

Editorial

The Critical Potential of Nordic

School Leadership Research:

Fundamental but Often Forgotten Perspectives

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Many phrases used in education policy discussions are very vague. They are fluid signifiers that everybody can interpret and understand in their own way. They are useful when building political consensus or affirmation.

But the phrases are often too vague when trying to communicate and understand education and educational leadership because they obscure the elements in the phrase: who is the political agent, and what are the relations between policy, research, school and staff. They also

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hide the purposes of schooling, and the societal values and power in the turn-around of political interests from education towards governance that are implicit in the 'as skilled as they can be.' It could have said as knowledgeable or as enlightened or autonomous as they can be.

These are some of the fundamental phenomena in education and leadership, and they seem to be forgotten.

With this special issue we want to put critical analyses into the centre of research again as we analyse some of the dilemmas and conflicts between remembered and forgotten insights in education research on policy, society, schools and educational leadership, and thus between diverse and often conflicting interpretations of – what is fundamental in Nordic contexts: Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish – school leadership re-search.²

Many phenomena can be found in the struggle between major discourses of school – the outcomes-based discourse and a general educational discourse. Generally speaking, this struggle originates from a major shift in international and national policy and governance of a welfare state and democratic-governed discourse towards a competitive state and economic-governed discourse (Moos, 2018, 2019a; Moos & Wubbels, 2018). These discourses are educational discourses, and thus also part of general societal, political and cultural discourses and practices. This may be a reason why it can be difficult

² All of the articles in this special issue are written as a result of the Copenhagen Symposium: **Fundamental but often forgotten perspectives on/in school and leadership**, October 2019. This conference was the third in a sequel of three. The second took place in Oslo Metropolitan University October 2017 under the theme: **Leading and organising education for citizenship of the world – through homogenisation or communicative diversity?** (Moos, Nihlfors, & Paulsen, 2018). The first conference took place in Uppsala University on November 2014 under the theme: **Educational Leadership in Transition** (Skott & Nihlfors, 2015).

Other chapters from the same symposium are published in: Moos, Nihlfors, Paulsen: **Re-centering the critical potential of Nordic school leadership research: fundamental but often forgotten perspectives**. Springer, 2020.

to notice and pay attention to the shifts or 'slidings' in them (Moos, 2019b).

Education research is investigating relations, values, positions etc. on the basis of the researcher's knowledge, but even they may have forgotten some fundamental knowledge because other dominant discourses have overshadowed it. The new, dominant discourse may have 'flown under their radar' and caused them to forget some fundamental perspectives.

Sometimes policy makers – and even academics – work hard to persuade populations and professionals that their political direction and ideas need to be followed and abided by. When we take on those ideas, we may forget known traditional knowledge. Insights and wisdom may be intentionally or unintentionally silenced, and not mentioned.

Analyses like those referred to above insist that educational policies move from a discourse of *Democratic Bildung* towards an *Outcomes Discourse*. This means that the purpose of schooling, a *Democratic Bildung*, is being *forgotten* and replaced by measurable educational aims, and democratic and sense-making leadership is replaced by top down economical management. *Fundamental* aspects of educational leadership are transformed from educational purpose towards measurable aims; leadership in relations is replaced by charismatic, single person management; and beliefs in trust and responsibility as core values are replaced by control and accountability.

Contemporary policies of educational leadership at most levels (transnationally, nationally and locally) and *education/training* of educational leaders promote and further these transformations for a complex set of reasons: turn of education towards marketplace, economical competition, and need for political legitimacy, to mention but a few. While policy makers may want to promote this net of transformation for reasons mentioned above, educationalists and



educational researchers need to have different agendas, because they need to remember the purposes of education.

Both the Outcomes and the Bildung Discourses stress developing the school culture. In the Bildung Discourse, it is often seen as the need to develop collaboration between professionals and between professionals and students in order to create inclusive and democratic communities that are open to student curiosity and critical reflections. In the Outcomes Discourse, more emphasis is placed on manuals for teacher collaboration and teaching for tests that are used to compare student outcomes.

The last function concerns cultivating and developing relations with the local community. In the Democratic Bildung Discourse, there is room for discussions and negotiations with parents and local political agents, because there is room for local interpretation of soft legislation and soft couplings. Much of this is substituted in the Outcomes Discourse by one-way information from school to community with little time or room for discussions.

