Nordic Studies in Education

Special issue: Educational Leadership in Nordic countries

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In this special issue, we present and discuss Educational Leadership in all the Nordic countries. We investigate how the Nordic countries respond to current international policy. Our focus on the following themes: How do educational leaders face the new demands for various forms of accountability? How does this development influence the different levels and actors of the education system, especially the superintendent and the school
leader? The six papers are based on research in the Nordic countries. The authors represent all the countries but Denmark.

Two papers have a multilevel approach. The first, written by Jan Merok Paulsen, Oslo and Akershus University College, Norway of Applied Sciences and Hans Christian Høyer, Hedmark University College, Norway, is entitled ‘External Control and Professional Trust in Norwegian School Governing: Synthesis from a Nordic Research Project’. The paper analyzes the ways in which school boards and school superintendents enact state strategies of external control when they encounter local school governance systems in Norwegian municipalities. The analysis is a review of published work in the form of journal articles, book chapters, and peer-reviewed conference papers, based on a synthesis of the Norwegian findings drawn from a large-scale Nordic research project undertaken from 2009 to 2014. During the research process, data from Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark were collected from school board members, superintendents, and school principals through joint survey instruments. Specifically, the analysis in this paper seeks to shed light on how external control devices are enacted by school boards and superintendents in Norway when they meet local professional cultures. In aggregate, the empirical evidence reviewed indicates that a delicate blend of control and trust strategies is operative in practical school governance in Norway.

In the second paper, Michael Uljens, Rolf Sundqvist and Ann-Sofie Smeds-Nylund, Åbo Akademi, Finland, present an empirical reconstruction of a successful ten-year multi-level and district-led school developmental turnaround process (2003–2012) in the Åland Islands in their paper ‘Commitment, care, and coherence featuring sustained multi-level school development in Finland – A non-affirmative approach.’ The study explores educational development initiatives and discourses between different levels (transnational, national, district, municipality, school) and professionals, by analyzing experiences and explanations offered by involved principals, superintendents, and regional district leaders in two focus group interviews, and analysis of policy and other documents covering a longer period (1995–2013). The results show how clear ambitions and goal-setting, commitment, care, and coherent, systematic development-driven initiatives, starting well before PISA 2003 on the part of the regional and district authorities, create a common and coordinated discursive space, moving towards improvement in a distributed, multi-professional and multi-level system, with several mediating levels.

Swedish superintendents, and more specifically their perceptions of their work performance, are focused upon in the paper entitled ‘Doing a Good Job as a Superintendent’, written by Lars Svedberg, Uppsala University, Sweden. Forty superintendents participating in seminars arranged by the Swedish National Association for Superintendents from 2009–2012 were asked to write a one-page reflective paper prior to the first residential seminar in response to the question, ‘How do I know I am doing a good job?’ By using an open-ended question as a point of departure, narrative evidence was obtained about how superintendents interpret and make sense of their work and their identities. The superintendents said they know they do a good job when they receive feedback from other stakeholders, the education board is kept calm and safe, they see positive developments in their schools, they feel an inner confirmation and above all, the results improve. Svedberg structures the professional relationships of a superintendent in four ideal-type categories: loyalty, solidarity, faithfulness, and authenticity. Finally, he identifies superintendents as balanc-
ing the audits related to the accountability agenda, and the moral purpose of schooling as the professional agenda.

‘The Assessment Culture of School Leadership’ by Eva Forsberg, Torbjörn Hortlund, and Kristina Malmberg, Uppsala University, Sweden, reports on a study within the field of management and school performance. They have analyzed texts produced by Swedish principals participating in a professional training course. Their research question focuses on how the assessment culture of school leadership is articulated with regard to both assessment practices and outcome discourses. The findings reveal a multi-faceted picture of principals’ interaction with, meaning-making of, and value attached to, educational outcomes. Four facets of the assessment culture of school leadership were identified: the narrative, the archive, the number, and the demand. Further, the data revealed two discourses of outcomes related to different objectives of education: the performance discourse and the care discourse. The paper is part of the project Changed assignments for superintendents in a new system of governance (Svedberg 2010), which pays attention to the interaction between the superintendent and the principals of primary and secondary education at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The fifth paper, by Helgi Þ. Svavarsson, Börkur Hansen, Samuel Lefever, Hafðís Guðjónsdóttir & Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, Iceland University of Education, is on ‘Leadership and diversity in Icelandic schools’. The study is part of a Nordic research project called Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice: Success stories from immigrant students and school communities in four Nordic countries (LSP). The project is based on collaboration between researchers in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland in studying success stories from immigrant students and school communities in four Nordic countries. The schools for study were selected according to good practices in working with immigrant students. This article focuses on challenges principals and lead teachers meet in diverse schools in Iceland. The study was conducted in nine schools at three school levels that have been successful in implementing social justice and in creating inclusive learning spaces. The findings show that all the principals and lead teachers had a vision of student well-being and achievement. Furthermore, all were primarily participative in their leadership style, but leaders who were identified as being most proactive appeared to be more directive in style.

