

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

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**Abstract**

*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.*

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### **Introduction**

A fundamental perspective within Danish primary and lower secondary education concerns teaching Danish children to become active, engaged, and democratic citizens, which entails that the school's work must be characterized by freedom of spirit, equality, and democracy (Danish Ministry of Education, 2019). This has been a core value of Danish schools since the end of the Second World War and was fully enshrined in national educational policy in 1975 (The Danish Government, 1975). Ross understood democracy as a form of government based on the right of the individual, such as the right to freedom of expression (Ross, 1946); however, democracy can also be understood as a way of life (Koch, 2005/1945). A democratic approach to education, therefore, entails more than learning about individual freedoms and rights; it entails 'doing' democracy and thereby experiencing the potential challenges and dilemmas of a democratic way of life - experiences that become embedded in the body (Dewey, 2005). School principals can play an essential role in this regard by generating structures in the school as social spaces that develop democratic practice. A democratic approach to education calls for the school's organizational structure to be democratic (Biesta, 2018). However, in ministerial orders, for example, the democratic agenda has been pushed somewhat into the background. For the last ten years, the Danish Ministry of Education has been more concerned with promoting a school practice focused on measurable student learning outcomes (Danish Ministry of Education, 2014, 2015).

Welfare professions and their professionalism can be defined as a particular field of work that promotes human wellbeing and therefore requires specialized knowledge and skills (Eliot, 1994). According to Biesta, the profession's insight into the required knowledge means that professionals need to regulate themselves instead of being ruled from the outside (Biesta, 2015). In this article, I draw on a different understanding of professionalism and agency that are to be understood differently. I argue that the definition of professionalism Eliot and Biesta states is essential for welfare professions is forgotten and that the autonomy of school principals' agency is set by standards for leadership derived from new public management (NPM) (Gunter, 2016). Assessment, accountability, and standardization are part of a global wave of harmonization in the public sector (Moos & Wubbels, 2018). These core principles of NPM tend to lead to a focus on outcomes and outputs in public administration (Moos, 2017) and, within the field of education, constitute potent tools for governing and controlling teachers (Holloway, 2019). Such logics call for a more professional leader (Hall, Gunter, & Bragg, 2013) - school principals are accountable for the school's output (in the form of student achievement) and reputation, which also entails many obligations outside the school (Coupland, Currie, & Boyett, 2008). For school principals, "good" professional agency, therefore, refers to a principal who runs the school based on standards or demands from a higher organizational level and takes good care of the school's reputation.

The introduction of an LMS in Danish schools has to be understood in the light of a recent school reform and new rules governing teachers' working hours (Law 409) (Dorf, 2018). The introduction of Law 409 resulted in a lockout of Danish teachers by the KL – Local Government Denmark (the association and interest



organization of the 98 Danish municipalities). It removed the limit on the proportion of teachers' working hours spent on classroom teaching. From a teacher's point of view, the law was seen as the government controlling teachers and teaching (Andersen, Boye, & Laursen, 2018). Three issues emerged from the school reform: 1) primary and lower secondary education must challenge all students to become as proficient as possible, 2) the impact of social background on academic results must be reduced, and 3) students confidence and wellbeing must be strengthened. The political assessment of the reform is based on clear, operational, and measurable goals – e.g., that 80% of students have to perform over the middle level in the National Tests (Danish Ministry of Education, 2013). The LMS is programmed to support goal-directed teaching, which is one of the 1 approaches policymakers believe will ensure the reform's objectives are met (Danish Ministry of Education, 2014, 2016). An LMS is a digital system where teachers can, for instance, upload teaching materials and give students feedback on their work. It also provides a platform for digital communication with students and their parents regarding student progression. In theory, it is a tool that can change teaching radically, yet the literature on how the introduction of an LMS affects practitioners is sparse. Exceptions are two central studies the first showing that teachers are sceptical towards LMSs and the other that teachers fear that the introduction of an LMS will lead to the standardization of teaching practice (Lochner, Conrad, & Graham, 2015; Selwyn, 2011). In Denmark, policymakers had three objectives when implementing an LMS: 1) to make teaching more efficient, 2) to support goal-directed teaching, and 3) to support the digitalization of primary and lower secondary education (Local Government, 2016, 2018). The tool is to be used by teachers, and when put into service, it functions like Foucault's panopticon, a

