Review of Scandinavian Leadership Development Programs
Open and Closed Customization

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ABSTRACT

Leadership development programs (LDPs) have proliferated and diversified but still usually share the ambition of involving the participants' on-the-job experiences. Yet, the dominant view hereof is crude, not acknowledging the variety of ways used to accomplish it. The Scandinavian context is illustrative for reviewing what we term 'customization devices' because of its tradition for LDPs with collective reflection, practice orientation, and broad participation. This review curates and synthesizes 31 studies evaluating empirical experiences with customization devices in Scandinavian university-based LDPs from no earlier than 2010. Such devices fall within three key categories, namely theories, cases, and relationships, and have three key effects: distancing from practice, dedicating to the program, and devising future action. Based on our findings, we challenge the dominant view that open enrollment programs cannot adequately mobilize participants' experiences by theorizing the distinction between open and closed customization. The review further serves as a resource for LDP designers and instructors to carefully choose and mix customization devices that are complementary in their effects.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, policy makers have intensified the use of public leadership development programs (LDPs) as a key to modernize public organizations, aiming to qualify managers' practices (Day, 2001, 2011; Engwall, 2007; Mabey, 2013). This faith – and investments – in managers have been a cornerstone in the global cascade of public sector reforms that has been termed New Public Management and, more recently, New Public Governance. It has been widely assumed that public organizations have been in need of better leadership and that public managers should be professionalized through leadership development programs (Blom, 2016; Greve & Pedersen, 2017; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

These two assumptions have been subject to extensive scholarly attention, especially in the Scandinavian countries, which have the world's largest and most generous public sectors, including the aspect of public (management) education. A now large body of leadership research has predominantly focused on the needs for and effects of different types of LDPs and much less on their instructional design and training methods (Blom, 2016; Mabey, 2013), especially regarding LDPs for public managers (Seidle et al., 2016, p. 604). However, by statistically combining multiple effect studies (primarily of LDPs for private sector managers), a few but influential meta-analyses have indicated which program design features that seem to have the highest training effectiveness (e.g., Burke & Day, 1986; Lacerenza et al., 2017).

A key recommendation emerging from these meta-analyses is that LDPs should be somewhat customized to the participants' current on-the-job realities (as opposed to generic programs) (Conger & Xin, 2000), because 'training transfer is maximized when training stimuli align with the actual work environment' (Lacerenza et al., 2017, p. 1692). Especially, three tools of customization were singled out as particularly effective by the meta-analyses: needs analysis, on-site programs, and practice-based training methods (Conger & Xin, 2000; Day et al., 2021; Lacerenza et al., 2017).

This recommendation of customizing LDPs relates to the classic dilemma of balancing academic rigor and practical relevance (Tushman et al., 2007) and reiterates the significance of relevance. The results of the meta-analyses may also imply that, currently, rigor in LDPs may be

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less of a problem to attain than relevance. However, for most public university-based LDPs recurrent upfront customization in the manner of on-site programs or deploying separate needs analysis may be out of scope – economically and pedagogically. Nonetheless, the recommendation to use practice-based training methods may provide more flexible forms of customization of such LDPs. Because of the categorical nature of the meta-analyses, unfortunately, they do not convey much detail and variety of what practice-based training methods are in practical terms.

The large public sectors in Scandinavia provide a promising context for researching how more flexible ways of mobilizing participant experiences may enhance relevance without sacrificing rigor. Hence, this review curates and synthesizes the rather scattered studies that evaluate post-experience, university-based, open enrolment LDPs for Scandinavian public managers, with a special focus on how the programs mobilize and make use of participants' experiences. We discuss this against the dominant view on customization – which we denote 'closed customization' – and by exploring and differentiating this view, we seek to qualify the design and delivery of public leadership development and to enlighten those who seek it.

2. Leadership development programs (LDPs)

Compared to common higher education in universities, post-experience, open enrolment LDPs stand out in that the participating managers bring along extensive knowledge, experiences, and opinions as to how their organizations are working and should be led in practice. Generally, such LDPs are designed to professionalize and challenge the expertise that the participants already possess. The content of LDPs usually addresses, on the one hand, functional skills such as finance, law, and human resources (HR) and, on the other hand, the personal capacities and practical skills of exerting leadership within organizations (Bolden et al., 2003; Bolden, 2005; Mccauley, Van Velsor & Ruderman, 2010).

The review at hand draws inspiration from two sources. One source is Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (KELT), which centers on four stages of learning: 'concrete experience', 'reflective observation', 'abstract conceptualization', and 'active experimentation' (Baker et al., 2005; Kolb, 1984). KELT has been crucial to debates about management education for decades. Its emphasis on inquiry connects to collective reflection and participative practices, resonating with the Scandinavian egalitarian tradition, where learning is a common good and where leadership often assumes the figure of the sense-making coach. The other source connects to KELT's focus on experiences – individual and organizational – and concerns the degree of customization that a program undertakes in order to tap into the participants' local needs and relevancies (Conger & Xin, 2000).

In our empirical material, we identify three key categories of what we term 'customization devices': theories, cases, and relationships. In turn, we specify their significance for the participants in three key effects: distancing, dedicating, and devising. Finally, we return to the notion of customization in order to challenge the dominant view – closed customization – and what these findings may entail for the practice of designing and attending LDPs.

