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## **Scandinavian approaches to school leadership**

### **Introduction**

The *Improving School Leadership* activity underscores that improving student learning is the core task school leaders should dedicate their time to. The report highlights what we know about the significance of school leadership in improving students' learning, and it includes many recommendations for policy-makers to consider. Sustainable change is probably depending on how well each country deals with the translation of these recommendations, taking into account their own social history of education and school leadership.

Countries' approaches to school leadership are culturally and historically distinct, but at the same time they are at present drawn together by common economic and political forces. This fact has been demonstrated by comparative studies like effective school leadership in the 1990s across Denmark, England and Scotland (MacBeath et al. 1996), a study of school leaders' life histories by end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century across Denmark, Norway, England and Ireland (Sugrue 2005), and the International Successful School Principalship Project (Day & Leithwood 2007). Openness towards other countries' approaches to improvement is necessary, but making a "blueprint" of other countries policies, without considering the local history of education, can be short-term.

In this session Scandinavia is used as an example. I will start by highlighting some aspects of the ideology and the history of the Scandinavian education systems. I will trace the images of Scandinavian approaches to school leadership by discussing both their historical distinctions and the emerging tendency to consensus caused by the spread of political expectations to leadership and accountability.

### **A welfare state based on social democracy**

The Scandinavian countries have a strong ideological tradition of emphasizing the role of educational institutions in the making of civic society. The schools should prepare children to

play constructive roles in a democratic society and education was framed as *Bildung* (Moos et al. 2004). This tradition is vital today, but has been even more important in the past. Equity, participation, and welfare state have been known as the distinguishing features of the Scandinavian model in education, and social democracy, both as political movement and broader ideology has had a crucial impact. The period from 1945 until about 1970 is often referred to as the golden era of social democracy, and Sweden was often the main source of inspiration for reforms in the education system, particularly for Norway (Telhaug et al. 2006). The cornerstones were citizens' equal rights, responsibility of the state for welfare of all citizens, and struggling towards narrowing the gaps in income and between men and women. The model has been supported by the labour market model, with collective bargaining, and a developed legislation in co-operation between governments and labour organizations (Antikainen 2006). School access for children from all socio-economic groups is considered very important. In addition, nurturing a national identity has played an important role in the construction of national curricula. However, the model includes some gaps. For instance, the nation building project tended in the past for long to lead to an exclusion of the cultural rights of ethnic minorities in education. This was for instance the case for the Sami people and the Kvens (Stugu 2001).

Additionally, the development of the comprehensive school system in Scandinavia must be seen in connection with the unique tradition of consensus-seeking politics in education. Both the right and left wing parties have sought compromises and agreements on educational reforms. This has its historical roots in the political mobilisation of and alliance between the farmers and the workers. It does not mean absence of conflicts, but there has traditionally been a political will in these countries to base decisions in education on consensus (Korsgaard & Wiborg 2006).

A supplementary dimension to understand the history of education in Scandinavia is the very special form of popular resistance that was constituted by anti-elitist lay religious movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. People learned to argue against the rulers and stand up for their own arguments through participating in these movements. Particularly in Norway these movements grew strong, and hegemonial structures were questioned. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Norway was a poor country and, compared to Sweden and Denmark, the country did not have traditional aristocracy and economic elites. It implied a broad public involvement in both economic and educational developments (Stugu 2001). The local teachers became agents of

the civic society. They had the cultural and social capital to act on a trans-local level and to mobilize people to move on. Often the schoolteacher became involved in a variety of activities. He or she ran the local youth club, sport activities, mission society and other charities (Ahonen & Rantala 2001). Even though the role of teachers as tenets of civic society declined after the Second World War, the images continue to influence the expectations of teachers, particularly in the rural areas. So, as a background for understanding the conceptualization of leadership within the Scandinavian education sector, one has to know that the schools and their teachers played a crucial role in the processes of nation-building and in the shaping of national identities.