design that allow all prisoners of an institution to be observed by a single security guard, without the inmates being able to tell whether they are being watched (Foucault, 1979), the LMS rendering the teacher's practice completely visible. The link between professional leadership and an LMS is that the political motivation for the enactment of an LMS is rooted in a belief that the specific goal-directed teaching methods supported will ensure that teachers adapt their teaching to a focus on assessments and student learning outcomes, thereby ensuring a strong assessment culture in schools, which is the currently dominant political discourse regarding excellent schooling (Danish Ministry of Education, 2014, 2016; Local Government, 2005; The Danish Government, 2006).

This article sets out to present an analysis of practice at four schools, with a particular focus on the principals' agency at these schools. The two issues addressed are professional agency and enactment of an LMS. This article will be done by applying Bourdieu's thinking tools of field, habitus, and capital (Hardy, 2015), alongside the concept of governmentality (Dean, 2004). Using the enactment of an LMS in Denmark as a case, I will examine the interplay between professional agency, an LMS, and democracy. The analysis is intended to fill a gap in the research literature regarding how the introduction of an LMS affects practice and to provide insight into school principals' agency, thereby developing an understanding of how principals produce and reproduce a specific logic through their actions. This leads to the following research question:

*Why do school principals' professional agency and the enactment of an LMS, with its embedded notions of self-regulation, tend to neglect the fundamental role of democratic participation as a basis for educational practice?*



In the article's first section, I will discuss Bourdieu's thinking tools when analysing the actors within specific fields of education, as well as highlighting the benefits of combining these thinking tools with the concept of governmentality. In the second section, I will present the study's methods and data. The subsequent analysis is divided into three themes, based on which, I present my conclusions, addressing the above research question.

### **Theoretical Approach**

This study intends to generate empirical insight into school principals' scope for agency and how enactment of an LMS influences this agency. Bourdieu defines habitus as permanent dispositions that are predisposed to functions as structuring structures – that means logic that produces and structuring praxis and representations (Bourdieu, 2006). Habitus is what gives actors agency, and actors' agency only makes sense in relation to other actors. Actors' preferences and positions in a social space is a product of their struggles to dominate this space and the amount of accumulated capital they can bring into it (Bourdieu, 1992).

Actors that have the "right" taste in terms of cultural capital can dominate a social space – a process that is not necessarily based on conscious actions. However, Bourdieu argues that this leads to actors accepting that something is the right taste, despite it not representing their own personal taste. As a result, certain dispositions are recognized as the right ones within a given social space, even though some of the actors in this space cannot achieve or accumulate the correct capitals to gain the recognition of others (Bourdieu, 2010). A field can be understood as relatively autonomous, which means that each field produces a specific interest and logic (Bourdieu, 1992).

However, the autonomy of the educational field is difficult to limit, and Rawolle and Lindgard argue that the educational field consists of numerous cross-field effects from other sectors and organizations such as OECD (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008). One potential challenge in fields comprised of cross-field effects is the loss of context. For example, the state, which sets the framework rules and regulations governing educational practice with universal symbolic capital that is endorsed in all contexts; however, school principals and teachers are contextually bound to a specific social space (Hardy & Lingard, 2008). Capital appears in many forms, but the most dominant analytical forms are embodied social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 2001). Moreover, according to Bourdieu, capital can be symbolic, which means capital can be altered and transformed into other forms of capital. The transformation, however, is dependent on how “habitus” perceives the symbolic actions within a specific field. For Bourdieu, symbolic capital is capital that is not recognized as capital, but as legitimate competences, for example, honour (Bourdieu, 2006).

Habitus is Bourdieu’s term for the accumulated forms of capital an actor can draw on when making a move in the social space. As such, habitus is comprised of an actor’s specific dispositions through exposure to particular practices within a social space. However, this process is dialectical – through its agency, the habitus engaging in a given social space constitutes and reproduces the dispositions in this space (Bourdieu, 1992). School principals’ habitus is shaped by neo-liberal discourses and practices and by standardizations processes for example as results-based management (Gunter, 2016), and thereby habitus in the educational field is associated with the likelihood of rewards and success and of having an effective practice in many different fields – the principals’ success is in an interplay between the



educational, managerial, and transformational demands (Lingard & Christie, 2003).

