

## ***Framing Successful School Leadership as a Moral and Democratic Enterprise***

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### ***Abstract***

*The article aims at exploring what counts as successful leadership and what the key questions in exploring successful school leadership across countries should be. A main argument is that successful leadership is a contestable concept, and I argue for framing school leadership as a moral and democratic enterprise, which implies a need to protect and promote the ideas and values of democracy in the language of education. In the discussion I draw upon data from the Norwegian part of an international research project. I claim that the principal is probably crucial in building the conditions for democratic participation in schools, but that success results from a continuous team effort.*

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### ***Introduction***

The Successful School Leadership Project<sup>1</sup> is a four-year international research project designed to identify the qualities, characteristics and competences of successful school leadership in primary and secondary schools in different socio-economic circumstances. The project is in its final year. In the article I will provide some reflections on what counts as successful leadership with reference to a Norwegian context and explore what the key questions should be in exploring successful school leadership across countries.

Given the goals of the research, emphasis was placed on selecting schools in which the school leaders and staff-members met the criteria of providing 'successful' leadership. This became a challenge for the Norwegian team because within the Norwegian context we have had

only very brief experience, if any, of developing public criteria about successful school leadership. The ongoing discussion is concerned with what a worthwhile and valuable education based on democratic principles should look like (Møller, 2002).

However, the discourse of governance and accountability within the Norwegian context is now changing, and it is becoming more legitimate to talk about ranking and standards based on test scores in education. A right-wing educational policy is driven by these ideas while at the same time we are celebrating the market and the values of justice and inclusive education. 'Consumer's choice' is argued more or less as a guarantor of democracy. The claim is that vouchers and choice will give everyone regardless of social class, gender, and ethnicity the right to choose the schools that are best serving their interests. Publication of international league tables like the PISA-findings (Program for International Student Assessment) is also being used by politicians to put additional pressure on the school system.

In 2003 the students' marks in national examinations were for the first time made public on a website, and the newspapers immediately put up ranking lists of all schools based on this information. Last year national tests in Reading, Maths and English were implemented, and the findings have been published on the website. The National Student Council has protested strongly against the decision of the Ministry of Education and Research to publish the results on the web, and is accusing the Minister of being non-democratic because she is not willing to listen to them. The national student council encouraged students to boycott the tests, and more than 20 per cent did so throughout the country in 2005. A self-established committee for protesting against the national tests also managed to obtain the test a day before 'testing day' and published the test on the web. As such, they have succeeded in the short run in undermining the value of testing. In addition educational discussion in the media has increased enormously.

The Ministry of Education and Research has also recently (2003) introduced a new system to award schools which can display systematic work to improve students' educational outcomes and the learning environment. It has also indicated that schools that encourage students to exercise their rights and influence on a larger scale, based on opportunities grounded in the legal framework, are likely to be rewarded. These 'good practice schools' or 'beacon schools' receive a grant (\$140,000) to continue and develop their work. They are supposed to act as role models for others, receive visitors and share their

experiences with others. The schools have applied and competed with other schools in receiving this recognition. In 2003 a jury selected 22 'good practice schools' based on almost 1000 applications and in the next year a further 20 new schools were selected.<sup>2</sup>

In Norwegian policy documents it is underscored that democracy and democratic attitudes should be one of the keystones of primary, secondary and adult education. But while most people in Norway will argue for the need for democratic leadership in schools in order to fulfill this vision, there is disagreement about what counts as successful democratic leadership. As Englund (1985) has shown in his analyses, the educational concept which is dominant at any given time can be said to constitute the outer framework defining what is educationally possible in ideological terms. When the meaning of democracy is ambiguous in the wider society, it is even more difficult to agree on its meaning in everyday life in schools. Thus, there is a need for inquiries and dialogues to clarify criteria for successful leadership. How do we understand a concept like successful schools or successful school leadership?

### ***Successful School Leadership – a Contestable Concept***

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) have provided an extensive review for the AERA Division A, which aimed at summing up what we already know about successful school leadership based on research. Their review focuses on building-level educational leadership, and particularly the leadership of those persons who hold formal leadership positions as school principals. One of their main sources is quantitative research studies that have been published in refereed academic journals. They also build on evidence from multiple case studies and systematic single case studies in which the findings either support or explicitly do not support evidence from other sources. They place a premium on studies which can demonstrate external validity.