The Scandinavian countries are both similar and unique. For instance, the regional policy dimension has been particularly central in Norway and throughout history the municipal level has played a strong role alongside a tradition of 'implementation from above'. Educational institutions have been and still are important for ensuring the survival of the many small communities in a country where the population is widely dispersed. But in Denmark, the national nature of compulsory education has been even more localized, and uniformity has been less pronounced. This feature can be traced back to Grundtvig's ideas. Grundtvig was opposed to the state controlling all education, and contributed to the creation of a free school tradition (Korsgaard & Wiborg 2006). Already in 1855, the Free School Act was passed by parliament in Denmark. One consequence is the fact that private schools are more widespread in the Danish system, as compared to Sweden and Norway. Today 13 % of Danish children in compulsory education go to private schools, whereas 4 % do so in Sweden and less than 2 % in Norway. The Danish mixture of liberty and equality in education seems to be strikingly different from the other Nordic countries. It includes a stronger anti-state ideology. At the same time it is important to emphasize that the Grundtvigian free schools were not schools of the elite. Grundtvig's influence on Danish thinking on education has made the Danish system special in a Nordic context, but we should not underestimate how Grundtvig's ideas also influenced the Norwegian educational reforms, but not it did not happened to the same extent as in Denmark. In Sweden his ideas played a less significant role.

### **Scandinavian Educational Culture in Transition**

In the beginning of the 1990s, a global transition happened towards more marketization of education, and this wave also hit the Scandinavian countries. The introduction of parental choice of school, schools opting out from the control by the local authority, assessment, and

the introduction of managerialism into the running of the schools were distinguishing features. Case studies of recent educational reforms have demonstrated how the Scandinavian comprehensive educational system under the influence of these strong international currents went through a process of thorough transformation (Johannesson *et al.*, 2002; Moos & Møller 2003; Moos & Kofoed 2007). The undermining of the common school as one of the institutions of the welfare state, started. Increasingly, the structure of public education has been substantially changed towards a quasi-market model during the 1990s, particularly in Sweden and Denmark; less in Norway.

Governments in all three countries still maintain a commitment to the welfare state, but during the 1990s certain aspects have changed or disappeared. Nowadays they all seem to be moving towards what Giddens (1998) has called the 'Third Way', that is, a combination of neo-liberal market reforms and (neo-conservative) government regulation. This is the case whether the government is a coalition among right wing parties or representatives from social democratic parties. All seem to be influenced by global trends, which have an ideological dimension favouring the reduction of the state and its public sector services. This international trend presents a radical challenge to countries that have been known for the value they place on equality (Moos & Møller 2003). The emergence and distribution of accountability models are signifying hallmarks of this transition process. The focus has shifted to more or less well-defined expectations of what has to be achieved by whom, and the increasing amount of external public evaluation of the quality of the services provided represents a drift from management of places to management of expectations. It means that only those outcomes which meet the predefined criteria are considered as success (Hopmann 2007).

### **Changing images of Scandinavian School Leadership**

The Scandinavian countries have a long history of framing school leadership as "*primus inter pares*". Heads of school were regarded as elite members of the teaching profession, and they were expected to perform only such organizational tasks which allowed the "business of school" to be carried out within the framework of relatively restricted identification and values. For many years there was no specific training for coping with such tasks, only sporadic offers in the course of in-service education. Therefore, school leadership was dependent upon the inherent organizational talent of each individual head of school. This resulted in a flat hierarchy in schools and few formal distinctions among members of the teaching staff. The choice of candidates for leading positions in the educational system was

usually adjusted towards formal assessable criteria like number of years in professional service. As a consequence, school heads for long regarded their administrative functions mostly as being an exact appliance to the rules and laws which were set down. Many principals continued to look upon themselves as teachers with some administrative duties in addition to teaching (Møller et al. 2001).

In more turbulent and less predictable times, like today, with a strong focus on managerial practice and external accountability understanding leadership as “*primus inter pares*” is often recognized as a romanticized, old-fashioned view of the leadership in schools. Scandinavian school leaders have today, like their colleagues in other countries, taken on many more administrative and managerial tasks, and we expect far more of our school leaders than we ever did. While principals may continue to construct themselves, or they are constructed as “one of us” by their teaching colleagues, they are frequently at larger schools no longer classroom teachers. They are expected to create a context for learning for staff members and students, and they are often caught in the “cross-fire” of reform. This requires moving beyond professional learning in terms of instruction and activities designed to develop certain competencies. It implies a training which takes into account both the different challenges of school leaders at different career stages and the emotional engagement of school principals. It is reasonable to assume that the less preparation principals have, the more likely they are to fall back on their lay theories of leadership that are often premised on a very narrow experiential base of prior experience as a teacher. Also, due to rapid changes in society, lay theories are likely to maintain outdated concepts of leadership rather than a concept of sustainable leadership (Møller & Schratz 2008).