Within criminology studies, Bourdieu's work has been combined with concepts drawn from Foucault (Schlosser, 2013; Wacquant, 2016). Bourdieu's thinking tools are intended to be used to analyse power relations between actors within a field, and his notion of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2006) is an analytic tool to shed light on invisible domination. Foucault's concept of governmentality - particularly in terms of how individuals are held responsible for their success (Dean, 2004) - emphasizes the individual self-regulated elements embedded in the LMS. Governmentality studies stress that modern forms of government are often based on soft power relations, where actors, perhaps unconsciously, act towards, for instance, specific standards (Perryman, Ball, Braun, & Maguire, 2017). Numbers come in handy because by measuring something, you can set a standard and then measure everything else against it - the data schools can provide becomes essential (Ozga, 2009). Soft power means to cultivate power through a variety of policies; it is about getting others to voluntarily do what you want them to without any conflict (Gallarotti, 2011).

Governmentality can be defined as the organized practice through which individuals are governed. Dean emphasizes that governmentality is not only a concept for understanding how individuals are governed but also how individuals think about the way they are governed, although they do not always fully understand the governance (Dean, 2004). For Dean, the essential issue for the researcher is to analyse how policies, for example, or tools such as an LMS, make individuals act in a certain way and, by extension, consciously or unconsciously regulate their behaviour in



accordance with said tool or policy (Dean, 2004). Cuban has demonstrated that there is a considerable distance from the enactment of a specific policy to the concrete practice in a given social space (Cuban, 2013), and Rose is arguing that government by distance is policy working through delicate associations, translations, and relations (Rose, 1999). Governmentality studies focus on what happens with the policy from enactment to practice (Colebatch, 2002; Olena, 2008). Ball argues that performativity is a technology that regulates employees' judgment based on rewards and sanctions – the employee's performance is measured in terms of, e.g., the outputs they produce (Ball, 2003).

In the data I have collected, I have identified that the principals' leadership through their habitus is being sharpened by policymakers' increased demands for assessments and measurable student learning outcomes. Also, LMS is a technology that enacts NPM-logic in its programmed design, which means that LMS is governmentality-tool to steer teachers' teaching in particular directions. The LMS governmentality-logic then again sharpens the principals' habitus towards the assessments and student-learning outcome. It means that governing at a distance bridge to principals' agency in the analysis. This lens of theoretical-discovery will be followed up in the method and analysis-sections.

### **Methods/Data Collection**

The findings in this article are generated using data consisting of in-depth semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007) conducted at four schools and in three municipalities with five leaders, four civil servants, and twenty-two teachers. The primary data presented is based on interviews with five school leaders. At one school, the



principal was new in the job, so the vice-principal was also interviewed to provide insight into the process surrounding the implementation of the LMS. One principal was female. All were experienced leaders, with four of them approaching retirement age. The reason for selecting experienced principals was that the topic is highly charged in Denmark, and the expectation was that experienced employees would be more likely to express themselves freely. Teachers were also interviewed to counter school principals' tendency to overvalue their own effort (Andersen, Boye, & Laursen, 2014), allowing teachers' perceptions to qualify the principals' utterances. In addition, a number of civil servants were interviewed, as being responsible for the implementation of policy, they can provide insight into how much autonomy and room for manoeuvre the school principals have. The interviews were conducted January-June 2019. In theory, the implementation of the LMS should have been completed during the collection of data, but it turned out that the four schools were each at different stages of the implementation process. The interviews were, on average, an hour.

Data were thematically analysed in two rounds of coding. In the second round, it was identified that all five leaders talked about demands from policymakers and professionalism as central working conditions for themselves and the teachers and that an LMS is a tool that can control teaching. The emerging findings were related to relevant literature, such as policy documents, Bourdieu's thinking tools, and the concept of governmentality. This study's findings are based on qualitative data – it is a theoretical construction and interpreted in light of the selected theory. The data is generated from a specific dynamic context, which means that the results of the study cannot be generalized. However, generalization is not my aim; instead, I investigate the social phenomena professional agency, self-

regulation, and democracy. As such, the analysis focuses on an exploration of how these phenomena relate to each other in the specific context of the introduction of an LMS in Danish schools and how they affect the various actors. It is not the individual actor's story that is of interest, and data will, therefore, be presented as the construction of school principals or teachers' utterances - excerpts from the data will be used to make the analysis more present.

