-19. This raises the question as to why this was the case. Based on the empirics, two factors stand out as the main determinants of this phenomenon:

1) **Perception of challenges**
2) **Perception of employees**

It has been identified that these two elements affect whether a transformational or transactional leadership style is implemented, as well as whether relationship-oriented or task-oriented behaviors are more prominent.

6.3.1. Perception of challenges

The challenges faced by both female and male principals were of a similar nature; the respondents expressed difficulties in matters such as making the digital shift, tackling societal uncertainty and fear, adapting to governmental recommendations and so on. However, the empirical data shows that whilst the majority of men saw these as operational challenges, the majority of women saw these through an employee-centric lens. In response to these challenges, women mentioned difficulties in balancing the different wishes of their employees and considering everyone's standpoints, as well as worrying about the teachers' mental states. These responses are of a *relationship-oriented* nature and could provide some explanatory value as to why women more frequently exhibited *individualized consideration* and *inspirational motivation,* and were generally more *relationship-oriented* in their approach. In contrast, men commonly viewed the same circumstances as challenging due to declining education quality and study results, decreased student motivation and participation, difficulties in implementing sanitary measures, increased employee absences etc. Likewise, men's different perception of challenges can explain why they chose to take a *task-oriented* approach, not engaging as much in transformational leadership factors of *individualized consideration* or *inspirational motivation* as the need for that was not even recognized.

> **Proposition 4**: The contrasting perceptions of comparable challenges can have explanatory value as to why men and women differed in their behavioral styles. Women were more *relationship-oriented* than men and engaged in *individualized consideration* and *inspirational motivation* to a greater extent, because their view of challenges was employee-based. Men were more *task-oriented*, and exhibited *individualized consideration* and *inspirational motivation* to a lesser extent, as their perception of challenges was focused on practicalities.

6.3.2.   Perception of employees

All respondents claimed to have good relationships with their personnel. Despite this, there was somewhat of a difference in the way female and male respondents described their employees.

A pattern regularly noticed among female respondents were their tendencies to refer to their employees on an individual level. They often expressed that their employees have different needs, that some get more stressed than others, some need more structure in their work, some participate less in discussions, and so on. Men, on the other hand, tend to refer to their personnel as a group in the majority of their responses. To exemplify, one respondent even went so far as to question the relevance of teachers, and also stressed their needs for authoritative figures in society. Another respondent expressed that teachers are not always rational, and some even impossible to motivate. These responses along with other empirical data reveal that male respondents to a larger extent than women view themselves as more important and/or competent than their followers.

Furthermore, female respondents expressed overall more concern regarding the mental wellbeing of their employees in these stressful times. They also saw a larger need for addressing the teachers' worries and personal needs. One female principal in particular even expressed concerns in regard to taking her employees time if she were to contact them too much. This and other empirical data further strengthen the theory that women viewed their employees as individuals.

The way the principals describe their employees sheds some light on the way they perceive them; and the stark contrast in the female principals' descriptions of their employees versus mens' implies that their subconscious perceptions of their employees differ too. Thus, this could be another possible explanation for the differences in leadership behavior.

> **Proposition 5**: Gender plays a role in principals' perception of their employees, which in turn impacts their choice of leadership behavior. Women see their teachers as individuals with individualized needs, take their concerns and worries more seriously and show greater support in turbulent times, and therefore, it is more common for women to adapt their behavior to be more *relationship-oriented* and perform *individualized consideration* and *inspirational*

motivation. Men, on the other hand, saw their employees as a collective and therefore did not value individual concerns, but rather focused on the overarching completion of tasks and thus exhibited *task-oriented* behaviors.

7. Discussion

7.1. Answer to research question

This study has investigated the differences between male and female school leaders' behaviors during a crisis, based specifically on the *transformational-* and *transactional leadership* models. Fourteen qualitative interviews with principals of Swedish highschools have been conducted and analyzed in the aims of answering the following research question:

What is the role of gender on school-leadership during COVID-19?