Based on this review Leithwood and Riehl put forward six claims about what counts as successful school leadership and from which future research in the area should be developed (*op.cit.*: 9-36):

- Successful school leadership makes important contributions to the improvement of student learning. Leadership effects are primarily indirect working through variables related to curriculum and classroom instruction.

- The primary sources of successful leadership in schools are principals and teachers.
- In addition to principals and teachers, leadership is and ought to be distributed to others in the school and school community.
- A core set of 'basic' leadership practices is valuable in almost all contexts. These practices comprise setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organization.
- Successful leaders must act in ways that acknowledge the accountability-oriented policy context in which almost all work. The way educational policies aim at holding the school publicly accountable will differ across contexts. For example, a successful school leader in the context of the free market approach will select strategies that increase the accountability of the school. That includes creating competitive schools. New Public Management approaches will require leaders to develop and execute strategic plans and different approaches to accountability will call for different strategies or different responses from school leaders.
- Many successful leaders in schools serving highly diverse student populations enact practices to promote school quality, equity and social justice.

For each of these claims, evidence from many studies is put forward. In their conclusion Leithwood and Riehl (2003:36) underscore that leadership seems to be necessary but not sufficient for school improvement, and that leadership can take different forms in different contexts. But still there are many gaps in our knowledge about effective or successful educational leadership, and there are many questions that call for further inquiry

The framework underlying their approach to reviewing leadership research is a production function model situated in a rationalist paradigm (*op.cit.*:3), and I will argue that there are problems connected with the choice of sources they have made. Outcomes of student learning, which are used as a measure for success, are often narrowly defined and based on test scores, and they mask the relationship between test scores and social class. Developing shared norms and values is about developing skills as a leader, and a term like democratic leadership turns out to be de-politicized. Successful school leadership as described in this review can be interpreted as a form of strong, charismatic, and visionary leadership that emphasizes cultural rather than bureaucratic control, even though it is underscored that leadership

should be distributed to others in the school and the school community. Additionally, the nuances of contingency and context are difficult to trace in the studies, even though we know that environmental factors greatly influence the school (Berliner, 2005).

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) are aware of the valuable contributions that approaches drawn from critical social theory and institutional theory can make. But these are deliberately excluded from their review. Their agenda contributes to a coherent focus on a rational model of leadership, and they emphasise that there are many aspects which call out for further inquiry, for example, how can school leaders balance their leadership and managerial responsibilities in ways that move their schools forward? How is distributed leadership co-ordinated and who takes responsibility for what? How should diversity in educational leadership be fostered?

In this article I argue for including both critical social theory and institutional theory in order to explore the many questions Leithwood and Riehl raise in their conclusion. This will invite research approaches that have a greater potential for providing accounts of the subtle daily negotiations that occur behind the scenes; accounts that can help us to understand how children in schools live nested lives, and indicate that problems are not always the fault of schools. Such accounts may show how teachers, students, parents, and school leaders struggle with each other over the meaning of the school, and how power is negotiated and shared.

A key question that should guide our research in exploring successful school leadership is what a worthwhile and valuable education based on democratic principles should look like, and what the consequences are for leadership in schools located in different contexts. Being a successful school leader in today's and tomorrow's schools based on this perspective implies that leadership must be driven by a deep moral purpose of promoting the ideas and values of democracy. Leadership must go beyond dedication and skills in setting directions, developing people, and fostering the acceptance of group goals.

Critical theorists, like Anderson (1996), Beane and Apple (1999), Bates (1990), Blackmore (1996) and Foster (1986), have attempted to develop a democratic theory of power that leads to a 'power with' model of leadership in which leading and following is a fluid, interactive and reciprocal process, so has Blase *et al.* (1995) using a symbolic interactionist perspective. Educational institutions provide contexts in which identities are continuously constructed and reconstructed. In

order to capture adequately the complicated and dynamic nature of school life, they advocate a micro-political perspective on schooling, as well as looking at the relationship between the school and the broader society. This approach will not produce a universal list of what characterizes a democratic leader, but hopefully will enhance a better understanding of what goes on in schools and give examples of how the conditions on which a democracy depends might be established in different contexts.

