School leadership – fundamentalistic beliefs or critical reflection?

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Abstract

There are tendencies in educational politics, which demands that educational systems as well as educational leadership are based on rigorous evidence. The evidence that some of those politicians consider rigorous and prefer is evidence that is based on randomised, controlled tests, RCT-studies. This kind of knowledge is thought to be valid all over the world.

This political attitude produce a special kind of relations between the political system, schools, school leaders, professionals and students that may not be productive for the development of ethical and professional practices in schools. It may also not be stimulating to schools trying to further and develop a comprehensive and socially responsible education for citizenship in democracies, also called ‘Democratic Bildung’.

The keynote will discuss another approach to educational leadership that goes back to the source of democratic thinking in the era of enlightenment: Can leaders contribute to building democratic communities in schools, where professionals and students participate in the interactions on the basis of inclusion to the community (participation) and on critical reflection and analysis (deliberation).

Outline

In this address I want to try out the combination of the two concepts in the title: fundamentalism and critique in this short exploration of the situation of school leadership in concept and in practice.

I shall sketch some major tendencies in international educational policies, that seem to tighten the couplings between state authorities and schools; remind ourselves of the purpose of schooling and point to other tendencies, that seem to loosen the couplings and thereby producing new conditions for school leadership.
Let me start by stating that when I use the concept ‘fundamentalistic’ I am NOT referring to religious discussions – although this is much needed - but to scientific and common sense concepts. I shall come back to that.

Tendencies in international educational policies:
There are a number of trends in international educational policies: A strong one is the focus on evidence based practice and best practice. One of the strong players on this field is the trans-national OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). Whenever a government from member states feel too weak to set an agenda in their country, they can have the educationall system join one of the international comparisons or they can ask the OECD/CERI (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation) to undertake a review. OECD has reviewed basic educational systems and the connections between educational research and politics and practice in England, New Zealand, Denmark etc. – using the ‘peer pressure’ strategy (Moos, 2006, 2006).

When he described the OECD/CERI strategies, Tom Schuller, the Director of CERI (8 September, 2005) used the expression ‘to set the agenda’ for educational and research development and discussion. This strategy is more clearly explicated in the OECD publication, ‘Education Catalogue’ (OECD, 1998) where it says:

“This ‘peer pressure’ system encourages countries to be transparent, to accept explanations and justification, and to become self-critical. This encouragement for self-criticism among representatives of Member countries is the most original characteristic of the OECD.”

The ‘peers’ are political, research and educational systems in the member countries. The understanding is that by assessing or reviewing aspects of member country policies and practices and making the review public OECD/CERI wants to enable countries to be self-critical. This approach has been taken by TIMMS, (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) in the areas of literacy and other proficiencies in the primary and secondary schools, and is now being taken in the area of educational research.

The reviews express the understanding that educational practice should be based on educational research is, or should be, objective science, free of norms and only based on evidence,
which here signifies: summative, large-scale Randomized Controlled Tests (RCT), taken from the science of medicine – where it was introduced because the law suits for maltreatment were too costly - and brought to ‘No Child Left Behind’ (Hammersley, 2002; Pellegrino & Shavelson, 2002). One of the reasons here is also that parents sued school systems for not providing the expected outcomes.

The template used for the reviews shows that they build on the idea of linear dissemination of research to policy and practice. You can find it in expressions like a ‘repository of knowledge …’, ‘best practice’ and ‘the production, distribution and application of knowledge …’ they are writing within a paradigm that treats knowledge as a commodity (Ball, 2003; Wolter et al., 2004) that can be transported from one party to another.

However educational research recognises that complexity is due in part to different interests, perspectives, and different issues or areas of research and therefore, different forms of knowledge and research must be aware of it. The foundation of educational research is getting a better understanding of human beings’ learning and teaching in the local society, politics and culture. Thus the educational practice of teaching is to a great extent based on tacit knowledge and experiences that take as their point of departure the actual, very concrete situation and interaction. Educational research cannot as is suggested in the review report, reduce those insights from ‘theories of knowledge’ to ‘models of action’.

‘Best practice’ is no guarantee that the educational processes will become productive. If ‘best practice’ is described without giving the practitioner the room to reflect on the context, background and values of the practice described, then they have to take over a ‘package of practice’ or a ‘model of action’ that is not adapted to their conditions and situation. If receivers of ‘best practice’ are not competent in interpreting the descriptions and adapting them to their own practice, they will often find that transforming the good practice fails.

Every profession wants to base his/her practice on the best knowledge available in the situation and context. However educational practice is extremely context bound. Where ‘best practice’ makes sense in surgery where patients are anaesthetized it should be used with caution in schools where students are conscious and not anaesthetized. Human beings tend to have their consciousness and therefore often act as they seem appropriate.