### **Analysis**

Three sections are the fundament for the conclusion of the article. In the first analytical section, I will show how principals' meeting activities and the particular implementation of the LMS drive principals toward a professional agency. The argument is that principals' habitus and thereby agency is sharpened to be managerial professionalism. The second analytical section will show how four drivers related to the enactment of the LMS lead to self-regulated behaviour for practitioners within the social space. The argument is that self-regulated behaviour amplifies the managerial professionalism and sharpens actors' habitus and agency in that light. In the last analytical section, I argue that professional agency and the programmed design in the LMS that encourage teachers to goal-instructed teaching, which means that the teaching is being harmonized, and therefore there is little time to focus education on democratic values and participation.

#### **The Orchestration of Professional Agency**

This section will present an analysis of two issues that contribute to professional agency: First, the implementation of an LMS and second, the principals' meeting activities.



All four schools in the study followed the same implementation process regarding the LMS. First of all, the municipalities drew up a number of objectives and requirements for the process, e.g., that teachers are to create their annual teaching plan in the system. The LMS was developed by private operators, who have created a manual to ensure that their product will be used properly; it is a step-by-step manual, and a governmentality technology because it is created in the sense of the intentions of the policymakers for the LMS. When implementing the LMS at the schools, the principals presented the overall objectives and requirements drawn up by the municipalities to school staff. They then strategically delegated responsibility for the process to trusted employees with excellent IT skills, familiar with the technical aspects of the LMS.

The principals' agency in the implementation process was clear: Develop objectives and requirements for the system's operation and let others do the legwork. The principals agreed that such tasks are not part of their area of expertise – they need to be delegated to others to allow the principals to concentrate on other assignments. As one principal put it:

*“The municipality asked us to appoint three “superusers,” so they could participate in some courses at the municipality, so we did that... ..I have said I did not have the competence to do it because I do not use it in my everyday life – it is entirely natural that it is those three that have organized it (Principal A).”*

However, one problem with the distributed leadership approach is that the teachers know that trusted employees do not have any formal authority regarding the LMS. When teachers experience something that, in their opinion, does not make sense, they want to talk to their principals about the problem. The teachers' rationale is that it is the principal who can make changes. The

teachers' experience was that the principal gave strategic, professional answers reflecting the official policy, e.g., that LMS makes it easier to reuse teaching in another context. Nevertheless, from the teachers' point of view, the problem is that material still needs to be prepared if it is to be reused. This demonstrates how principals try to tone down a potential conflict between different positions in the social space by drawing on accumulated capital to convince teachers that LMS is still working.

All five leaders stated they took part in many meetings both in- and outside the school.

*"Most of my days are packed with meetings ... .. I would say that probably 70% of my meetings take place at the school, which means with employees, board members, but also external partners (Principal A)."*

To reinforce the principals' perception of many meetings, a new survey conducted by the Danish Association of School Principals found that school principals use, on average, 46% of their working hours on administrative tasks (School Principal Association, 2020). The principals in this study stated that they attend many meetings with different educational stakeholders. While this might include, for example, meetings with parents to address a conflict about student grades, much of their time is spent preparing and holding meetings on how to translate municipal policy into school practice. In addition, they often participate in seminars organized by the municipality centred on the implementation of policy. The data also showed that principals accumulate capital by seeking to influence strategic participation in municipality council or the union for principal, which reinforce their meeting activities. Principals' meeting activities helps them accumulate capital, which they can draw on in other context but also call for a tool to steer teachers from a distance.