3. How are participant experiences and organizational contexts mobilized in LDPs?

Experiences and how it is mobilized in education are usually theorized by drawing on authors such as Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, which was also the case for David Kolb's development of his Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984). From Dewey's social learning model, Kolb takes that the learner's experiences are transformed into higher-order purposeful action (Kolb, 1984). With Piaget, Kolb understands learning as the mutual interaction between, on the one hand, the accommodation of concepts and schemas to experiences and, on the other hand, the assimilation of events and experiences into existing concepts and schemas. This pivots in his dialectic conception of learning as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb, 1984), consisting of 1) concrete experience, 2) reflective observation, 3) abstract conceptualization, and 4) active experimentation (Baker et al., 2005).

However, according to Gray, experiences cannot be isolated from social action: knowing and doing are combined Gray (2007). Such insights extend the original individualized focus of KELT to collective and participative practices of reflection and conceptualization (Hemetsberger & Reinhardt, 2006). In this latter conception, experiential learning encompasses experiences at the individual as well as the communal or organizational level. Experiential learning has obviously attracted considerable interest in management education over the last few decades, including a variety of applications, modifications, and qualifications.

However, integrating experiences into leadership development also connects to a pragmatic dimension pertinent to public policies (Rasmussen & Callan, 2016). This concerns the dilemma between customization – that is, tailoring service to cater for the diversity of the clientele – and the efficiency of standardization. In the current context of LDPs, customization usually denotes the variety of executive education that is based on 'customized offerings aimed at a single company or organization' (Garvin, 2007, p. 364) – as opposed to, for example, the Executive MBA and similar open programs in universities. Conger and Xin observed that globalization, technological advances, e-commerce, and changes in governance and owner structures have driven executive education 'from being university based and standardized to in-company and customized' (Conger & Xin, 2000, p. 76). Concurrently, a shift occurred from functional knowledge towards content focusing on leadership and change and from general case studies to real-life problems (Conger & Xin, 2000, p. 76). At the time, Conger and Xin (2000) expected open-enrollment programs to play a gradually smaller role, partly because of their lack of capacity to customize content to the needs of companies. Day et al. (2021) highlight the following example of upfront customization:

> One program worth emulating dedicated six months to conducting a needs analysis, which incorporated benchmarking against comparable companies and conducting interviews and focus groups with both new and experienced managers from the organization. This needs analysis informed the design and content of the leadership training program (Day et al., 2021, p. 45).

On the contrary, according to Tushman et al. (2007), the open enrollment programs are typically built as products with modular standard components. Faculty routinely teach their material with limited linkage to other faculty or to practice. This standardized offering, typically taught with faculty in control, results in less participant learning, stunted organizational impact, and distancing of faculty research from the relevancies of executive education participants (Tushman et al. 2007, p. 348).

Tushman et al. (2007) argue that this situation renders open enrollment programs at risk of disruption by other providers, such as consultancies and corporate academies. Crucially, if open enrollment programs could connect stronger to the issues that participants do experience in their managerial practices, they could provide more impact for managers.

We may then characterize this dominant conception of customization – as exemplified by Tushman et al. (2007), Conger and Xin (2000), Garvin (2007), Lacerenza et al. (2017), and Day et. al. (2021) – as 'closed' in the sense that the program content is locked into the specific needs and relevancies of the focal organization to which a customized program is designed. In order to develop a deeper understanding of customization and relevance in public LDPs, our review unravels the practices by which open enrollment programs cater to participants' experiences.

We understand such practices as 'customization devices' as we wish

to keep an open mind to variation and what goes into them in terms of people and artefacts. As such devices we register, on the one hand, practices by which experiences constitute the input into activities such as assignments or designated group discussions, where it is subjected to various explorations, such as group discussion or theoretical analysis. On the other hand, we register practices through which experiences are generated by program activities such as 360-degree surveys, stretch assignments, and real-life experiments, which are then subjected to analysis. Therefore, by 'customization device' we mean the complete and successful staging and execution of practices that mobilize and make use of participants' experiences. In doing so, we are indebted to Basil Bernstein's concept of 'pedagogical device' (Bernstein, 2000; Singh, 2002), even though we recognize that his concept was a more critical than descriptive vehicle and that he is more concerned with knowledge entering the classroom than practical experiences. Thus, a customization device is a planned activity or feature of an LDP that seeks to afford a connection between the participating managers' daily practices and the management education classroom.

4. The Scandinavian context

Historically, the Scandinavian societies stand out with a particular balance of liberalism and socialism that has been given labels such as 'mixed economies', 'state-controlled markets', and the like (Greve, 2007). Although relatively small, the Scandinavian societies are economically prosperous, highly educated, and at the forefront of technological development.

At least since the 1930s, scholars have considered the Scandinavian societies as representing a certain approach to work, education, and management that is rooted in the social democratic and egalitarian tradition, emphasizing broad bottom-up participation and co-operation (Byrkjeflot, 2003; Grenness, 2003; Stage, 2020; Warner-Søderholm, 2012). A longstanding guiding principle has been that high investments and trust in workers lead to both efficiency, adaptability, and democratic stability (Byrkjeflot, 2003; Greve et al., 2020). Hence, it is generally recognized 'all actors have to learn and that this, in turn, demands a certain degree of freedom in the work role' (Gustavsen, 2007, p. 666). Scholars argue that Scandinavian countries have developed a wider application of learning-oriented and autonomy-based forms of work organization than other parts of the world (Gustavsen, 2007; Lopes et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2003). However, associated challenges are, among other things, low workplace loyalty, high personnel turnover, and employees expecting jobs to be fulfilling (Allen & Vardaman, 2021; House et al., 2014).