**What are schools for?**

- **Socialization**
- **Democratic Bildung**
  - Community: Participation
  - Authority: Deliberation, critique
- **Beane & Apple:**
  - The open flow of ideas
  - Critical reflection
  - The welfare of others and common good
  - Dignity and rights of others
All societies need to prepare the next generation to take over. They socialize children and youth to be able and willing to take over the values of society. This can be described as the sociological explanation for schooling.

There is also a cultural explanation for schooling: Many societies and educational systems used to build on the understanding, that schools were the major cultural institution that societies established and maintained because they wanted to make sure that the next generation of citizens were brought up and educated to take over, maintain and develop the society. Thus educational purposes were often described in broader terms: Schools should educate students to become enlightened, participating, active and collaborating citizens. Democratic Bildung therefore aims at maturity, reflexivity, social judgment, aesthetic and political consciousness and competence of action. Schools were therefore also about social justice, equity, empowerment and community. These notions still live in schools in most places, but are not always furthered from the level of politicians and administrators.

The discussion of Democratic Bildung can be taken back to the Era of Enlightenment when philosophers and politicians started contesting medieval traditions and fundamentalism. We saw new approaches to religion and to science: the firm belief in divine knowledge was transformed into the everlasting doubt - contingency - and critique that science brought (Beck, 1986). In the same movement human beings were dragged out from their traditional collectives and made autonomous individuals, capable of taking care of their own life in collaboration with other citizens in communities.

Democratic education is described by Biesta (2003) as ‘creating opportunities for action, for being a subject, both in schools and other educational institutions, and in society as a whole.’ (Biesta, 2003)(p. 59). Besides the opportunity for action, participation, I find that the most important concept related to democracy is ‘critique’ because it gives a more precise direction to the concept of deliberative democracy.

In line with this understanding we find that Beane & Apple (1999; Furman & Starrat, 2002) and Woods describe the central concerns of democratic schools as: 1) the open flow of ideas that enables people to be as fully informed as possible, 2) the use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies, 3) the welfare of others and the ‘common good’ and 4) the concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.

Collisions of paradigms
In contemporary Denmark:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>New policy trends</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The vision of Democratic Bildung</td>
<td>Back to Basics, Effectiveness</td>
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<td>Improvement</td>
<td>Quality controle</td>
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<td>Room for interpretation</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
<td>Distrust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not systematic, formative evaluation</td>
<td>Systematic testing (multiple choice)</td>
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<td>‘Talking’ tradition</td>
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<td>Community learning</td>
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<td>Grading scale (independent, autonomy)</td>
<td>Grading scale (comply with goals)</td>
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- on the way towards standards and fundamentalism?

When I use the term fundamentalism I refer to Talcot Parsons values categories/levels:

- **Taste**: individual preferences, part of the person’s identity, not debatable
- **Tradition**: a group identity, build on rituals and prejudice, not debatable
- **Rationality**: on the basis of agreed criteria one gives reasons for those values, debatable
- **Fundamentalism**: values are presupposed based on external authorities (e.g.: curriculum, legislation, ideology)

There seem too be a move towards more fundamentalistic forms of values in educational policies and administration in the bog democracies, however I find that one should aim for more rationalistic values in the small democracies in schools.

**Indirect leadership: networks – distributed leadership**
Most Danish schools are organized in intricate patterns of networks and meeting structures.
First there are meetings of the school board that consists of parents, teachers, and students with the principal as secretary and a parent as chairman. The school board meets once a month and makes overall principles for the school’s activities about the organisation of instruction, the cooperation between the school and the homes of the students, the distribution of the work among the teachers, and it approves the school’s budget.

Second there are meetings for the whole staff, teachers and other staff members, four times a year in the “staff committee” with the senior management team (SMT) as chairpersons. In addition to that there are development conversations between the SMT and every single employee.

Third meetings for the pedagogical personnel: staff council meetings (3-4 a year), meetings in the executive committee that plan the staff council meetings with representation of the SMT. The pedagogical development council coordinates the pedagogical development with representation of the SMT. The council has 6-10 meetings per year.

Fourth there are the meetings about the cooperation in the teams of teachers. There are weekly team meetings, and there are team conversations together with the SMT; there is a reading conference about 1st and 2nd form’s reading capabilities. In this conference the teachers’ team, the SMT, and the school psychologist participate. The meeting agenda in the last mentioned meetings is discussion of the children’s early reading capabilities in the two lowest forms; there are at least twice a year curricular meetings in the respective teams.

Fifth there are special centre meetings with a psychologist and the teachers in the centre and there are four yearly coordination meetings in the special centre concerning the overall planning of the special centre’s work. In these meetings the management team and the centre’s personnel participates.