Our Point of Departure

When we started the project and invited colleagues to the symposium in Copenhagen (October 2019), we had the following thoughts about the theme: We would discuss phenomena and conditions for schools and school leadership that are often forgotten in educational discourses and policies, but nevertheless are important aspects of educational and leadership practice:

a. Much educational reform is premised on normalising the idea that those who run schools are *leaders* and that their work is *leadership*. We want to critically review the situation and operate on the basis that the people who are required to be leaders, who lead and exercise leadership, are first and foremost educational professionals.

b. National authorities believe in *data driving*: learning, teaching and leadership must be based on solid data including evidence based on general standards for learning and measurements and comparisons

hereof. The *reasons* for compiling and using data are often obscure but need to be made known and discussed by researchers and practitioners.

c. If policies, routines and actions are *maladapted* to concrete school settings, leaders are forced to act and make decisions based on their personal agency and expertise rather than existing structures and frameworks. Their actions have effects on contexts outside of school, including intersections of global, local and national education policy.

d. *Relations* between material frames, organisational structures and social relations are important in both educational practice and research because the practical construction of schools as spheres of work and learning is as important as theoretical reflections.

e. Contemporary educational policies are often designed to focus on students' acquisition of basic skills, but schools *also need to focus on* themes like democracy, equity, social skills and communication, inclusion, immigration, sustainability and local cultures.

Overview of Articles

Does the Combination of Professional Leadership and Learning Management Systems Signal the End of Democratic Schooling?

Ronni Laursen, Danish School of Education, University of Aarhus, Denmark

Education of democratic citizens is a fundamental aspect of Danish primary and secondary schooling. However, policymakers push school principals' agency towards professional leadership by encouraging specific methods for assessing student learning outcomes. Enactment of a learning management system (LMS) supports the transition towards professional leadership and leads to self-regulation by all actors within schools. While supporting the professional agency of school principals, this transformation is at the expense of core elements of democratic practice. This article argues that schooling's democratic purpose tends to be forgotten in the shift towards the



professionalization of principals' agency. In this process, an LMS is a powerful tool because principals can keep track of what teachers are doing digitally at all times. The concept of professional agency is used in this article to denote how the actions of school principals become distanced from the educational practice within the schools. The article is based on a qualitative study at four schools, comprising 31 semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, and civil servants. Bourdieu's thinking tools -field, habitus, and capital - will be used along with the concept of governmentality to explore principals' professional agency and self-regulation and to conduct a thorough analysis of practice.

Superintendents as Boundary Spanners - Facilitating Improvement of Teaching and Learning

Katarina Ståhlkrantz, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden & Stephan Rapp, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden

Superintendents, functioning as the local school boards' chief executive officers, play a fundamental role in improving schools. While teachers and principals have been given a prominence in students' learning outcomes, the perspective of superintendents as instructional leaders is often forgotten. Based on a nationwide survey of Swedish school boards the study investigates the boards' expectations of their superintendents to influence student learning outcomes. The basic research question is: How may superintendents as boundary spanners facilitate school improvement? Boundary spanning is used as a theoretical and methodological framework to explore how superintendents may facilitate the local school system to become a more tightly coupled system and strengthen the organization's capacity of school improvement. The study's findings indicate that superintendents have significant opportunities to influence political decisions and school improvement. Superintendents may exert an indirect instructional leadership and thereby tighten the couplings between different hierarchical levels in the school system. In their boundary-spanning roles, superintendents

are expected to prioritize managerial assignments, which is a time-consuming task. Because the superintendent is not likely to be criticized or dismissed because of poor student results, windows of opportunities opens up in their entrepreneurial role, and thus a higher likelihood of working more effectively as instructional leaders.

Principal Turnover: When is it a Problem and for Whom? Mapping Out Variations Within the Swedish Case

Katina Thelin, Department of Education, Uppsala University

Principal turnover has become topic of discussion, attracting attention not only in media, but also among scholars. Research indicate that high turnover rate is problematic for several reasons. First, it jeopardises stability of school management, which is crucial for schools, not only to function well but also to develop as organisations. Second, since studies indicate that principals have an important, yet indirect, effect on student learning, it is reasonable to expect high turnover to impact negatively on both student and school performance.

The aim of the study was to map out and describe national variations in principal turnover in Sweden and thus provide a basis for practice-oriented research. To determine the level of turnover and the extent to which particular municipalities or types of municipalities are facing substantially higher turnover than others, statistical data from Statistics Sweden (SCB) were used.

Results show that the average principal has worked in the same municipality for approximately six years and changed schools less than once. Yet, results differ between different types of municipalities, i.e. metropolitan, urban, rural and sparsely populated areas. The results raise fundamental, yet often, overseen questions, namely: When and for whom is principal turnover a problem?