These characteristics of the Scandinavian context, which to different degrees also apply to other advanced economies, do have implications for what it takes to be an effective manager. Scholars argue that a constitutional style, where managers motivate, mingle, and negotiate with employees, is particularly influential in the Scandinavian countries, compared to a 'paternalistic' and 'rule-based' style of management (Byrkjeflot, 2003; Elkjaer, 2018; Smith et al., 2003). Despite slightly varying acceptance of power distance and assertiveness across the Scandinavian countries (Lofquist & Matthiesen, 2018; Warner-Søderholm, 2012), the general picture is that 'the leadership role does not have the same status [in Scandinavia] as in many other countries, and that the leaders function more as a coach for their employees' (Andreasson & Lundqvist, 2018, p. 8).

However, a string of NPM policy reforms have gradually degraded the distinctness of Scandinavian public management versus private and foreign public sectors. Such reforms have persistently increased – for example, the involvement and emulation of private welfare providers (Svallfors & Tyllström, 2019), the local authority of public managers through devolution (Greve et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2020), and the use of performance indicator systems (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Correspondingly, Scandinavian LDPs for public managers increasingly adopt the same concepts and models as their private-sector and foreign

counterparts (Engwall, 2004).

Still, making sense of and dealing with wicked problems – when leading relatively autonomous, knowledgeable, and fickle employees – may or may have play(ed) a larger role for a larger share of (middle) managers in the Scandinavian context than elsewhere. Hence, there has been a longstanding demand and tradition in the Scandinavian countries for LDPs that not only teach rules, guidelines, and best practices, but also directly help participants unpack and make sense of their specific on-the-job problems and employees. Therefore, the Scandinavian region constitutes an illustrative case for reviewing a variety of customization devices that have proved effective in practice over time.

Against this backdrop, we proceed to explore studies of how customization devices have been deployed in a large number of Scandinavian LDPs and how participants' experiences are mobilized differently across the following corpus.

5. 10-year sample of Scandinavian LDP studies

This review builds on and extends a prior evaluation, conducted by the first author and others (Stage & Kruse, 2020), commissioned by the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Research from the otherwise LDP independent Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy. For this paper, we have augmented the final sample from the previous evaluation and included additional studies from its broad initial search, thus narrowing in the focus on customization devices.

Our sample is limited to studies *evaluating* empirical experiences with customization devices in post-experience, university-based LDPs in the Scandinavian countries from 2010 to 2020. Our evaluative criteria excludes studies that merely describe a program's devices, without evaluating whether they worked in practice. Our empirical criteria includes both qualitative and quantitative types of data, also autobiographical, but excludes papers and essays with only normative, speculative, or theoretical views. The review process was guided by the principles of Rapid Evidence Assessment (Thomas et al., 2013) and is depicted in Fig. 1.

First, we carried out systematic, semi-automated searches in three databases, namely Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC, using Boolean operators and truncations on variants of the terms leadership, development, and education. Second, we manually screened the abstracts of more than a thousand papers for potential relevance. Third, the initial hits guided complementary manual searches in Google Scholar, in LDP curricula, and on relevant department websites for evaluation reports and studies published in unindexed outlets to reduce publication bias, although evaluations of ineffective programs are usually not shared at all (Lacerenza et al., 2017). Fourth, we bilaterally asked key authors, who stood out from the identified papers, to add to our list in case they thought we had missed relevant studies. Fifth, we assessed the full text of more than one hundred papers to identify the most credible empirical experiences.

Our extensive narrowing of papers was a crucial task because the terms and keywords we address are very common in a great variety of papers (Blom, 2016). It was fairly easy to screen and exclude the majority of the initial sample as these papers did not address the actual learning processes but rather focused on the needs for and effects of a particular LDPs in question. Furthermore, many of the identified papers, which actually addressed the learning process and seemed relevant at first glance, were excluded for not reporting on customization devices evaluatively and empirically. Thus, during the full-text assessment, we only kept papers that specified the empirical basis upon which they connect specific devices to positive learning effects (e.g., coaching motivated students to X, work groups improved X, or assignments worked well in X way).

Applying the above criteria resulted in a final sample of 31 studies, which is, for better or worse, characterized by authors evaluating one or two programs that they themselves are involved in as instructors or coordinators (similar to the samples of other related reviews, e.g.

Fig. 1. Flowchart of the literature review process.

Lacerenza et al., 2017, p. 1693). Few of the included studies consider multiple programs, neither empirically nor analytically, and most of the studies rely either partly or entirely on data that are tied to the authors' own participation in the evaluated program. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample and the authors' involvement. On the one hand, personal involvement can lead to positivity bias in the assessment of one's own program (Martin et al., 2020). On the other hand, 'membership knowledge' may enable extended access within the field and make intricate processes, such as learning and reflection, intelligible (ten Have, 2005).

The corpus of 31 studies was subjected to an initial open coding according to which devices each study explicitly evaluated as having a significant impact on the learning objectives of the program. These very diverse and multidimensional categories were then considered for similarities and differences (Gioia et al., 2013), enabling us to identify second-order categories displaying a telling data structure in which theories, cases, and relationships turned out as a sensible categorization of devices. This procedure was reiterated with respect to the three different effects we refer to below.

6. Review of customization devices

This section presents the results and is built around the three key categories of customization devices emerging from the review. Theories, cases, and relationships.

6.1. Theory as customization devices

Although, at a first glance, theories used in leadership development are 'off-the-shelf' standardized recourses, the review shows that instructors can deploy these in the program and in the classroom in ways that enable customization, leveraging a combination of rigor and relevance. Obviously, theories are often seen to provide stringent academic syntheses of reliable research. Jensen and Thomassen (2016) find that exposure to theories is a main reason why managers choose to join LDPs in the first place, indicating demand for rigor in its own right. However, when most of the reviewed studies evaluate the actual use of theories in LDPs, they tend to highlight how theories are routinely set in relation to on-the-job experiences that are evoked on an ad hoc basis. In the following, we therefore build the case for theory as a customization device.