When encountering a problem, teachers stated that they often found the principal was not available to discuss the issue because he or she was in a meeting or not at the school at all. As one teacher stated: *"Our principal is often not here ... we (the teachers) do not know what he is doing (Teacher A)."* Most of the 22 teachers in the dataset regard it as a problem that the principal does not have time to discuss their issues, even though the teachers do state that the principal finds time in his or her schedule when there is a serious conflict, for instance with a student. The teachers do not want to be monitored by the principal, but they expect principals to be highly aware of what goes in the classroom as part of everyday teaching practice so they can offer support when problems occur. By the accumulated capital meetings sharpen the principals' habitus and professional agency – they are aware, for example, of their role in the social space as the auxiliary arm of policymakers, which means they know they are accountable for policy demands, and doing the work of government at a distance. In this strategic game, the principals play strategically and are loyal to policy when in social spaces away from city hall. When disagreeing with policy, their strategy is to keep the disagreement between themselves and the policymakers. One principal explained:

*"even though you do not agree with the inherent purpose of control, you implement with respect for the legislation – you have to do that, otherwise you fail as a leader. When a law is enacted, I act like a civil servant and implement it (Principal B)."*

In this sense, meetings generate the logic within the social space, and the principal through he/she agency reproduces this logic, for example, when drawing up policy-decided objectives and requirements for an LMS.

The school principals want to be close to teaching. However, they are frequently away from the school, for example attending meetings about school policy at city hall. When they have to implement a tool such as the LMS that will potentially radically change teaching, they delegate responsibility to others. Consequently, they do not understand the premise of the tool and, therefore, cannot support the teachers' practice. These two examples show how the shift towards managerial professionalism distances principals from teaching practice at the school. Instead, the data indicate that principals' agency is professional. Thereby, the principals' accumulate capital from the political field and their habitus produce and reproduce the dominant professional logics within the school – for instance, that data and assessment in terms of the goal-directed teaching method embedded in the LMS are crucial to student progress. The link between professional agency and the LMS, as well as how the LMS, when used, produces self-regulated behaviour, will be further explored in the next section.

#### **Four Drivers of Self-regulated Behaviour**

This section will examine how four aspects of implementing an LMS will, in theory, lead to self-regulated behaviour, and how the LMS is an essential tool for principals' professional agency. For the principals, one of the goals in using an LMS is:

*“for us (management at the school), the goal with the platform is to ensure a strong assessment culture. We need a tool that can help us document that we improve student learning outcomes (Principal C).”*

Besides implementing a tool with lots of embedded political issues, the principals were aware of some technical difficulties with the LMS. Many of the teachers interviewed were sceptical towards the LMS and saw it as part of the unpopular school reform and law



409, but also that many teachers initially preferred using Google-classroom because it is more intuitive. The principals, therefore, found the implementation process difficult at the beginning. However, as one principal stated: *“the LMS is, in fact, an easier way to plan (teaching) while also documenting that learning is taking place (Principal D).”* This means that the principals might be aware of potential conflicts embedded in the LMS, but their professional-habitus telling them it a tool that lightens teachers’ workload and places the focus on assessment. In the data, meanwhile, it is clear that before self-regulated behaviour could be established at the school level, policymakers had to use direct force and enforce a top-down process with clear goals and demands. The teachers in the study did not use the LMS voluntarily, and the LMS can only act as a self-regulated instrument if practitioners use it. As already-mentioned, policymakers embedded a particular structure for the enactment of the LMS. This structure is, of course, something principals have to ensure teachers implement. They, therefore, inform the teachers that this is a requirement that he/she must meet - with structures within the schools, making it very difficult for any failing to do so.

*“Teamwork is the place for development and help... As leaders, we have to draw up expectations and a structure for this teamwork. We want our teams to be units that ask themselves if we are solving the task properly (Principal E).”*

Instead of continually reiterating requirements, the school principals organize the work within collaborative communities where teachers work together, for example, when developing the annual teaching plan. Being part of a team requires that teachers work within the LMS. As one principal put:

*“Then there were four courses that should be prepared in the LMS, and they were reused in connection with professional learning communities, so we had*



*the link between professional learning communities and the LMS (Principal D)."*

Secondly, at one of the schools, the data in the LMS is an essential part of the process when teachers hand over a class to a colleague (with the other three schools working to implement a similar system). Storing data within the LMS makes it accessible to the new teacher, who can thereby see what the class has been working on and the work the previous teacher has done. If a teacher does not put his or her work on the platform, colleagues cannot build on this work. The aspect of governmentality that leads the teachers to a self-regulated behaviour is that the teachers' autonomy is shrunken, so if they do not want to be controlled by the principals all the time works on the LMS and programmed-design for teaching. If the teacher does not want to be a bad colleague, then again needs to work on the LMS. A principal explained, "*they (teacher in the team) expected him (a teacher) to deliver the item because they deliver it themselves (Principal B).*" The goal is to sharpen teachers habitus in light of the wished self-regulated behaviour, so they in their agency produces and reproduces a self-regulated behaviour in accordance with the dominant logic of assessment and use of data in teaching.