The propositions generated as a result of the analysis in the previous section serve as answers to the research question:

1) Female principals show higher levels of the transformational leadership factors *individualized consideration* and *inspirational motivation*, and are therefore considered to be more *transformational* overall than their male counterparts
2) Female principals were generally more *relationship-oriented* than men, whereas male principals were generally more *task-oriented* than women
3) Gender did not have an impact on the perception of effective leadership. However, a discrepancy was found between male principals' perception of effective leadership and actual leadership behaviors implemented.

Furthermore, the following propositions serve as potential explanations to the findings above, i.e. the differences in leadership behavior:

4) Gender plays a role in the perceptions of challenges: Female principals' perception of challenges was employee-based. Male principals' perception of comparable challenges was task-based.
5) Gender plays a role in the perceptions of employees: female principals' perception of employees was individual-based. Male principals' perception of employees was collective-based.

In summary, men and women did not differ in their recognition of the crisis and the somewhat necessary changes that had to be made due to it. They did, however, differ in their choice of leadership behaviors in adapting to these changes, with women being more transformational than

men. Potential explanations behind these differing leadership behaviors boils down to the differing ways in which the two genders perceive challenges and their employees. Additionally, discrepancy between perception of effective leadership and implemented leadership behaviors occurred only amongst the male sample.

7.2.   Discussion and implications

The study has found that gender does have an effect on school leadership, thereby disproving the argument that sex differences do not exist among leaders occupying the same organizational roles (e.g., Eagly & Johnson, 1990). The findings of this study are in alignment with the large bulk of previous research which suggests that women are more relationship-oriented (e.g., Eagly et. al., 2003), and more transformational (e.g., Engen & Willemsen, 2004) than men. However, a significant contribution of this research is that this is the case even in school settings, thus questioning previous claims that female principals are more task-oriented than their male counterparts (Eagly et. al 1992).

Following this, the question arises as to why a difference even exists. As briefly discussed in the literature review, a plausible explanation is societal expectations and gender-specific norms. As suggested by the social role theory, men and women's difference in leadership behavior may be to conform to said expectations. However, it is also possible that men and women differ in their leadership behaviors not only because they tailor it to gendered expectations, but rather also because they to some extent have internalized their gender roles (Eagly et. al., 2000). Thus, men and women may differ in their expectations of their own behaviors as leaders, which would ultimately influence their choice of leadership style. In fact, the authors often found that men and women tended to differ in their perceptions of themselves and their leadership; whilst men saw themselves as more relationship-oriented and effective than they actually were, it was much more common for women to downplay their leadership capabilities or to see close, interpersonal relations with employees to be a given.

As transformational leadership embodies certain behaviors typically considered to be feminine, it is not surprising that female principals chose to adopt this style as a means of conforming to the relationship-oriented expectations of the female gender role, and thereby, overcoming the problem with role incongruity. This is particularly relevant for women as it has been shown that they are more susceptible to disapproval and negative feedback when deviating from their perceived gender roles (Eagly & Karau). This is especially true for the factors of *individualized consideration* and *inspirational motivation* which are particularly communal. Thus, it is no surprise that these two factors were precisely the only transformational behaviors exhibited by the respondents of this study. Scholars have argued that the other components of transformational leadership do not conform either gender roles (Northhouse, 2019), which again corresponds with the findings of this study, as neither of them were identified in the respondent sample.

The implications of this study are manifold. It is important to note that the reason for investigating these differences is not to declare one gender's approach as correct and the other as wrong, but rather it's about understanding the differences themselves. Comprehending differences in perceptions and in leadership behaviors enables heightened empathy for, and more effective collaborations between, the genders. Furthermore, although the differences observed were not extreme, they still serve an important purpose. Because these effects of gender, when repeated over and over again, can lead to significant consequences in organizations. Also, it is crucial to note that the differences cannot necessarily be too large either, as leadership behavior is not only influenced by gender roles. To a large extent, leadership behavior is regulated by organizational roles and requirements, which cannot differ between men and women (Eagly et. al., 2003).