In a large public governance program, Meier (2020) observes that participants constantly centered their individual and collective reflections on practices around the theoretical classifications that the instructors introduced through lectures, feedback, and curriculum. These classifications orchestrated conversations and interactions that were new to the participants, enabling them to experiment, both hypothetically and practically, with alternative management identities and strategies. Meier (2020) identifies three archetypal ways in which participating managers link theory and practice.

- Participants describe their existing practices by means of theory to increase their legitimacy, making the theory fit practice (see also Jensen & Thomassen, 2016).
- Participants gauge their own practice against theoretical standards of good management, adjusting the practice so that it complies with theory.

- Participants recognize new opportunities for action by seeing old challenges in a new light, using theory to put their own practice in perspective (see also Knudsen & Adriansen, 2016).

In a similar vein, Pedersen and Ry Nielsen (2011) and Mouritzen and Søndergaard (2018) assert that the participants in a public administration program and a school management program used different theoretical perspectives to achieve both distance and focus in self-examination of own managerial practices and circumstances. Likewise, in a program for Norwegian and Swedish school principals, Aas and Törnsén (2016) point out that presented theory illuminated and linked dynamics in the managers' micro and macro context.

Knudsen and Adriansen (2016) argue that in an educational management program, participants' diverse everyday work limited the use of practice-specific theories and required generic theories that illuminate how problems and roles are socially constructed. They find that participants used generic theories to reformulate their everyday problems and discover alternative actions. Hersted and Frimann (2017) achieved a similar goal by deducing questions and prompts for school principals from systemic and constructionist theory, which made the participants rethink their own assumptions and routines.

However, several studies mention that participants sometimes felt paralyzed or frustrated when generic theories were not sufficiently coupled to concrete on-the-job realities that felt relevant to them (Adriansen & Knudsen, 2013; Jensen & Thomassen, 2016; Kronborg & Willert, 2017; Stegeager et al., 2013) – paralyzed because they became acutely aware that everything has disadvantages and frustrated when not getting solutions to their practical problems.

Meier (2020) finds that participants, to a lesser extent than instructors, accept theory as fixed or universal knowledge. Instead, participants were keen to use theory as learning-oriented objects that were context dependent and open to appropriation and manipulation. Interestingly, Jensen and Thomassen (2016) find the opposite in interviews with instructors from three LDPs with a problem-based learning (PBL) approach. These instructors thought that the participants viewed theory as too much of an unquestionable authority and that it was crucial to help them soften it. Both Meier (2020) and Jensen and Thomassen (2016) concur that a critical and open approach to theory supports the learning of participants.

6.2. Cases as customization devices

The review shows that using cases that resonate with or originate from participants is a way of customizing sessions and exercises that otherwise risk being too generic. Making participants reflect on concrete examples of managerial practices is clearly a cornerstone of all the LDPs covered by this review. However, the degree to which the cases used in LDPs are structured in advance or evoked ad hoc does vary, indicating that customization can be achieved through cases in a variety of complementary ways.

6.2.1. Planned cases

In the structured end of the spectrum, Berggren and Söderlund (2011) used cases based on real-life project issues that were specified in advance, in detail and in writing, and where an invited key figure from the project in question supplemented with context and feedback during plenary discussions. They found that these planned cases were effective but also resource intensive. Similarly, Kvalnes and Øverenget (2012) used carefully prepared dilemma scenarios to make managers reflect on

Table 1
The included studies and the authors' involvement in the evaluated program.

Reference	Program	Country code	Part of program	Participation as main method
Aas and Blom (2018)	Benchlearning of school principals	NO, SE	X	
Aas and Paulsen (2019)	Benchlearning of school principals	NO, SE	X	
Aas and Vavik (2015)	School principal development	NO	X	
Aas and Törnsén (2016)	Two school principal programs	NO, SE	X	
Adriansen and Knudsen (2013)	Educational management	DK	X	X
Berggren and Söderlund (2011)	Two project management programs	SE	X	X
Christensen (2017)	Public leadership	DK	X	X
Frank (2010)	Codex of public management	DK		
Gergen and Hersted (2016)	Dialogue training	DK	X	X
Greve (2013)	Public governance	DK	X	X
Greve and Pedersen (2017)	Public governance	DK	X	X
Hauge, Norenes, and Vedøy (2014)	Shared school leadership	NO	X	
Hersted and Frimann (2017)	Public school management	DK	X	X
Jensen & Thomassen (2016)	Three PBL management programs	DK	X	
Kjærgaard and Meier (2021)	Public governance	DK	X	
Knudsen and Adriansen (2016)	Experimental management practice	DK	X	X
Knudsen and Justesen (2019)	Public administration	DK	X	
Kvalnes and Øverenget (2012)	Dilemma training	NO	X	X
Kronborg and Willert (2017)	Organizational coaching	DK	X	X
Larsson, Carsten, and Knudsen (2020)	Hospital management and leadership	DK		
Majgaard (2016)	Public governance	DK	X	X
Meier (2020)	Public governance	DK	X	
Mouritzen and Søndergaard (2018)	Strategic pedagogical management	DK	X	X
Pedersen and Ry Nielsen (2011)	Public administration	DK	X	
Rennemo and Vaag (2018)	Knowledge management	NO		
Ry Nielsen (2013)	Public administration	DK	X	X
Skytt, Ljunggren, Engström, and Carlsson (2011)	Public admin. and self-development	SE		
Söderhjelm, Björklund, Sandahl, and Bolander-Laksov (2018)	University leadership development	SE	X	
Stegeager, Thomassen, and Laursen (2013)	Organizational coaching and facilitation	DK		
		SE	X	