Thirdly – and this is, as the enactment of the LMS, a combination of direct and soft power. The school principals use annual staff development reviews to address teachers' work on the LMS. At first, the review is direct power because staff does not have a choice whether to participate or not. Even though there is a power relation between principal and teacher, the review becoming soft power relations if it is a success in terms of the principal convinces the teacher the benefits of the review. Is it a success, it is a common-development conversation where principal and teachers agree on



shared focal points for the teacher and hiding the power structures embedded in the review. As part of this dialogue, there is an expectation from the principals that teachers present their work; for example, in the form of one of the exemplary pedagogical teachings, which is a demand that teachers have to make. Exemplary teaching is a teaching course based on data and student assessment. One principal explicitly states that the implicit agenda with the review is to make sure the teachers use the platform: *“you do not need to do extra work, just bring what you have to do on the platform to the review (Principal D).”* There are three aspects of the annual staff development review that lead to self-regulated behaviour regarding the use of LMS among teachers. First, teachers know that the LMS will be discussed – the teacher, therefore, has the option to either ignore it and take the heat or play along and do the exemplary teaching. Most teachers choose the latter. Second, exemplary teaching is expected to involve goal-directed teaching or other forms of teaching that use data and student assessment. Again, the teachers know what is expected of them and can regulate their actions accordingly. Third, the review often ends with an agreement concerning what the teacher has to work on for the next year - both more generally and in terms of the LMS. From principals point of view, a successful review, on the one hand, turns teachers habitus towards assessments through the exemplary teaching, and at the same time encourage to further self-regulated behaviour by voluntarily setting up measurable goals for the teachers’ practice, which can be evaluated in the next review.

The fourth and final aspect of school practice linked to self-regulation is the visibility embedded in the LMS. All relevant parties can monitor a student’s progression, test scores, well-being, assessments by teachers, and so forth. Although organizational

demands such as the student plan are being used to ensure the teachers using the LMS – a principal stated:

*“employees work within the framework, and we support it, and we talk about it when we think there is a problem, but we do not accept that you do not work with it (the LMS). However, we do not look over our shoulders, checking all the time; we control things like the annual plan and grades. Grades - it's not even control; we detect it if things are not done right, and I get fed up when they are not done right (Principal D).”*

It is a requirement that student grades are inputted in the LMS, so the school administration is alerted if a teacher forgets to report a student's grades. What is more, the school has the right to share the information embedded in the LMS, such as individual student plans, with other parties who might find it relevant for their job, e.g., the school psychologist. The panopticon-technology means that teachers can never know when another party may want to see what is going on in the LMS. The possibility of being watched is what encourages self-regulation. Principals are very much aware of this possibility and address it explicitly in the interviews. Although, they clearly stated that this is not something they did – and none of the teachers had experienced this form of control. Nevertheless, the school principals argued that the possibility is there and will be utilized if necessary – in other words, if they “hear on the grapevine” that a teacher is performing poorly.

Each of the four aspects of self-regulation outlined above relates to specific teaching practices. The top-down implementation with particular requirements, the principals' agency, and the programmed design of the LMS all lead to the logical consequence of teachers' self-regulation. Teaching practice becomes harmonized and instrumental, which means that students experience the same method for teaching in all subjects and at all grades. Once the LMS is used, it activates



programmed steering-techniques as architecture for reshaping task and relations in education. The logic behind harmonized and instrumental teaching shape teachers' and principals' habitus, meaning that they produce and reproduce these logics in their practice. Although teachers might be critical of the LMS and the growth of a culture of assessment, teachers' performance is measured through their ability to successfully practice specific teaching methods, for example, during annual staff development reviews. The fact is that principals' professional agency distances them from everyday school practice. In this light, the LMS becomes a perfect, powerful tool for school principals to ensure a specific teaching practice by allowing them to monitor what is going on in the classroom digitally – steering by distance.