The First Teacher as the Elephant in the Room – Forgotten and Hidden Teacher Leadership Perspectives in Swedish Schools

Frida Grimm, Centre for Principal Development, Umeå University, Sweden

International research has highlighted teacher leadership as a means to improve teaching and learning by distributing instructional (learning-centered) leadership to teacher leaders. Simultaneously, there has been an increase and alteration of teacher leaders in schools. One example is the ‘first teacher’ position in Sweden implemented in 2013. The article builds on an inductive, empirical study made in four Swedish schools. I conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with teachers, first teachers, assistant principals, and principals to explore how different school actors understand first teacher leadership and how this enables and constrains the construction of teacher leadership for teaching and learning. In the analysis, I concluded that the participants understand first-teacher leadership as horizontal and facilitative. Their understanding, built on egalitarian and autonomous norms, collides with the intensions of a changed role to improve teaching and learning. The result implies a hidden first-teacher function. In the article, I argue teacher leadership, as a concept, has been forgotten in Swedish research literature and schools, even though Sweden has had teacher leaders for decades. Increased exploration of first-teacher leadership in Swedish schools can contribute to a more visualised and nuanced understanding of teacher leadership and its impact on teaching and learning.

Developing Leadership by Participating in Principal Professional Learning Communities (PPLCs) and the Added Value of Transnational Collaboration

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This article presents a case study aiming to encourage and support principals from six countries to work in Principal Professional Learning Communities (PPLCs) to enhance their leadership

competencies and foster strong leadership for school development and teacher learning. We argue that the need for principals to participate in a PLC is a fundamental but also forgotten perspective in school leadership. Our most important findings indicate that the principals participating in a PPLC gained (1) enhanced leadership skills, (2) awareness of and security in their own leadership roles, (3) new knowledge about organisation and implementation of PLCs and (4) appreciation of the importance of PLCs. An added value was the benefit of meeting peers from different countries, which contributed to their reflections about their own school systems and practices. We argue that facilitation and support is important to establishing effective PPLCs and that external support may be considered to create a structure for and to strengthen the outcomes of PPLCs. We further argue that local authorities should reinstate or restructure these meetings so that principals can focus on teaching and discuss the subject with their peers. Data for the study were collected through pre/post-surveys, in-depth interviews, reflection notes and audio recordings of workshops, world café meetings, a SWOT analysis, and group discussions.

How school leaders can gain role clarity and grow their leadership identity

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Over the past decades, principals have experienced an increased pressure emanating from the responsibility for managing change and building organisations, whilst striving to improve students' learning outcomes. Leadership learning programmes appear to emphasise the requirements of the job rather than leaders' individual capabilities, moral purpose and the need to take an active role in learning. In the design of programmes, there seems to be a challenge in finding the balance between system and reform needs and school and individual needs. Despite these challenges, there is consensus in the literature that



principals and school leaders need to comprehend the macro-contextual and micro-contextual influences on their work, as well as to develop knowledge and skills to understand their schools and leadership roles. A *fundamental but often forgotten perspective in leadership learning programmes* is how to facilitate learning processes and help school leaders to gain role clarity and grow leadership identity. In this paper, we examine and discuss the way that newly appointed school leaders in Norway participating in a leadership learning programme can gain role clarity through investigation into role expectations and group coaching. We provide findings that shed light on aspects of how school leaders develop role clarity through taking an active role in learning within their workplaces and together with the school leaders participating in the leadership learning programme.

Editorial Comments

Four different approaches to analysing and discussing school leadership in relation to the theme of the special issue: one looks at learning management systems and relations to professional agency. Another on the functions of superintendents in relations between policy enactment on the municipal level and educational demands spanning boundaries and a third one on principal turnover and the effects hereof on education. The fourth discusses the problems of forgetting traditional teacher leadership roles in the development of leadership models and the fifth analyses the forgotten benefit of school leaders meeting peers in their learning/development processes. Finally, the sixth analyses the need to assist individual principals in managing the dilemmas of leadership practice.

Seen through those lenses it is amazing how policy makers are able to forget practical and fundamentally aspects of education and organizing when wanting to transform politics. Conflicts illuminated in this issue are related to the transformations of performance management into practice on the expense of democratic

leadership. Moreover, the articles take into account leadership dilemmas related to principal turnover, role identity and professional growth that have not been remembered in the current Nordic school governance systems.

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