Furthermore, questioning these differences spurs an important discussion about women as leaders. It is highly relevant to understand the motivators as to why men and women choose certain leadership styles. Because although it might appear to be a free choice, in some cases it might be highly influenced by other factors. Women may exert certain leadership styles not purely because they deem it as most effective, but as a means of evading role incongruity. Women may find themselves in situations where conforming to their leader roles hamper them from conforming to their gender roles, and thus being disliked or considered to be incapable leaders, whereas conforming to their gender roles may deter them from meeting the requirements of their leader role. This places women in a no-win situation. Perceivers will only eliminate themselves of preconceived notions and internalized gender-stereotypes if they are made aware of its occurrence, and even then, it is required that they have motivation to counter it. Thus, if gender equality of opportunity is to be advanced, it is of critical importance to raise awareness of- and address these issues. Hence, in contributing to this very important discussion, this study and its findings are very relevant.

7.3.   Limitations of the study

It is possible to identify some limitations with this study. The authors chose to do the study with a constructivist and interpretivist approach which means that the presentation of the empirical materials are based on the authors' capability to interpret the data. Furthermore, the study does not focus on outcome performance which is considered as an important component of transformational leadership (Northhouse, 2019).

The study is only based on the principals' self-perception of their leadership and does not consider how the employees perceive it. Therefore, there is a risk that the empirical data is not reflecting the actual situation in the best way. Furthermore, the study is not based on a fully

homogeneous sample which can have affected the result. Therefore, the differences found between female and male leadership might not be entirely due to gender differences.

7.4.   Suggestions for future research

This thesis has provided five propositions to answer the research question. Despite this, future research can further help improve the study's transferability by using an increased sample of principals from a more significant geographic area. Future studies could also expand the scope from only examining high-school principals to school principals overall to generate a more general conclusion.

To further clarify the differences between female and male principals, future studies can also include teachers' and students' perceptions of the principals' leadership. In order to support the leaders' self-perception of their leadership behavior. One further suggestion is to try to secure a more homogeneous sample and in that way the potential difference in leadership can connect better to the role of gender.

To measure transformational and transactional leadership, the *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)* is one of the most used methods (Northhouse 2019). Since this method generates reliable and valid results (ibid), future research could do a quantitative study when examining if the principals are more transformational or transactional leaders.

8.   Conclusion

Leaders in all types of organizations have all to some extent been subjected to complications and work disruptions as a result of COVID-19. School institutions in particular have been especially vulnerable to startling circumstances. School principals have been facing high levels pressure due to expectations from a variety of stakeholders with different needs and requirements; for the past two years, principals have not only been expected to carry out the same mission of providing quality education, they have also had to take drastic decisions following regulations set by the governments, whilst also catering to the needs and worries of students, parents and teachers. Despite this, minimal research has been devoted to this topic. Furthermore, as the number of women in positions of power and influence is progressively growing, much attention and praise has been aimed at their handling of COVID-19 as leaders. Following this, the question arises as to whether these types of gender-based leadership differences also exist in school settings where there is an urgent need for effective leadership.

This study has found that gender does play a part in leadership behaviors when addressing changes due to crises. The findings add to previous research that female leaders tend to be more transformational and more relationship-oriented than men whereas male leaders are more task-oriented than women, by showing that this is also the case during crises. Although it cannot be concluded whether one leadership style is more effective than the other, understanding and addressing these differences is a good first step for future research. Furthermore, being aware of these differences and perhaps more importantly, questioning the reasons behind these differences, is a crucial start in the process of establishing gender equality for women in power positions. Finally, awareness about differences in leadership behavior and handling of crises in schools specifically provides valuable insights which can enable better preparations for possible crises in the future.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Email to prospective interviewees

Hello XXX,

Our names are Olivia Halling and Sahba Sadeghi and we are currently writing our bachelor's thesis in management at the Stockholm School of Economics. The subject of our study is leadership in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically on the differences between female and male leadership. We are very interested to hear about how [the school in question] has been affected by this crisis and your experiences of what it has been like to lead the high school over the past two years.