### **The Tendency to Forget the Schools' Role as a Key Democratic Institution**

The data shows that principals' professional agency and the self-regulation of teachers caused by the LMS are linked and lead to the proliferation of specific teaching methods, resulting in instrumental and harmonized teaching. In the following, these aspects will be analysed in terms of how they affect democratic schooling. In the dataset, professional agency and the LMS have intended or unintended consequences for democratic schooling.

Firstly, the LMS is designed to support an instrumental, goal-directed approach to teaching. The principals are accountable to the municipalities for ensuring such an approach is embedded in school practice. Hence, they are accountable for what happens within the local school space. However, it is a complicated matter. The teachers do feel pressured by principals to practice this specific approach to teaching. However, the implementation of the recent school reform

and law 409, resulting in a greater number of lessons and less time to prepare for these lessons, also plays a key role in this regard. All 22 teachers I interviewed state that they use goal-directed teaching because it offers a ready-made and fully baked solution that is only one click away. Related to the lack of time to prepare lessons, one teacher explained: *“Often, you just use a portal, and then you do what is on the portal (Teacher B).”* However, this gives the school principals another chance to support the use of the LMS and goal-directed teaching; it simply – or at least that is the school principals' argument – saves the teachers time. One might say that this view of practice is in complete alignment with the Danish Ministry of Education's notion of how Danish primary and lower secondary education should be governed. However, many of the teachers in the study added their teaching had become worse since the reform and implementation of LMS because they now just tell students to click on a webpage and complete the assignments there. Most of the teachers regard digital platforms for teaching as highly instrumental due to their instructional design. Instrumental teaching means that students know precisely what is expected of them after every lesson and what comprises the lesson's specific content. The problem from the perspective of democratic schooling is that pressure from school principals and a lack of time to prepare lessons mean that such methods constitute the majority of teaching among the interviewed teachers – methods that do not enhance or encourage students' critical and innovative thinking (Biesta, 2018). The programmed technical architecture leads to a reduction of teaching to those activities that can be captured in measurable quantitative form.

All principals explicitly mentioned that the demands from “above” are increasing and becoming more detailed. One principal stated:



*“We do have the autonomy to create our vision/policy for the school. However, I feel we are being measured on some very specific matters - which do not always make sense. We are accountable for some simple issues and are being measured on that. Final student grades, national test scores, and student wellbeing scores (Principal E).”*

The increase in detailed demands from policymakers is part of the professionalization of school structures and principals' habitus and agency (Courtney & Gunter, 2015). The specific demands for measuring student learning progress in, e.g., national test scores narrow down principals' autonomy to sharpen the school from their own beliefs. They are civil servants that have to deliver a specific result. They accumulate capital from meeting with policymakers and encourage teachers to use, e.g., goal-directive teaching to ensure student results. In that process LMS is a tool underlying self-regulated behaviour in terms of the above-mentioned teaching method. If the self-regulated behaviour is a success – and none of the teachers in the data feel that they are being controlled by their principal, which could indicate self-regulations. It then means teachers in their habitus and agency also produce and reproduce the notion of, e.g., goal-directive teaching, which harmonizes teaching, so the students experience the same sort of teaching in most lessons. It means that the principals in his/her habitus are disposed of for professional agency rather than to generate core democratic structures. If the principal were to prioritize such structures, he/she would be in conflict with policymakers' approach to schooling. Furthermore, it is challenging to implement “learning by doing” and participatory democracy in schools because of the detailed demands from policymakers. A democratic schooling approach is based on student participation and is a prerequisite for socializing students to becoming democratic citizens (Dewey, 2005). Being socialized into a progressive,

democratic society involves learning about different cultures and values (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Zemon, 1998).

### **Conclusion**

Teaching students to become democratic citizens is a core task of primary and lower secondary education in Denmark. However, the data in this study shows that this task tends to be neglected in school principals' agency. The article presents a three-pronged analysis of: 1) the pressures on school principals to act professionally, 2) how the enactment of an LMS leads to self-regulation by teachers, and 3) what these two factors mean for a democratic approach to schooling.