Case studies exploring school leadership of today show how the discrepancy between leadership team and staff still is relatively small, reflecting the historical collegial tradition. Instructional leadership has been and still is to a large degree the teachers’ responsibility and domain (MacBeath et al. 1996). The relationship with parents has mainly been the teachers’ responsibility. There is still little or no intervention in classroom practices from principals or local authority, unless the parents have raised complaints about the teachers. Compared to Sweden and Norway, maybe the Danes are those who have most successfully built into their system a role for parents as educators. This can probably be linked to the Grundtvigian influence on Danish education policy.

Successful leadership today might be interpreted by many teachers and school leaders as the ability to maintain the grass roots tradition and marry it to the demands of top-down reform. This argument is supported by a comparative study, aimed at identifying ways in which Danish, Norwegian, English and Irish principals, at different stages of their career, constructed their professional identities. The study showed how the veterans' actions, in contrast to newly appointed heads, were driven by their basic beliefs despite the turmoil of what is going on other places. This seemed particularly to be the case in Norway and Denmark. It seemed as they wanted to retain the kind of psychological rewards they have got as teachers. It could be framed as "keep in touch with the kids". The mid-career and early career principals on the other hand told stories about establishing professional accountability, but they, too, wanted to create close relationships with the students (Møller 2005).

The International Successful School Principalship Project (Day & Leithwood 2007), which includes case studies from Sweden, Denmark and Norway, showed how the construction of leadership and management roles was grounded in the view that education should promote democracy as a fundamental social value and an ethical guide to citizenship. The Swedish case study highlighted how the principals were working to change school structures and culture by opening the school to the local community, and how the teachers supported these changes because they believed in would contribute to improvement of learning for students (Höög et al. 2007). The Danish case study emphasized that the conditions for non-coercive rational communication were crucial for the development of successful learning cultures in schools. The leaders were child-centered and committed to improving teaching and learning. Also, they had trust in teachers' motives, and they listened and communicated openly (Moos et al. 2007). The Norwegian case study demonstrated how both principals and teachers had strong emotional commitment to their work, and how leadership was seen more as a joint function of the leadership team. The principals wanted to make a difference in their students' lives, and learning was the focal point of the schools' philosophy as well as their practice (Møller et. al 2007).

In all the Scandinavian countries the local municipalities have played and still play a strong role. Leadership at municipal level is shared, between professional administrators and elected politicians. Through this linkage, education is connected to broader community affairs. Today the municipalities are portrayed as the owners of the majority of schools, they finance their schools and they are the employers of teachers. They also play a key role in providing in-

service training for teachers and school leaders, and they are increasingly being influenced by business management approaches and define their role as the purchase of services that may be offered by either public or private providers. Being efficient public managers and playing the role of educational leaders do not seem to create role conflicts for leaders at municipal level. In most municipalities teachers still enjoy considerable trust and autonomy, and relationships are not very hierarchical in practice. However, there are evidences of huge differences across municipalities with regards to the way leaders at municipal level support school leaders' work on teaching and learning. For instance, the 2006 evaluation of school leadership in Danish compulsory schools in three municipalities demonstrated that only one of these municipalities focused the improvement of teaching and learning in their dialogue with the schools, and a number of work conditions needed to be improved in order to support and enhance school leaders' capacity to focus their energies on student learning. The support the Scandinavian school leaders receive seems owing to decentralization, highly depending on where the school is located. This calls for a national policy, not only with a focus on school level, but also on the responsibilities of municipalities (EVA 2006).

A more recent feature, as a consequence of the restructuring of municipal governing of school, is the fact that many principals today coordinate various functions that earlier were taken care of at municipal level. This new construction has both gains and strains. The advantage is that the principals distribute their leadership energies, experiences and knowledge between their own schools and others (cf. Hargreaves 2007). Everyone finds themselves in a new space of more intensive communication with colleagues from other schools and this interaction across schools may open up for mutual learning. In the absence of the principal, the staff members have to take responsibility of internal affairs. It creates a potential for deputies' and teachers' capacity buildings, but it also puts on more workload. In Scandinavia it seems like this move often has taken the shape of increased responsibility combined with decreased authority in a context of often insufficient resources. In particular, the implementation of New Public Management at municipal level has resulted in less time and attention for providing leadership for improved teaching and learning.