In *Democratic Schools: Lessons from the Chalk Face*, Beane and Apple (1999:7) discuss the conditions on which a critical democracy depends. In order to develop democratic schools the following conditions must be present:

- The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
- Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
- The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.
- Concern for the welfare of others and 'the common good'.
- Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
- An understanding that democracy is not so much an 'ideal' to be pursued as an 'idealized' set of values that we must live by and that must guide our life as people.
- The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life.

As Bates (1990) has emphasised, we should also be aware that the dominant traditions of theory and practice in educational administration often serve to justify, uncritically, patterns of organizations and control in schools that both mirror and reinforce the dominant patterns of inequality in the wider society. A theory of successful school leadership should, therefore, include a consideration of the ways in which external social structures are reproduced through the administration of schooling.

For the notion of successful democratic leadership Dewey's (1937) writing about a 'lived democracy' still may serve as an important vision and inspiration. In other words, if schools are meant to be democratic places, the idea of democracy must extend to the many roles adults play in the schools, and this requires the creation of specific structures. If students attending school are to develop a democratic way of life, they

must be offered the opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led. Leaders as well as teachers should be modelling the fact that they are continuous learners themselves. Democratic thoughts and attitudes must characterize the relationships between those who work in schools, and the relationship between the school and the local community. The concept of what counts as successful leadership should not be divorced from deeper philosophical and political questions because education is essentially a moral enterprise based on democratic principles and values. Education is democratic and democracy is educational. As we are 'doing' democracy we are 'doing' education. In sketching what counts as success, we must ask the following questions: success in or for what, success for whom, who benefits, and finally, success under what conditions?

### *Distributed Leadership and Democratic Leadership*

Distributed leadership has recently received increasing interest within the field of leadership and organizational studies, because of the limitations of relying on the single and heroic leader. But what does a concept like distributed leadership mean? Is the concept so vague that it includes everything, or is it more a tool for framing investigations into school leadership? Does the concept equate with democratic leadership?

Publications by Spillane *et al* (2001) and Gronn (2002) have provided extended analyses of distributed leadership as a concept, and they argue that school leadership is best understood as *distributed practice*, stretched over the school's social and situational contexts. Their perspective on leadership is grounded in activity rather than in position or role, and, therefore, the unit of analysis should be leadership practice, rather than an individual leader. Gronn (2002) states that the attractions of activity theory are that its activity system model provides a helpful vehicle for tracking changing divisions of labor and connecting the agents' actions to enabling and constraining structures in organizations.

The National College for School Leadership in England recently commissioned a systematic review of the literature on distributed leadership, and it demonstrates that a variety of meanings are attached to the notion. According to Woods (2004), who participated in this review, the idea of distributed leadership is seductive because it is so easy to mix it up with characteristics associated with democratic leadership. Woods demonstrates convincingly how the two concepts show both overlaps and differences. They are both a dispersed activity

in which initiative circulates widely. But while distributed leadership can be understood as a helpful descriptive or analytical conception that has a potential for highlighting some ideas across different societies, democratic leadership is both an analytical and a normative concept. In his article Woods emphasizes that:

Democracy is dependent on initiative and influence distributed throughout the organization. Understanding more about how this works – which research on distributed leadership can do – has a contribution to make to democratic leadership. However, the notion of democratic leadership both draws upon and goes beyond that of distributed leadership. Democratic leadership grows from a concern with philosophical, political and sociological questions that surface with the idea of opening the boundaries of leadership, and translating into practice the ideals which form an integral part of democratic rationalities (*op.cit.*:23).

According to Woods democratic leadership must be seen as oppositional to the dominance of instrumental rationality embedded in rational authority while the interest in distributed leadership entails an unexamined acceptance of dominant values. I follow Woods' arguments about these aspects, but emphasize also that the distributed leadership perspective as developed by Spillane *et al.* (2001) and Gronn (2002) offers a grounded framework for *studying* day-to-day leadership practice that is highly promising and goes far beyond documenting lists of strategies that leaders use in their work as in studies grounded in a rationalist paradigm. This research perspective offers a way of understanding how leaders go about their work, why they do and think what they do, and addresses the relationship between structure and human agency, between power and trust. As an analytical perspective distributed leadership is helpful, but it becomes problematic when it is used as a normative concept or simply as another way of referring to democratic leadership.