The data in this study demonstrates that principals experience pressure from policymakers at different levels. Policymakers make specific demands concerning student outcomes and encourage school principals to apply to particular methods, such as goal-directed teaching, to ensure these demands are met. Requirements are focused on student learning outcomes. This means that policymakers limit the school principals' autonomy in the school as social space while, at the same time, determining which logic should dominate this space and, by extension, the practice of teaching. Analysing the data shows that the school principals in the study adopted this logic, thereby reproducing it in the social spaces where they are the dominant actor, embedding demands for goal-directed teaching, for example, in the structures of the social spaces of the school. Teachers' autonomy is thereby limited by the demands emanating from a culture based on assessment and clear goals for student learning, structuring the organization of the school in alignment with official policies. Once



that LMS is in use it is a tool that is programmed to support the official policies

However, it is important to stress that most of the participants in this study underlined the vital role of democratic schooling where the teaching is organized so that students learning by doing and develop their critical thinking skills. All five leaders in the study support this view. As such, it is the agency of the various actors, rather than their beliefs that has implications for democratic schooling. It is the way policymakers structure the school as social space, which leaves little room for principals' autonomy in structuring educational practice, in turn leaving little room for teachers' autonomy. However, it is important to underline that the data shows that this is a very complicated process with many explanations for the structuring of the school as a social space. Not only principals' professional agency, but also the recent school reform and law 409-push teachers towards safe options in the form of ready-made goal-directed teaching materials available from online teaching portals.

The data shows the implementation of the schools was based on a top-down approach, both pressuring teachers to use the LMS and shaping their habitus according to the logic of goal-directed teaching. The first action is based on accumulated power in the social space: Policymakers set up demands for how to use the LMS, the municipalities translate and create more and new demands to the principals, which then again translate and set up demands for teachers. When a policy is enacted, the translation-process can lose original thoughts of the law, in the case of the LMS, there is a straight line from what policymakers demand and the principals' demands toward the teacher. The principals support the political notion that a



strong assessment-culture within the school is a necessity. None of those interviewed in the study express support for instrumental teaching – but the logic and habitus sharpening in a specific social space in terms of, for instance, lack of preparation time means that instrumental teaching is seen as a necessity. The enactment of the LMS plays the same role in structuring the social space as the principals' professional agency – it is a powerful tool to exercise a specific logic in the space. It is a powerful tool because the embedded programmed design reproduces this logic, reinforcing the centrality of goal-directed teaching and assessment through the options the LMS provides. It means, on the one hand, that the programmed design limited teachers' autonomy because it subscribes to ready-made goal-directed teaching and collection of data on student progress. At the same time, teachers' habitus is sharpened in that light, which means teachers in their agency are reproducing policymakers' thoughts of education.

The data indicates that there are two mutually dependent logics embedded in the LMS that sharpen principals' and teachers' habitus to self-regulation and sharpen principals' and teachers' habitus.

The initial analysis shows that the enactment of an LMS is not an example of soft power, for instance, by providing incentives encouraging the use of specific teaching methods, but of top-down hard power, enforcing its use. Nevertheless, once the LMS has been integrated within school practice, and its logic starts to shape the habitus of the various actors, the concept of governmentality can help understand such processes. Firstly, the evidence shows how the visibility of the LMS and its embedded approach to teaching shape the actor's habitus and agency in accordance with the dominant political logic. Secondly, it shows how that leads school principals to



focus on the use of the LMS to optimize teachers' professional development – primarily evident in annual staff development reviews, where teachers are held accountable for their work on the LMS and their individual development plans.

Two reservations must be stressed. The theory is used to interpret self-regulation within a particular context, and therefore does not indicate how the LMS will affect self-regulation in the future. It is a theoretical construct offering a plausible explanation of the phenomenon. Second, two teachers in the study present a direct challenge to the concept as they had not been using the LMS and had no intention of doing so until the principal finds out.

To summarize, the analysis presented in this article shows that a combination of professional agency and the intended and unintended consequences of the enactment of an LMS has resulted in a tendency to neglect democratic schooling in school principals' agency. A prerequisite for success for successful democratic schooling is that schools base their values on the recognition of diversity and their practice on critical thinking and democratic activity so that students experience everyday democratic life as embedded in their habitus. While school principals accept the importance of such an approach, this is not reflected in their agency – mainly because the political field dictates two dominant logics governing primary and lower secondary education: goal-directed teaching and ensuring a strong assessment culture. These logics are instrumental as they are reproduced in the principals' agency and thereby embedded in the organizational structures of the school, leaving little room for the practice of democratic agency among other school actors.

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