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# A Scandinavian Perspective on Educational Leadership

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## **Abstract**

*The objective of this article is to examine the rhetoric of educational leadership within a Scandinavian context, as it occurs within the framework of New Public Management. The study asks questions about new demands on leadership expressed in policy documents.*

*Local culture and distinctive aspects of national life tend to modify external influences such as those inherent in the philosophy and practice of New Public Management. Scandinavian schools reflect key elements of Scandinavian life such as a commitment to collaboration, democracy, and individual enlightenment. These are themes in the curriculum of many of these countries and key values of the teachers who lead the learning processes. The range of tensions and dilemmas that teachers and their leaders are now facing are a direct result of the clash between generic public policy and the distinctive approach to support life and democratic culture in the Scandinavian countries. School leaders, it seems, are clearly in the middle of this clash and must mediate between these two trends. To remind us of the ultimate objectives of schooling, we outline a Scandinavian vision of democratic reflective leadership.*

The deliberations in this article are based on a study that explored the conditions affecting the work of school leaders across the Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The term “Scandinavia” is often used to identify the region that includes Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The model of the welfare state is foremost in the Scandinavian region and includes policies that are intended to create

equitable life conditions for all social groups, regardless of social background, gender, ethnicity, and geographical location (Tjeldvoll 1997). Education acts in the three countries stipulate that all activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values and that everyone working in the school should encourage respect for the intrinsic values of each person as well as for the shared environment.

Significant changes in the organization and control of schooling have taken place in the region since the mid-1980s. Deregulation and decentralization along with new laws and national curricula have changed the working conditions for principals dramatically. Different discourses of change are competing in society, and new contexts of meaning are challenging established roles and identities. These discourses are not restricted to Scandinavian society, but are influenced by global discussions on educational leadership. For instance, New Public Management (NPM), with a focus on accountability, effectiveness, competition, and local democracy, frames the nature of school leadership in which managerial aspects are emphasized. In this paper, questions are raised about how school leaders across the Nordic countries respond to changed policy circumstances. How do local school culture and distinctive aspects of national life modify external influences? That is, which trends in education and educational management have affected the Nordic countries? A vision of democratic leadership in light of the NPM initiative in Scandinavia vis-à-vis school leadership and decentralization is presented.

### ***The Political Discourse of Educational Leadership***

Discourses are viewed as domains within which power and authority are conferred on some and denied to others. The role of a school leader/principal can be understood by examining the relationships between the various domains operating in public education. To make sense of their surroundings, those in each domain develop a particular sense-making discourse. The understanding of a school leader's job varies depending on who is given the preferential right of interpretation.

A number of similar problems and dilemmas face school leaders in the Scandinavian countries, and some common trends and tendencies are apparent in the educational landscapes of the Nordic countries. These trends all point to school leaders being in the midst of a cross pressure, with tension from NPM (Moos and Dempster 1998; Hughes 1998) regarding efficiency, low trust, consumer orientation, and product-focused management strategies. Local authorities often apply these strategies because management has devolved from the state level to the local level. The national authorities, which have only the weak power of assessment, set the goal for all Nordic countries' educational systems: to support children developing into action-competent and educated citizens of democratic societies. The school culture, which staff members and school leaders often resist, is but one aspect of the powerful frames set by culture, tradition, structures, and actors (Johansson and Bredeson 1999).

Figure 1 illustrates the cross pressures to which local school leaders are exposed in their work (Moos, Carney, Johansson, and Mehlbye 2000; Möller 1999, 2000). Tensions exist even when the goals and objectives of Nordic schools clearly support children developing into reflective, competent, and educated citizens who will defend and nurse the ideas of demo-

## **Figure 1: Cross Pressure of School Leadership**



cratic societies. The national assemblies set these goals, and most people in the Nordic countries accept them. However, the real meaning of each goal is not clear to everyone. Assessment and evaluations of the school system often have focused more on knowledge assessment than on the so-called soft aspects of democratic schooling (Johansson 2001a).