This meeting structure constitutes an ingenious web that holds the organisation together. With the team structure and the permanent teams there could be the risk that the school falls apart because the teachers do not meet regularly across the teams; that the school would be transformed into “100 schools within the school” as one teacher says. With this web of meetings the school is held together across the teams; and despite the decentralised structure with decentralisation of much decision power to the teams the SMT is very well informed about what is going on at the school in the teams, because of their participation in these regular meetings with almost all members of the staff. This participation is the very means by which the SMT on the other hand has the possibility to influence the culture, setting the agenda for the school’s pedagogical line and development, and in this way influence the childrens’ learning and democratic ‘Bildung’.

**Leading schools**

Setting direction for the school is one of the major tasks of school principals. This understanding is implied in the concept of leadership that is understood as: ‘Lead the way …’ and ‘be at the head of …’ It is also understood in this way in the research (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005) where it is found that successful principals are setting the direction for their schools: “… successful leadership creates a compelling sense of purpose in the organizations by developing a shared vision of the future, helping build consensus about relevant short-term goals and demonstrating high expectations for colleagues’ work.” (Leithwood, 2006)

This means that principals, in setting direction for the schools, are influencing the teachers (and the rest of the staff and students) in one way or the other. The forms of influence and power will differ from situation to situation and from context to context. In order to better be able to categorize and analyze the ways of setting direction in the ISSPP schools we shall em-
ploy a model of power that include four forms: Direct power, indirect power, consciousness controlling power and institutionalized power (Christensen & Jensen, 1986).

Leading schools: influence/power (to)

- Direct power
- Indirect power
- Consciousness controlling power
- Institutionalized power
- Dispersed/distributed power

‘Direct power’ (Dahl, 1961) getting other people to do something, they would not have done under other circumstances. Exercising this kind of power is usually accompanied by sanctions of some kind.

‘Indirect power’ (Barach & Baratz, 1962) is exercised when the principal is setting the agenda for the professional discussion in schools.

‘Consciousness controlling power’ (Lukes, 1974) is a broad range of influences that include story telling, narratives, sense making (Weick, 1995, 2001) and other forms of ways that one can try and get other people to change opinions or sharpen their understandings.

‘Institutionalized power’ (Foucault, 2001/1978) captures the influences that are laid down in the ways structures, procedures and social technologies are constructed and working. Very often we look at the structures like the year plan or the weekly plan of schools as effects of the law of nature, not as products of human activities. We see social technologies like the ways relations between adults and children is perceived in schools or the ways testing is carried through, as naturalness, things that are taken for granted. We tend to forget that those influences are products of fights between different interests that involve power fights between people or social groups of people, power struggles.

It is worth mentioning that when ‘indirect power’ and ‘consciousness controlling power’ are exercised, there is room for participation and deliberation, for consensus and conflict, for disagreement and agreement, for reciprocity and for critique. In practical life one will often see that different forms of power are exercised in different phases of developmental processes.

The ISSPP cases stories in Journal Of Educational Administration Vol 43 no 6, 2005, demonstrate that all successful principals are committed to setting a direction for their schools. This can hardly surprise anybody. But it seems that the principals in the case stories differ in the ways directions are set from one educational system to the other parallel to the state/national accountability system.

When principals in tight accountability systems like US/New York and China exercise a direct power form in order to set a direction for their schools, they in many cases point to the accountability system. This system is often so rigid in procedures and instruments that nothing is left to the school or the teachers’ interpretation and negotiation. Therefore the direct power is being transformed into institutionalized power. In looser accountability systems
principals also exercise direct power to introduce or focus on external demands: The act or the curriculum, but as those are not detailed or explicated in the same ways as the accountability systems are, they leave some interpretation to negotiations between principal and teachers. That takes place, when the principal sets the agenda for the professional discussions or when he/she enters into narratives, sense making interactions or other consciousness controlling forms of power.

**Leading Professionals**
School leaders are leading professionals, knowledgeable, experienced, classroom leaders and teacher team leaders – who also need empowerment/professional development and support when they try to plan and carry out education for Democratic Bildung – and they often have to be reminded about it. Example: one principal worked hard to have teachers accept and take on their own authority and not refer students to her when a conflict or a problem occurred.

**Leadership and Governance in public institutions** (with Dorte Pedersen)

> From hierarchy towards networks where leaders must **create their own leadership** who make collectively binding decisions – making decisions that form the basis for further decisions  
> From a political governance by rules towards a self-programming based on financial tools, makes **polyphonic leadership** that sets the horizons for the institutions by strategic leadership and imagination – translating and filtering the demands from the outside  
> The superior-subordination relations are substituted by reciprocity in relations, which means **negotiated leadership** – sense making: narratives, lies (making sense is about building on the past and looking into the future when describing the present  
> Establishing and maintaining **communities** by negotiating norms/values, borders and membership (trust creating power)  
> Leadership in schools is **communications** about Democratic Bildung - and the conditions for that – room for critical reflections

**References**