### **Approaches to Leadership Training**

There are pressures to transform the governing of schools towards models of management from the world of business, and simultaneously, there is growing consciousness for the need for sustaining trust in the school in order to improve teaching and learning (Moos & Møller

2003). Consequently, there are tensions and contradictions connected to the way school leadership is being conceptualized in Scandinavia (Møller, 2007a). Views of leadership differ, but everyone agrees that the workload of school principals has increased, and that there seem to be recruitment problems, due to the lack of attractiveness of the job as a principal. In order to respond to this challenge, discussions of leadership preparation and support have emerged to the centre of the agenda. How can school leaders develop their capacities in such a way that will make a difference in what students learn?

In Sweden the State's involvement in the training of school leaders has been rather strong. A national training program for principals has been carried out since 1986 within The National Agency for Education. Since 1992 courses have been carried out at different universities, while the Agency has kept the responsibility for these programs (Johansson 2004). Currently Norway and Denmark don't have a mandatory requirement for any leadership qualification. Except for a recent set up agency in Norway, which deals with accreditation of college-based programs for school leaders, there is no national surveillance of the content and structure of the courses and in-service training which are offered school leaders at municipal levels.

However, it is already possible to notice the first signpost of the influence of the OECD program *Improving School Leadership* within the Scandinavian context. For instance, the Norwegian Minister of Education and Research has recently announced that they will consider a national education program for principals, or move towards having a mandatory in-service program. The Ministry will also collect and analyze information about other countries' approaches to leadership development, and for the time being they find the Swedish initiative particularly interesting.

### **Summing Up**

In my presentation I started by tracing historical and cultural patterns of social development in the Scandinavian region and went on to explain how, in recent years, the position of school leaders have changed radically. In a time of change, which is often both discontinuous and unpredictable, successful leadership will express itself in different ways.

Policy recommendations aimed at restructuring education systems may at local level be interpreted as a threat to traditional practices, roles and relationships within schools and between schools and their environments. Tensions will emerge and may create dilemmas for those involved. This is particularly the case for principals who have been trained and selected for positions under very different conditions from those now developing. Schools are sites of struggle, and politics is the essential mechanism of that struggle. Paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty are words which are capturing the conditions schools are facing nowadays (Mintzberg 1994). Certain interests are threatened by change, and this is the case both within the school and in the wider political community (Møller 2007a). Therefore, it is important both to listen to critical voices in evaluation of policy and plan carefully for how to cope with resistance. As I have emphasized in this presentation, Scandinavian schools are not only seen as places for the students, but in many places the school is also the cultural core of the local community. This turns the local and the regional distribution of schooling into an always contested issue.

An international project like *Improving School Leadership* may lead to more standardization in each country's approach to leadership development. Already, in many countries there is a trend towards developing standards as a central issue of educational reform, borrowing frameworks and ideas particularly from England and the United States. There seem to be numerous examples of policy copying, following site visitations, study tours, electronic networking amongst national agencies and authorities. No doubt, dominant leadership discourses within a Scandinavian context, although rooted in an historical and socio-cultural context, are increasingly influenced by a more global discourse, in which EU and OECD seem to take a lead role (Møller 2007b). But even though there is a growing homogenization of approaches to governance due to global forces, local traditions ensure that they are played out differently in national contexts, a phenomenon which Beck (2000) has coined "glocalization".

Will the common school and popular adult education be maintained as tenets of equal educational opportunity in Scandinavia in the future? Are the Scandinavian constitutional mindsets still salient different compared to other countries? For how long will and can municipalities and schools continue to respond to the new accountability expectation with a classic Scandinavian "muddling through", i.e. planning, coordinating and reporting on a local level and with inconclusive outcomes and no real stakes (Hopmann 2007)? Will for instance

the municipal authorities in Scandinavia continue to translate a policy of free school choice into ways where they try to counteract the inequality created by this policy, by supporting financially schools that due to their socioeconomic background are poorly performing? Whether the Scandinavian community will hold its legacy, the democratic idea of education, depends on how far they adopt the new international ideas of education as human capital and an individualistic quests. As demonstrated in a number of historical analyses of education (cf. for instance Ahonen & Rantala 2001; Telhaug et al. 2006), history is about choice.

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