School culture is an important aspect of school change and improvement. This powerful frame has managed to effectively slow down changes in the schools (Thomassen, Ulholm, and Moos 1998).

During the 1980s, Nordic countries turned from a strict national school system to a system with a national curriculum for local school systems. It can be argued that the latter system existed all along because national agencies never have been able to assess and evaluate local activity at a level that has significantly influenced local practice (Johansson 2001b).

Pressure on local schools comes from globalization and border crossing, as well as commerce of new ideas. NPM, one idea that has affected the governing and running of Nordic schools, has been seen as the solution to a lot of problems. Scandinavian countries have been hit hard by the global trend toward one overriding marketplace that is governed only by a capitalistic logic of competition. No super power or system is competing with the Western version of capitalism, and a growing number of transnational companies control a growing percentage of world trade. In addition, each country is influenced by the emerging "global village" created by the Internet and other mass communication media. There seems to be virtually no limit on the free movement of goods, labor, and finances on a global scale; therefore, the nation states have changed their function and cooperation. National governments are finding it increasingly difficult to make their own national legislation and regulations. All nations have become interdependent on one another and on the international and transnational interplay, bringing about a permanent public deficit in most countries. Even Norway, which does not have a public deficit and whose government does not come from the Social Democratic Party, is influenced by the neoliberal agenda. The state is rich, but the municipalities responsible for carrying out the national welfare policy are poor and state grants to the public sector are limited.

### ***Decentralization of the School System***

Expert councils like The World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development advise countries that are having trouble financing the public sec-

tors to decentralize finances and administration from the state level to the local level and even to the institutional level. A common stance is that decentralization is good for the local democracy because important decisions are made closer to the people involved and sometimes with their participation.

A response to this position, though not often used in the political arena, is that the state could no longer afford a system where law regulated how much money different schools should be given. The solution to the problem was “frame laws” and block grants to the municipalities. In a block grant, one unspecified part is for the school sector. Through this approach, the state lowered its cost for education and forced municipalities to take on greater responsibility. The problem today is that many municipalities cannot afford to take full responsibility, so budgets schools receive vary greatly with regard to the location in the country and, of course, the size of the municipality.

Another argument is that the state, in a hypercomplex society, ran out of ideas on how to steer and govern the schools. National political institutions had no good recipes for getting schools to change in accordance with the decisions of the policy community (Johansson and Lundberg 2001). The local school system did not respond according to the old hierarchical top-down model of government because it had become too independent and the goals of the state policies were no longer seen as relevant.

A decentralization of the educational system, irrespective of motives, puts in focus the balance between political and professional power over education. In moving from central governing to local governing, it seems that the question of who has the responsibility is sharpened (Weiler 1990).

### ***New Public Management***

The diffuse line between political and professional responsibility represents a major problem. It seems that a model of public management, which started in the United States, moved to England, and then to the Scandinavian countries, has developed. There are other factors in this development, of course. The cultural development toward more pluralistic and regional cultures makes the notion of national cultures and values more difficult to adhere to, and makes it impossible for a national agency to control the maintenance and development of local and institutional politics. The task of national governments has changed fundamentally over the past 20 years. Governments no longer can rely on institutions and servants to be loyal to national goals and intentions. At the same time, most states have decentralized the hard means of regulation (finances and legal sanctions) to the local level, leaving soft regulations like basic value statements to the school system and curriculum to the national agencies.

In Scandinavian countries, the national level has been left with nothing but overriding legislation, without much legal sanction and no financial power to support it. The hard management has gone to local authorities who often stress that the institutions, first and foremost, must be attentive to the bottom line of finances. At the same time, the institutions, as they compete for local attention and financial support, feel required to show their qualities in the public arena. The need for accountability has grown consider-

ably. According to research conducted in Sweden, Finland, and Iceland (Johannesson, Lindblad, and Simola 2002; Lindblad, Johannesson, and Simola 2002), the neoliberal reforms adopted during the past ten years by Nordic countries have been highly influenced by strategies rooted in the American/British forms of NPM.