Table 1 (*continued*)

Reference	Program	Country code	Part of program	Participation as main method
Tjulin, Landstad, Vinberg, Eriksson, and Hagqvist (2019)	Health-promoting leadership			
Walker (2018)	Diploma of public governance	DK		

ethical dimensions of specific decisions and on their own values as managers. In a program on strategic pedagogical school management, Mouritzen and Søndergaard (2018) also used detailed planned cases that the instructors wrote in advance based on interviews with teachers from selected schools. Participants easily recognized the realistic problems of the cases, and freed from personal responsibility for the problem, diagnosis, or treatment, they boldly engaged in thought experiments.

Similar experiences are described by Aas and Blom (2018) and Aas and Paulsen (2019), where a program for school principals included carefully planned school visits. Tailored theoretical preparation in the classroom before the visits helped the students focus and describe what they observed during the school visits, leading to subsequent discussions of the visits and their own management practices. Moreover, in an elective in a public governance program, Greve and Pedersen (2017) asked the participants to pair up and visit each other's organizations to observe each other in concrete management situations.

6.2.2. Evoked cases

Whether or not the LDPs used planned cases, all of them evoked concrete examples of managerial practices on an ad hoc basis. In a broad study of LDPs for top managers in state administration, Frank (2010) concluded that informal pedagogical approaches, such as dialogue, were used more frequently than structured and guided approaches. Rennemo and Vaag (2018) observe that the exchange of on-the-job experiences acted as a mirror for the participants, leading to reflection and dialogue.

Although all the instructors in a large and flexible public governance program had a high degree of freedom in designing their respective modules, Greve and Pedersen (2017) state that a shared overall goal was to integrate the participants' own practical experiences and challenges. Based on one of these modules, Majgaard (2016) asked the participants to prepare and present dilemmas from their everyday lives, which were subsequently analyzed and discussed in a plenary. In these emerging case debates, participants were encouraged to think of 'moderately brave' alternatives and to ponder on potential outcomes. In an adjacent module in the same LDP, Mouritzen and Søndergaard (2018) complemented thematic sessions with standardized questionnaire tests on personality, management styles, and employee involvement. The personality test included an individual talk with a business psychologist, which subsequently served as input in collective sessions on management dispositions.

Aas and Vavik (2015) and Hersted and Frimann (2017) used group coaching to make managers share experiences for both their own and others' learning. Participating school principals stated that the group coaching sessions focusing on others had been as relevant as the session about themselves, as it was thought provoking to see others go into very specific and contextualized issues, followed by a plenary discussion.

Gergen and Hersted (2016) and Hersted and Frimann (2017) recommend role playing to make participants reflect on their own practices. In this manner, participants can prepare for impending work situations by imagining the upcoming dialogue in a so-called private theatre. By role playing other personas, such as users of their public service, participants gained insight into the relational positions of others, thereby making future dialogues easier. When a role-played situation arises, people do not feel as if it is the first time they are in

such a situation.

Another way to mobilize relevance is real-life experiments carried out in the participants' own organizations and subsequently subjected to analysis in the program (Adriansen & Knudsen, 2013; Greve, 2013; Kjærgaard & Meier, 2021; Knudsen & Adriansen, 2016; Kronborg & Willert, 2017). In a study of a management education program, Kjærgaard and Meier (2021) explored how small-scale mundane experiments within the participants' daily practice strengthened experiential learning by improving the feeling of relevance among the participants. This was found to occur through two sources: First, it situated learning in practice, and second, it aligned learning with the everyday mundanity of leadership situations. Furthermore, the intervention helped the participants understand how experiments can complement their personal leadership conundrum.

Adriansen and Knudsen (2013) find on-the-job experiments demanding for participants in terms of independence and unpredictability, but also eye-opening, helping them to link analytical reflexivity (rigor) and practical decisions (relevance). They find that a main challenge is to balance the fact that an instructional experiment may not be a productive experiment for the respective organization and that neutral data collection in one's own organization is difficult.

6.2.3. Written assignments

In most LDPs, the participants have to evoke their own experiences and practical problems as cases in minor written assignments during the program and a more extensive assignment towards the end of the program. Several studies concur that the traditional academic discipline of taking the time to write a coherent assignment promotes deep reflection and analytical skills in a distinctly different way than lectures and plenaries (Greve & Pedersen, 2017; Knudsen & Adriansen, 2016; Mouritzen & Søndergaard, 2018; Ry Nielsen, 2013; Stegeager et al., 2013; Walker, 2018). Assignments help couple rigor and relevance as they force participants to think hard and long about the relationship between the curriculum and their own on-the-job experiences or practical problems.

In three LDPs with a problem-based learning approach (PBL), Stegeager et al. (2013) find that most participants involved themselves deeply and wholeheartedly in the process of writing their assignments about practice-specific challenges, often producing innovative solutions based on their academic learning. Similarly, Greve and Pedersen (2017) noted that public value was often generated in a public governance program when participants wrote their final assignment about a practice-specific challenge chosen by themselves. As an example, a senior police chief analyzed how new meaning could be created for police officers after their work tasks doubled as a result of the terrorist attack.

Knudsen and Adriansen (2016) experienced that the final assignment, which combined the program's highly generic curriculum with on-the-job experiments, was a necessary step for the participating managers' learning. The writing process helped them translate the analytical reflexivity that the LDP had taught them to a more action-oriented reflexivity, which they needed in their everyday lives as managers (Walker, 2018), thus demonstrating a customization effect.