COVID-19 has undeniably affected all types of organizations and not least the school world. The National Agency for Education reports that 70% of all municipalities and those responsible for independent schools have stated that they see a great risk for loss of education as a result of the pandemic. This applies above all to upper secondary schools. With this in mind, we are very curious about how you as the principal have handled this and how you have worked to maintain a safe working environment for your employees.

With this thesis, we hope to contribute to the combined academic discussion for educational management and crisis management. We strongly believe that our research can add value to the discussion of how organizations and schools can best handle future crises. The interview responses will of course be completely anonymous. No names or other revealing information will be published.

We would love to meet you (digitally or physically) for an interview. We would be happy to do sso as soon as possible - preferably this week or next week. We look forward to hearing from you!

Thank you in advance!

Kind regards,

Olivia Halling | 24856@student.hhs.se | 070-991 85 15
Sahba Sadeghi | 24893@student.hhs.se | 073-787 59 14

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

The following interview guide has been translated to English from Swedish)

1. Tell us a bit about your career in the school world!
   - How long have you been a principal?
   - Why did you become a principal?
   - What qualities do you believe you have that make you a good principal?
2. What were the first steps you took when COVID-19 struck?
   - How much of a say did you have over the decisions? In respect to governmental regulations as well as requirements from the *huvudman?*
3. Based on your experience, at what point of time did COVID-19 affect your school the most? Why?
   - How did you experience that period yourself?
4. What would you say have been the biggest changes since March 2020?
   - How important has it been for you to involve the teachers in this change?
5. How do you feel that teachers have felt during this crisis?
   - Have you done anything to meet their needs? If so, what?
6. How do you feel the teacher has felt about the decisions made/initiatives introduced?
7. How have the teachers felt in general?
8. Have you introduced other types of initiatives for the sake of the teachers; e.g., social activities?
9. How would you describe your relationship with the teachers? Personal/professional?
10. How do you think you teachers would describe you?
11. What has been the biggest challenge for you personally?
12. How has the last two years been for you?
    - Have you felt more stressed than usual?
13. In your opinion, how do you as a leader handle a crisis?
14. How has the last two years been for you?
15. Looking back now, with all the knowledge you have acquired, would you do anything differently?

Appendix 3: Information on interviewee

FEMALE RESPONDENTS

Nr	Respondent alias	High school	Number of teachers	Number of students	Number of students per teacher	Date of interview	Duration of interview
1	Alice	A	20	375	19	2022-03-02	39 min
2	Bella	B	19	396	21	2022-03-08	38 min
3	Carla	C	22	404	18	2022-03-10	35 min
4	Dora	D	17	227	13	2022-03-11	39 min
5	Emma	E	23	291	13	2022-03-14	37 min
6	Fia	F	11	154	14	2022-04-07	33 min
7	Greta	G	43	275	6	2022-04-13	27 min

MALE RESPONDENTS

Nr	Respondent alias	High school	Number of teachers	Number of students	Number of students per teacher	Date of interview	Duration of interview
1	Hans	H	89	1006	11	2022-03-03	47 min
2	Ian	I	16	266	17	2022-03-07	42 min
3	John	J	27	423	16	2022-03-15	48 min
4	Karl	K	19	376	20	2022-03-22	42 min
5	Liam	L	18	275	15	2022-04-01	33 min
6	Mark	M	58	889	15	2022-04-05	57 min
7	Nick	N	14	253	18	2022-04-12	43 min