Within the Norwegian part of the Successful School Leadership Project we have chosen a combination of a micro-political and a distributed perspective as a theoretical framework and methodology for researching school leadership. Hence, we have *leadership practice* as the unit of analysis. This entails in-depth observations for 2-3 weeks at each school and interviews with formal leaders, teachers, students and parents. We have also included analysis of the relationship between the school and the local community.<sup>3</sup>



In what follows I will, based on the data collected in this project, provide an example which captures some aspects of what may count as successful democratic leadership in an upper secondary school in Norway.

### ***Preparing Students for Democracy***

Given the national objectives for Norwegian education<sup>8</sup>, it is sensible to argue that successful school leadership should be based on democratic principles. In the Norwegian core curriculum<sup>9</sup> the following is stated:

Education should be based on the view that all persons are created equal and that human dignity is inviolable. It should confirm the belief that everyone is unique; education should foster equality between sexes and solidarity among groups and across borders (*page 7*).

Education should view individuals as moral beings, accountable for their decisions and responsible for their actions; with the ability to seek what is true and to do what is right (*page 9*).

When exploring and analyzing successful school leadership, we should ask: is the leadership practice identified successful in promoting the ideas and values of democracy? Do they serve a democratic vision in line with Dewey's perspective on the school? Do students play a clear role in the decision-making processes? Are they involved in building the conditions for and encouraging democratic processes and participation?

It might be seen as an irony, that schools which have an explicit purpose of preparing students for democracy often operate in ways that demonstrate a lack of belief in such collective participation when it comes to the control of classroom activities. Though the main business of the school is shaping students' lives, the substance of this influence can be disputed. How much control should students have on scheduling their own time in school? How much control should they have in designing the curriculum and learning activities? A distinction may also be made between who sets and who monitors standards (Berlak and Berlak, 1981).

At many of the Norwegian schools participating in the project the students revealed that their participation in setting up the activities varied from teacher to teacher, but most teachers involved them in planning and also in establishing criteria for evaluation. Some students mentioned that they were given too much involvement because it required hard work, and they had to be responsible. Sometimes they

would prefer that the teachers decided the curriculum, but being involved in setting the standards for evaluation was important. To them their interactions and relationship with the teachers were crucial. Our observations demonstrated how power and leadership were negotiated and shared within classrooms. The students in upper secondary education, in particular, were well aware of their own contribution to a successful school. If there were students who did not want to collaborate with the teachers for some reason, then they could make the life of teachers very difficult. It only needed a few students to ruin a school culture, according to those interviewed.

But our studies in 'successful schools' also indicated that those in positional leadership roles, like the principals, are probably crucial in building the conditions for and encouraging democratic processes and participation. For instance, the students at one of our upper secondary schools, Ospelia, played a very active role both in decision-making processes and in profiling the school for the outside world. Those students on the Student Council, in particular, underlined how important the attitude of the school principal had been in the process of developing student democracy. He had been the gate opener, and they collaborated very well with him.

Even though power relationships are always two-way, school principals are undoubtedly, vested with formal powers that include a range of means of compulsion and reward, like economic and structural sanctions. Those means can be used to regulate the relations between members in an organization. As such, the school principal has a key for opening up or closing the flow of ideas that enable people to be as fully informed as possible. As Dewey (1937) framed it: What the argument for democracy implies is that the best way to produce initiative and constructive power is to exercise it.

At Ospelia Upper Secondary School<sup>6</sup> all stakeholders were constantly focused on how they could contribute to the students' personal development as citizens. This was particularly underlined by the school principal, who was also most critical in his comments about the present educational policy that, according to him, was driven more by ideas that celebrated the free market with a focus on creating a competitive school. Both teachers and leaders highlighted the importance of building relations based on mutual trust between students, students and teachers, teachers and formal leaders and between the school and the local community. They had a focus on students' achievements in school subjects, but most important was the need to create a safe and

stimulating learning environment where students could flourish and develop as persons. This required an open flow of ideas and faith in the collective capacity of people to create opportunities for problem-solving. Relationships distinguished by *mutual trust and respect* were at the core of what they thought should count as a successful school. Together they had developed a school characterized by strong and trusting relationships between adults and students, between staff members, and between the school and the local community.

According to both the leadership team and the teachers at Ospelia, a successful school is a school that succeeds in taking care of all children, regardless of social-economic or cultural background and abilities. The main aim is to provide good learning opportunities so that they can become good citizens in the future, and this is a continuous team effort. The principal framed it like this:

To me a successful school is able to motivate students, and to provide a safe and sound learning environment. It is important to create this foundation for learning. The school should not be evaluated based on marks or test scores only, because it will create a misleading picture. The most important aim is to develop active citizens, to develop a collaborative attitude, tolerance and creativity, and that is not easily measured by tests in basic subjects.