Although even busy managers wrote long and detailed assignments, Berggren and Söderlund (2011) find that most managers have difficulty making a logically coherent and empirically supported analysis in written form. Therefore, they state that written assignments is a priority in their own popular LDPs, organized together with major Swedish companies and governmental organizations. These authors state the following:

> Scholarly rigor refers to the requirements to clearly state purpose and research questions, to search and build on previous studies, to design and carry out a transparent empirical investigation and be aware of its limitations, and finally, to limit conclusions and recommendations to aspects supported by the investigation. This may sound basic, but it runs against the grain of many experienced managers (Berggren & Söderlund, 2011, p. 394).

In an analysis of how participants formulate research questions, Knudsen and Justesen (2019) argue that assignments require managers to move back and forth between so-called 'management problems' and 'knowledge problems'. The former refers to something taking place in the future that cannot be analyzed empirically and that is usually formulated in this way: 'How can I ensure, for instance, that the fusion between x and y is successful?' While such questions may ensure relevance for pending decisions, Knudsen and Justesen (2019) emphasize that participants should be taught to reformulate such questions as knowledge problems that can be operationalized and analyzed empirically: "Why was the merger in the neighboring organization a success (measured on x, y, and z)?".

Stegeager et al. (2013) report that it sometimes challenged the self-identities of vigorous managers to spend a long time researching a problem and drafting a long academic text – without directly solving the issue. To motivate the participants to write relevant and rigorous assignments, and not least submit on time, Berggren and Söderlund (2011) used a "knowledge theatre" right after the submission deadline, where the participants present the principal lines of their assignments to colleagues from their own workplaces. The presentations forced them to articulate and visualize them clearly and distinctly, which most often took their conclusions one step closer to practice.

6.3. Relationships as customization devices

The review shows that participation in LDPs creates relationships between participants, workplaces, and instructors, causing customization of the program. According to reviewed studies, the present relationships at any given time shape how a program unfolds, as most activities are interactive and based on real-life experiences, problems, and tensions.

6.3.1. Diversity and team spirit

In two major public governance programs, several hundred participants customize their individual program, consisting of many elective modules, for a period of up to six years. Here, participants get to interact with numerous shifting fellow managers from all across the public sector, which is found to increase relevance (Christensen, 2017; Greve, 2013; Greve & Pedersen, 2017). Pedersen and Ry Nielsen (2011) find the same in a small and inflexible public administration program.

However, in direct contrast, several studies of especially smaller and specialized LDPs emphasize the value of a fixed group of participants who get to know each other in depth throughout a program. The researchers argue that the fixed and homogeneous groups in three LDPs for school principals in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, respectively, allowed the participants to go more in depth, reflect more directly on each other, and draw on more practice-specific cases (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Mouritzen & Søndergaard, 2018). The mere fact that such programs bring fellow school principals together and force them to find time for careful reflection was considered a value in itself (Aas & Blom, 2018).

According to Pedersen and Ry Nielsen (2011), most participants in a public administration program found continuous dialogue and follow-up with a regular program group rewarding for their ongoing learning. It took a while before the participants opened up and discussed the intricate and difficult things in their daily work, which is the reason why a longer and more coherent process together was crucial. Ry Nielsen (2013) and Hersted and Frimann (2017) argue for fostering a social climate characterized by dialogue, with a focus on sharing rather than discussing for the sake of winning (see also Gergen & Hersted, 2016). Ry Nielsen (2013) finds that team spirit creates a sense of psychological safety, which in turn promotes reflectivity. He characterizes this as slow learning in which participants together go through repeated analytical exercises and immersions, reportedly creating a basis for pattern recognition, multidisciplinary analysis, and action (Pedersen & Ry Nielsen, 2011).

Adriansen and Knudsen (2013) make similar observations in an experiment-based program for educational managers, where a relatively low number of participants and plenty of time for dialogue and joint reflection created the right social climate. On-the-job experiments create risks and doubts, which requires a trusting and safe learning environment where even bad experiences and silly dilemmas can be safely shared.

Larsson et al. (2020) and Söderhjelm et al. (2018) assert that the participation of managers with different ranks – high as well as low – from the same organization improved mutual understanding of strategic objectives and processes. Because elite professionals can struggle to act as a collective, Söderhjelm et al. (2018) find it conducive that entire management teams participated and spent plenty of time together, discussing leadership development. Similarly, in two hospital management programs, Skytte et al. (2011) observed that participants were motivated by the fact that managers from all levels participated on an equal footing. However, they also observed the opposite effect in situations where top managers dismissed the shared program.

Majgaard (2015) warns that when 'aspiring management talents' from the same organization participate together, the LDPs become an intricate platform for not only collaboration, but also competition. Therefore, the programs should bring out the sociable traits in the participants and lead them in the direction of collaboration (Majgaard, 2015; Mouritzen & Søndergaard, 2018).

To spark team spirit, Pedersen and Ry Nielsen (2011) and Ry Nielsen (2013) organized four-day off-site stays at the beginning of a public administration program, with a combination of formal and informal interactions, such as short presentations, group assignments, shared meals, community singing, and evening events. These intense intro days created strong social ties that enriched the subsequent academic lecturers and discussions throughout the entire program. For a similar purpose, group coaching has been used in LDPs (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Hersted & Frimann, 2017). Aas and Vavik (2015) found that sharing and debating sensitive and personal topics made relationships between participants closer and made them surprisingly open about personal difficulties.