In some instances, however, the central government in Scandinavia returned to earmarking grants for primary and secondary schools to influence the priorities of the local municipalities. This was the case concerning in-service training for teachers on implementing new curriculum guidelines in upper-secondary and compulsory schools. It is also the case when it comes to large national school improvement projects. Municipalities must develop plans and grant some money to qualify for national grants.

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The cross pressures on leadership are quite difficult in situations where local authorities feel more responsible for economics than for education—a situation where authorities ask more often for efficiency, long-term planning, and control. Conversely, school staff members seek a collegial, noninterfering, and collaborative style, and view the principal as the person who should be able to protect the school from too much control and external pressure.

Because existing structures and ideas within a country influence ideologies like NPM, the “national filters” through which ideological responses must pass before they become influential on educational systems should be explored. Current discourses cannot be separated from national historical roots. Likewise, national discourses that focus on accountability and the governing of education have to pass “local filters” at the municipal and school levels (Dale 1992; Lauvdal 1994). The need for accountability in the Scandinavian countries often is based on self-evaluation instead of externally driven evaluations of school outcomes.

One way of analyzing school policy is to explore the relationships among market, state, and civic society (Dale 1992; Lauvdal 1994; Klausen 1998). Within the market, the rationale is instrumental and goal oriented. Economic contracts are the media for individual and organizational relationships. Within state governing, the rationale also is instrumental and goal oriented, but communities are built on social contracts. Politics, power, and rules are the media for governing. Within the civic society, the rationale is normative and value based. Ethics and morals govern, and human relations and interactions are built on trust and reciprocity.

Schools within Scandinavia traditionally have been the responsibility of the state, but NPM introduces market forces within public education. The principle of equality in

terms of educational service still has strong support in Nordic countries, and the overall aim of the government has been to ensure equal rights to education for all—regardless of sex, social, geographical, and cultural background.

In the model of decentralization implemented in the Nordic countries during the 1990s, political authorities stated the goals, but local authorities were free to pursue the practices for achieving the objectives. Several White Papers on management by objectives, which had implications for school leaders, were launched during this time from the governments in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The principal was given increased formal power and had a key role in implementing the curriculum and assessment program.

### ***Democratic Reflective Leadership: A Scandinavian Vision***

Most people in Scandinavia probably would agree on the need for democratic leadership in schools, but certainly would disagree about how democratic leadership is defined and should be provided. This ambiguity makes it difficult to agree what democracy means for everyday life in schools. What should a worthwhile and valuable education based on democratic principles look like? What are the consequences for leadership in schools? The continuous dialogue about these issues might be seen as a pervading aspect of Scandinavian culture (Möller 2002; Moos 2003).

Dominant traditions of theory and practice in educational administration often serve to uncritically justify patterns of organization and control in schools that both mirror and reinforce patterns of inequality in the wider society. A theory of educational leadership should consider ways in which external social structures are reproduced through the administration of schooling (Bates 1983). As Anderson (1996, 962) framed it, “Each of us who works in the administrative sciences must ultimately struggle to answer a key question . . . who do we work for?”

The following section discusses notions of democratic leadership in light of the NPM initiatives in Scandinavia and identifies the problems associated with cultural politics of leadership. The cornerstones of our vision are:

- leadership should be based on the objectives of the institution to be led: democratic, liberal education;
- leadership is part of a cultural and political struggle; and
- leadership is about constant learning and is, therefore, both an intellectual and emotional activity.

### ***A Democratic Education***

Leading a school is not simply a matter of managing budgets, personnel, and buildings. It is being responsible for the overall activity of an institution meant for educating children to become citizens, workers, community members, parents, and adults. According to the Danish Folkeskole Act of 1993 (Article 1):

*The school shall prepare the students for participation, sharing of responsibilities, rights and duties in a society with freedom and democracy. The education in the*

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*school as well as the daily life of the school therefore must build on intellectual liberty, equality and democracy.*

The main objective of other Scandinavian educational systems is similar, pointing to the demands of educational leadership. The school leader is responsible for the education offered to children and youth; teacher planning, carry through, and evaluation of teaching in accordance with these objectives; and organizing the whole school so that it furthers and facilitates this work.