But he and his staff have to deal with living in a society which has become more dominated by market accountability. Hence, he tries to be proactive, for instance by inviting reporters from the local newspaper in order to educate them so that they understand what they are publishing when they are ranking schools based on tests and exam marks. He doubts whether it will help, but this does not prevent him from trying. Both he and his staff are worried by the way the discourse about what counts as a valuable education is changing, and he is anxious about how the OECD is playing a powerful role in transforming models of accountability. Teachers and school principals have become subject to stress from governments to improve national ranking in the different subjects. Improving the ranking may become an aim in itself rather than the efforts to understand and discuss how schooling could be improved, and what goals are most important to achieve.

Fulfilling a vision of democracy and an ethic of caring, promoting equity and social justice in school is hard work, and often the staff deal with moral dilemmas. During my fieldwork at this school I frequently observed events and situations where the leadership team devoted their time to discussing problems with and strategies for including students

with serious problems. My interview with a group of parents also supported this view. Two of them had students with handicaps and learning problems, and they told stories about how most of the staff members at Ospelia actually 'lived' the vision of an inclusive school for all. They gave very positive feedback to the leadership team because they were always treated with respect and taken seriously. In response to my question to the school principal regarding what he would like his epitaph to say, he answered:

I hope they will tell that I always treated people with respect. It is not so important if they characterize me as a change agent, but I do want people to say I treated them honestly, with justice and respect, that I showed empathy and compassion with people in different situations; that I showed human considerations whenever needed. That is what I wish my epitaph should say.

My interviews and talks with the cleaners, the caretaker, and the clerical officers confirmed a picture of a school which 'lived' its ethic of caring. Everyone felt they were valued and respected.

### ***Conclusion***

In this article I have demonstrated how successful school leadership as a concept is both ambiguous and contestable, and I claim that successful school leadership should be framed as a moral and democratic enterprise, because the responsibilities of educators should be directed towards democratic values. Such a perspective has consequences for analytical approaches, and I argue for a combination of a micro-political and a distributed perspective in order to capture the complicated and dynamic nature of school life. This approach takes into account that leadership is not necessarily synonymous with a particular position, and simultaneously it offers a grounded framework for studying day-to-day leadership practice. I also underscore that distributed leadership is not synonymous with democratic leadership although there are some overlaps.

In the example of what may count as successful democratic leadership in an upper secondary school in Norway, I pay particular attention to how students have a voice in decision-making processes and opportunities for open dialogues. Building the conditions for and encouraging democratic participation amongst students as well as amongst staff members is crucial. Democratic leadership is indeed as Foster (1986) has framed it: an act that enables others and allows them,

in turn, to become enablers. Additionally, in the school referred to in this article, relationships distinguished by mutual trust and respect were at the core of what they thought should count as a successful school, and both the leadership team and the teachers were persistently discussing criteria for success and how they could contribute to the students' personal development as citizens.

### NOTES

1. The project includes teams of researchers from the UK, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Canada, the United States, Australia and Hong Kong. Each team is developing case studies of successful leadership in their own countries. Further details are available at:  
<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~schoolleadership/ssl.html>
2. Twelve of these schools are participating in the Norwegian part of the Successful School Leadership Project. This implies a focus on schools that have received public acknowledgement, not on successful school leadership per se. Successful leadership is one of the criteria mentioned by the Ministry in their evaluation of the school, but the clarification of this criterion is vague.
3. For further details about the methodological approach and other findings, see Møller et. al. 2005; and Møller and Eggen, 2005.
4. Within Norwegian schools there is no streaming according to abilities, gender or other factors.
5. Dewey's perspective on democracy has, over the years, influenced Norwegian educational policy.
6. Ospelia upper secondary school was chosen as a beacon school for the period 2002-2004 based on its excellent work in improving the students' learning environment and in ensuring more influence and real power in the school for students. The school has 550 students (age 16-19) and approximately 100 staff members of whom 75 are teachers. Within the Norwegian context it counts as a medium sized upper secondary school. The school is located in a semi-rural environment, and the municipality has 13000 inhabitants. From its very beginning in the early 1970s Ospelia has been known as an innovative school.

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