6.3.2. Instructors and the workplace

Several of the studies illuminate facilitating teaching approaches, implying that the instructor provided time and space for joint discussions (Söderhjelm et al., 2018) and invited participants to a dialogue in a way that made them feel heard and respected (Hersted & Frimann, 2017; Skytt et al., 2011). Tjulin et al. (2019) find that the participants valued the collegial exchange and professional guidance of the instructors because they felt it was lacking in their daily professional lives.

In a public governance program, Meier (2020) likewise find that the role of the instructor is just as much an active contributor to the participants' – sometimes messy – interpretation and appropriation of the presented material. When the instructors failed to familiarize themselves with this process, they seemed out of step with practice, and their authority was put at stake and challenged (see also Kronborg & Willert, 2017). Adriansen and Knudsen (2013) find that instructors can more easily help participants link theory and practice if they are present during most of the program, even when not actively teaching.

Gergen and Hersted (2016) find that the way in which instructors express themselves, including through their body language, is important for creating a learning space characterized by inclusive and constructive dialogue. In school principal programs in three different countries, Aas and Blom (2018) and Hersted and Frimann (2017) find that the key role of the instructors was to prompt reflection with carefully considered and open-ended questions and interruptions, enabling the participants to reach practical conclusions themselves. Adriansen and Knudsen (2013) likewise emphasize that concrete solutions must come from the participants themselves, as the role of the instructors is primarily to facilitate and guide the process of translating theory into practice.

Although LDPs are largely based on experiences and problems from

the participants' workplace, several studies still find a need for an adequate distance between the workplace and the learning space (Hauge et al., 2014; Jensen & Thomassen, 2016; Knudsen & Adriansen, 2016; Ry Nielsen, 2013). Ry Nielsen (2013) argues that distance is needed for managers to be open to doubt, learning, and development. In some programs, it has been difficult for participants to accept their two simultaneous roles – as a 'not-knowing student' who investigates problems from different angles and as a competent 'knowing manager' who makes decisions about real problems (Adriansen & Knudsen, 2013; Kronborg & Willert, 2017; Stegeager et al., 2013).

According to Hauge et al. (2014), a Norwegian LDP gradually became a neutral space for much-needed open discussions and reflections among high school principals and managers. For participants to actually dedicate themselves to learning, researchers find a need for clear support from superiors and prioritization of learning processes of problem solving (Skytt et al., 2011; Söderhjelm et al., 2018; Stegeager et al., 2013).

Berggren and Söderlund (2011) and Knudsen and Adriansen (2016) find that numerical grading complicates the relationship between learning space and workplace because grading cannot take into account the different organizational conditions of the participants and may have disproportionate consequences for both the participants and the workplace. Not all parties understand that performance is evaluated on academic criteria irrespective of practical value (Berggren & Söderlund, 2011; Knudsen & Adriansen, 2016; Kronborg & Willert, 2017). A pass/failed assessment has been found sufficient in many cases.

Berggren and Söderlund (2011) used a so-called 'hard entry, soft exit' principle, where participants at the beginning of the program related their own practices to the theoretical curriculum in writing and formulated questions to each other for a follow-up group exam. The instructors had to approve the written product in advance, which usually required multiple rounds of repetition and revisions (hard entry), while the group exam itself was kept learning oriented and dialogical without actual grading (soft exit).

7. Discussion and conclusion

Active mobilization of on-the-job experiences have a high priority in all Scandinavian leadership development programs (LDPs) included in our corpus, which we note consists mainly of open enrollment programs. This observation is somewhat at odds with the dominant view of customization, which is associated with localized offerings, designed for the recipient organizations' needs and relevancies (Conger & Xin, 2000; Day et al., 2021; Garvin, 2007; Lacerenza et al., 2017). We denoted such practice as *closed customization*, as it locks in its orientation towards the organization at hand. Conversely, we denote the kind of customization devices that we have been reviewing as *open customization*. Open customization arises from a set of devices that accomplish individual and organizational experiences to be mobilized in the program, regardless of whether the program itself is understood to be customized or open enrollment. As such, and this is our main contribution, these devices allow the oft-labeled 'standardized', open enrollment programs to mobilize and engage with the relevancies of the participants.

First, the review shows that theories are deployed in ways that enable open customization, as they are routinely set in relation to the participants' on-the-job experiences. Second, open customization was achieved using cases that were planned to resonate with the participants or evoked from the participants through interactions or written assignments. Third, open customization arises from the relationships created by LDPs between specific participants, workplaces, and instructors, as most activities depended on dialogue and sharing of experiences.

Our review shows that open customization is achieved by a careful mix of devices such as theories, cases, and relationships, including adequate and timely instructor facilitation and intervention. For instance, theory, the academic resource par excellence, if rendered very generically in the program, may paralyze or frustrate participants and

may not evoke relevant experiences with the participants. On the other hand, theory can be deployed so that it becomes an object of appropriation and manipulation by the mobilized experiences and learning of participants (Meier, 2020). This example illuminates how open customization depend on a subtle and situated mix of devices. Thus, open customization is not automatically accomplished by including any of the reviewed devices into the program design. Instead, open customization is contingent on a careful mix of customization devices. Keeping with our example of theory, to activate open customization, faculty could face the need for a broader and deeper repertoire of not only delivering content, but also to actively react and intervene in the appropriation of theory by participants.

We synthesize from the review of devices that open customization has the following three effects on LDP participants: *distancing* to preconceptions of own practices, *dedicating* to the program community, and *devising* how the program can become a resource for practical leadership actions. We unfold each of these consecutively.