The increased need for this type of educational leadership is a direct consequence of the decentralization and devolution of responsibilities from state to municipality to schools. When national or local educational and curricular frames are broad and loose, the institution itself is responsible for pursuing the educational objectives. In the daily life of the school, it is the teachers, individually and collectively, who carry out the work; however, the school leader is responsible for both this work and the overall direction and accountability of the school.

A school leader should develop a critical attitude toward goals decided by politicians. In accordance with NPM trends, goals set in national curriculum guidelines increasingly are oriented toward preparing students for the workplace. Economic concerns in many countries take precedence over knowledge in maintaining democracy. Further, Fenstermacher (1995, 70) stated, "Education and democracy are so intertwined, so critical to one another's vitality. Any loss of democratic ideals in the rhetoric and practice of educational reform is a loss of educational ideals as well." Principals, teachers, students, and parents, therefore, should engage in critical analysis and action to secure a democracy that contributes to economic justice. At the school, the principal often acts as the gatekeeper or the gate opener to such analyses.

School democracy has been a concept in Scandinavian countries since the end of World War II. Various policy documents have explained the meaning and importance of school democracy. The Swedish curriculum from 1994 (Utbildningsdepartementet 1994, 6) declared:

*All school activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values. . . . The school has the important task of imparting, instilling and forming in the pupils those fundamental values on which our society is based.*

Despite this long tradition and the presence of clear policy documents, substantial variations exist among and within Scandinavian countries from municipality to municipality, demonstrating how difficult it is to go from policy to implementation.

### **A Cultural and Political Struggle**

Leadership is about relationships and power. In our vision, school leadership should be about a way of coming to terms with power: the democratic way.

School leaders are vested with formal powers that include means of compulsion/force and of reward. Those means can be used to regulate the relationships among agents

(teachers and leaders) if the school is viewed as a field of forces (Bourdieu 1977; 1998). Other forces, however, are more important in school leadership. These can be called informal powers, and are based on the legitimacy of the leader. Leadership has a special relationship with other parties when all exercise power on the basis of the positions they take. According to Bourdieu (1998, 142):

*Those who act according to the rules have the group on their side and at the same time ostensibly place themselves on the group's side through a public act of recognition of a communal norm, which is universal because it is universally approved within the limits of the group.*

A school leader can—and should—act democratically. He or she can be the agent responsible for making the power struggle public so that everyone can examine what is going on and have a say in the decisions. The leader should set the agenda for the school's professional dialogue and educational practices.

Ironically, schools that have an explicit purpose of preparing students for democracy often operate in ways that demonstrate a lack of belief in such collective participation by operating in hierarchical relationships. Moreover, the danger exists that if the approach to professional dialogue is poorly conceived and implemented, it can become a laissez-faire abdication and balkanization of local schools (Glickman 1995).

In the Scandinavian educational systems, various approaches to the leadership role are taken. Some leaders withdraw from the power struggle. Some leaders assume all power, without giving teachers any latitude for influence or dialogue. Some take on the responsibility of initiating a continuous professional discourse about ensuring quality in schools (Nygren and Johansson 2000).

Developing trust in all relationships is essential to a democratic vision for leadership. Trust creates the conditions and mobilizes people to act and collaborate. Trust and power are closely interrelated according to Sörhaug (1996) and are forces that both threaten and presuppose each other. Power without trust destroys its own basis, while trust without power can barely survive because there always will be the potential for violence in a group. Therefore, a leader must be endowed with appropriate means of power and be able to restore trust through trustworthy use of power.

### ***An Intellectual and Emotional Activity***

Leadership, particularly school leadership, depends on constant learning. School leaders are directors of highly educated people with intellectual work. To be able to lead such a group, the leader must be a learner. School leaders in the Scandinavian countries must learn the goals of the curriculum.

A school leader must understand that governing power is an authority based on discursive power. The leader must create a democratic environment where everyone feels noticed and appreciated for whom they are.