The final paper builds on a comparative document analysis where Marit Aas, University of Oslo, Norway and Monika Törnsten, Umeå University, Sweden examine and compare principal training programmes in Sweden and Norway, the two Nordic countries with national leadership programmes for already active school leaders. Changes in the role of principals have prompted consideration of their preparation. Regardless of the ways principals are prepared, all approaches are influenced by both the local context and inescapable global trends. In an effort to respond to both local needs and global pressures, educational jurisdictions develop guidelines, standards, and expectations for principals. In the paper, ‘Examining Norwegian and Swedish leadership training programmes in the light of international research’, two research-derived tools about successful professional learning programs for school leaders are used to investigate the knowledge base and design of the two programmes. The findings suggest that both programmes reflect international research as regards both content and process factors. In addition, topics and issues balancing democratic participation with managerial decision-making are identified which can be characterized as making up a Nordic profile.
Leadership in the intersection between external control and professional trust

School leaders in the Nordic countries are part of a global society. System level leaders, superintendents and principals serve as mediators when the accountability agenda meets long-term democratic values. This can create tensions. Uljens at al., however, report on the successful development process in the Åland Islands as ‘free from typical accountability-oriented policy practices, using student evaluation to misrecognize education professionals’, this though initiated by unfavorable PISA results in 2003 and transnational influences. The explanations are dual. First, the policy tradition in Finland introduced school development using evaluation data many years before the PISA results, in combination with an experience of working with evaluation data in a developmental fashion, and second, leadership practices were distributed across levels and professional group. The external accountability agenda can, however, create tensions. Svedberg, in his study on Swedish superintendents, talks about a balancing act, also recognized by Merok in the Norwegian context, where superintendents are active mediators of change initiatives, through selection, translation, and also buffering practices. Forsberg et al., in their analysis of the context of the Swedish assessment culture of school leadership, acknowledge the tension, when stating that principals are under pressure to supply performance outcomes to external stakeholders. The discourse of performance together with the discourse of care, that is, student safety, well-being and satisfaction, are valued, while the discourse of democracy present in curricula is a restricted discourse.

The Islandic study pays attention to another aspect of being part of a global society, namely changes in demographics which have influenced the operation of many schools in areas with high numbers of immigrants. The legislation governing schools is based on principles of equality and therefore on the discourse of democracy. The laws stipulate that schools should benefit all students and educate each child effectively. The findings show that how the leaders contribute to the success and inclusion of immigrant children varies between school levels, this though the studies being conducted in schools having a good reputation for working with immigrant children.

In sum, the papers all pay attention to educational leadership on several levels, most with a focus on superintendents and principals, and all in various ways point to the tension between accountability-oriented expectations and professional democratic values. They point also to the importance of enactment of democratic values by leaders as a prerequisite to being successful as regards measured and publically compared academic results. The Nordic school leadership profile, Aas and Törnsén argue, entails performing leadership within long-established democratic societies which build on equal and collaborative relationships between leaders and staff, and doing this in parallel to meeting system level accountability demands. In practice, this implies balancing the democratic idea of involvement and exerting influence with necessary decision-making, and acting in a democratic way when dealing with dilemmas, paradoxes and challenging situations.

This leads us to the concept of trust, which alongside with the concept of control, is elaborated on in Merok’s paper where he cites Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2000, p. 549):

*Trust is necessary for effective cooperation and communication, the foundations and productive relationships in organizations.*
Uljens et al., explaining the successful improvement in Åland, state that ‘Trust and collaborative coherence-making between all levels in the school system was important,’ which reflects the above quote. Svedberg, referring to Fink (2010; 2016), writes that ‘Trust is the currency that is required in all professional relationships, perhaps to counterbalance the system’s uncertainties and incongruences.’ Although not mentioned, trust no doubt is the required currency for principals and the lead teachers when they, due to the emerging diversity in Icelandic schools, instil the visions of equity, democracy and inclusion with teachers and parents. Forsberg et al., in describing the interactive data-informed approach in the context of the Swedish assessment culture, talk about ‘a trusting relationship between leaders and followers’.

The abovementioned ‘balancing act’ reflects what leaders of today have to deal with. The question is if and how principal training programmes prepare principals for handling the ‘balancing act’. Merok sees the Norwegian steering of principal training through national standardized curricula as normative and as ‘use of behavioral control’ which should be subjected to more investigation. Aas and Tornéen, when analyzing the Norwegian and Swedish programme, suggest that the challenge for school leaders to handle the ‘balancing act’ call for providers of the programme to complement system needs with a focus on individual needs beyond the formal roles. To strengthen individuals to carry out the multifold and at times competing demands calls for self-awareness not only in the role, but also as a human being. The task is to meet the external hard control demands from the audit society and to do it as a professional in a society with long-term democratic values. This calls for critical thinking and the knowledge, ability, strength and courage to balance aspects of hard control with values of care and trust. Communication skills, the importance of personal involvement, emotional engagement and knowledge how to build trust, needs to be part of professional development of school leaders.