From the reviewed studies, it is clear that managers are, for good reasons, very submerged in their own daily practices. Through open customization, participants managed to *distance* themselves from their practice; yet, this does not happen automatically. Participants can be prompted to take a step back and examine their own or others' managerial practices from a distance with experiential learning devices such as theories (e.g., Jensen & Thomassen, 2016; Meier, 2020), thought experiments (e.g., Majgaard, 2016), and written assignments (e.g., Berggren & Söderlund, 2011; Knudsen & Justesen, 2019). Such open customization provide exogenous vantage points from where the participants can reflect upon managerial practices in new systematic and analytical ways. They help participants consider the larger picture, recognize or reformulate problems, make sense of wicked problems, and orchestrate new conversations within and without the program.

Second, in the programs examined by the studies, the participants are fortunately very dedicated to their main role as an accountable manager in a specific organization. *Dedicating* themselves to the role as an explorative and even playful student in an open enrollment program takes an actual effort from participants and instructors. Dedication can be fostered by customization devices such as plenum sessions (Mouritzen & Søndergaard, 2018), coaching techniques (e.g., Aas & Vavik, 2015; Gergen & Hersted, 2016), and soft grading (e.g., Berggren & Söderlund, 2011). Such devices enhance the feeling of relevance and trust among participants, encouraging them to devote the time, energy, and courage that experiential learning in leadership development requires. In the effort to foster open and practice-oriented exchanges, which tend to be highly appreciated and rewarding, customization devices provide common anchor points for the participating managers to identify and engage with one another's experiences.

Third, the review highlights the fact that managers are engaged in very diverse everyday situations that do not fit neatly into narrow recommendations from instructors or curriculum. Open customization helps turn a program into a resource for *devising* practical leadership actions. Although the managers must draw practical conclusions themselves, the process of reaching these has a clear social component that can be facilitated and enhanced with open customization devices, such as structured discussions (e.g., Ry Nielsen, 2013; Tjulin et al., 2019), small-scale experiments in the workplace (e.g., Kjærgaard & Meier, 2021), and written assignments (e.g., Knudsen & Adriansen, 2016). Such devices provide diverse opportunities to digest the input individually and collectively, helping managers to gradually appropriate and translate abstract input into practical avenues for possible actions that are relevant to their specific work situation.

Engagement with open customization is obvious in all the reviewed programs, so KELT-related practices would be far from new to most instructors of LDPs. Yet, in our view, the concrete variety of devices to accomplish it have not been acknowledged, researched, and theorized to an extent that corresponds with its clear centrality for LDPs at large. Although the extant literature has indirectly reported on it (e.g.,

Lacerenza et al., 2017), this review has taken a first step in explicitly theorizing open customization and reviewing its specific devices. By introducing open versus closed customization, we hope to balance the conversation and challenge the idea that open enrollment programs are destined to be stunted, off-the-shelf resources with only generic linkage to practice (cf. Conger & Xin, 2000; Tushman et al., 2007). In fact, by incorporating open customization devices in the design and delivery of open enrollment programs, they can link in very direct ways to practice.

It is an open empirical question whether open customization may even surpass closed customization in terms of personalizing content in finer detail than the closed customized program given that the latter is often tailored in advance to top management's articulation of the needs of their organization (Majgaard, 2015). However, in-house commissioned LDPs may also deploy open customization devices just as open enrollment programs and thereby offset some of the disadvantages of closed customization. Furthermore, open enrollment programs with only open customization will rarely be able to facilitate that teams of participants from the same organization work in action learning sets on specific organizational problems (Reason, 1999; Tushman et al., 2007). Open customization works primarily with the individual participant as medium, even if, at times, it will connect to broader organizational experiences through e.g. evoked cases.

Regarding practical application, this review offers two inroads for practitioners to deliberately working with open customization when designing and delivering LDPs. First, the overall categorization of devices – theories, cases, and relationships – may direct program designers' attention toward devices that cover a dimension needed in a particular program. Second, the three identified effects of using devices – distancing, dedicating, and devising – may help program designers choose a mix of devices that are complementary in their effects. In general terms, we urge designers and instructors to engage with a mix of devices in an exploratory fashion to cater to local circumstances such as learning objectives, pedagogical frames, and faculty strengths. We do contend that, in most programs, all three categories of devices and all three effects of devices should be deliberately and specifically addressed. This suggestion of carefully mixing customization devices connects to yet another key recommendation from the meta-analysis of Lacerenza et al. (2017, p. 1704): 'use multiple delivery methods'.

Finally, we reinitiate that the reviewed studies are characterized by a focus on one or two closely related LDPs in which the authors are usually involved as an instructor or coordinator. Very few studies compare, discuss, or cite competing approaches to LDP design and delivery, which may indicate a collegial norm of non-interference in the Scandinavian leadership development field and partly explain why only these relatively few, scattered studies exist. This fact makes this review stand out as a first comprehensive study of diverse Scandinavian LDPs, synthesizing their approaches. In doing so, we show how the dominant view of the limitations of open enrollment programs overlooks the unsung variety and potential of open customization devices.

Future research may select entire national or regional fields of public management education and evaluate how multiple LDPs vary in terms of their mix of open (and closed) customization devices, including tracking the emergence of practices that are new or hitherto unaccounted for. We suspect that open customization involving online and hybrid formats will grow in number and significance. The offered notion of open customization and its effects may also inspire new intermediate measures of learning transfer (Sørensen, 2017), as these are easier to capture empirically than opaque long-term outcomes of LDPs. Above all, this review is but a first step towards theorizing the landscape of Scandinavian LDPs, and such extended efforts may enhance programs and inform those who use them.

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Andreas Kjær Stage: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Frank Meier:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

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