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In our vision, a school leader is a democratic reflective leader who guides the school in accordance with democratic ideas and the understanding that school democracy is for all who are working in the school. The leader understands that imparting knowledge of fundamental democratic values is not enough. Democratic working methods must be used to prepare pupils for active participation in civic life. Pupils who participate in planning and evaluating their daily education, and who exercise choices over courses, subjects, themes, and activities, will develop their ability to exercise influence and take responsibility (Utbildningsdepartementet 1994, 8).

A school leader who is both democratic and reflective creates and merges school cultures and structures by rethinking and leading dialogues and discussions. The leader is aware of the learning process and realizes that the control of related emotions and anxiety impact educational leadership. The democratic reflective school leader's task as a supporter and promoter of interactive professionalism is essential.

### ***A Democratic Reflection of a Leader's Tasks***

Though a vision of democratic reflective leadership is normative, it should not be reduced to a long list of what school leaders should be doing to promote democracy in schools. Democracy is not so much an "ideal" to be pursued as an "idealized" set of values that must guide our lives (Beane and Apple 1999). Some guiding principles for a democratic reflection of a school leader follow:

- *Contribute to the quality of teaching in an active way.* The leader is responsible for the overall quality of the teaching offered to students and therefore must guide and supervise teachers in their planning, carry through, and evaluation. The challenge to raise the quality of education is ongoing.

- *Contribute to and create space for teacher learning.* Teachers are the most important agents in challenging and facilitating student learning. Teachers must have space for continual learning, reflection, and collaboration on didactical matters. The leader is responsible for creating opportunities and challenges for teachers to examine their previous learning experiences and assume greater responsibility for their current and future learning.

***Ironically, schools that explicitly prepare students for democracy often operate in ways that demonstrate a lack of belief in such collective participation by operating in hierarchical relationships.***

- *Create and design space for professional discourse.* To facilitate the collaboration, teachers must discuss the values underlying their actions and decisions. The leader is responsible for providing opportunities for this discussion.

- *Lead relationships with the outside world.* The legitimacy of the school is questioned constantly by stakeholders and others in the local environment. The leader is in charge of building relationships.

• *Lead his or her own life through reading, thinking, reflecting, learning, and acting.* The leader's power of knowledge is crucial to his or her power to lead. Learning is partly a process of constructing and reconstructing one's own identity. Traveling, changing jobs, and enrolling in continuing education, are all different ways of constructing identity and coming to self-understanding.

In a Scandinavian context, leaders have a shared responsibility to discuss, develop, and implement values and goals. Leaders, however, have an individual responsibility for setting the agenda and ensuring that discussions take place. A democratic vision in keeping with the Deweyan perspective implies a "power-with" leadership orientation (Möller 2002). Democratic thoughts and attitudes must characterize the relationships among those who work in schools, as well as the relationships between the school and the local community.

Dewey's writings embody the vision and inspiration for the notion of democratic leadership. In "Democracy and Educational Administration" (1937, 345–46), he wrote:

*What the argument for democracy implies is that the best way to produce initiative and constructive power is to exercise it. Power, as well as interest, comes by use and practice. . . . The delicate and difficult task of developing character and good judgment in the young needs every stimulus and inspiration possible. . . . I think, that unless democratic habits and thought and action are part of the fiber of a people, political democracy is insecure. It cannot stand in isolation. It must be buttressed by presence of democratic methods in all social relationships.*

### Conclusion

Global social and cultural trends are impacting large parts of societies, particularly educational systems and educational leadership in the Scandinavian countries. The logics of the "market place" and the "global village" are getting closer to shaping and forming our daily lives as governments and transnational associations and unions apply NPM in various forms. The situation for educational systems and school leaders is confusing and bewildering. How can one be inspired by ideas and theories from other countries without losing connections and roots in the local culture and practice? We believe that schools and their leaders should stay rooted in the practice and core values of our societies, making schools cultural institutions that strive to educate children to become democratic citizens.

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