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Tracing the rise of educational leadership in Denmark

Piil, Signe

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Tracing the rise of educational leadership in Denmark

The study of educational leadership has become an important aspect of an ongoing trend to improve the performance of pupils at elementary schools in Denmark as well as in other countries. Apparently, demands for educational leadership has emerged as a result of disappointing achievements in PISA and other international tests on the one hand, and the outgrowth of a competition state (O. K. Pedersen, 2011) and neo-liberal control technology on the other hand (Gorur, 2013; Lingard, 2011).

The development towards a management state has been described extensively elsewhere (Greve & Ejersbo, 2002; Klaudi Klausen, 2001; D. Pedersen, 2004; D. f. Pedersen, Højlund, & Greve, 2008), what is interesting in this paper is, how this focus on performance-based management unfolds and shape conditions for educational leadership at elementary schools in Denmark.

For decades, management and leadership in general has become the vogue. In particular, leadership has been an important societal power, expected to improve efficiency in the public sector – also at elementary schools. Furthermore, the intensified focus on measurability as an outcome of New Public Management strategies seems to increase the needs for explanation, causal relation studies and ‘best practice’. It entails demands for facilitating learning in particular ways.

Nevertheless, school leadership is an eclectic topic, and identifying management and leadership as an idea or conception hard to define and demarcate. Irrespective of whether leadership is viewed on as a function or as personal qualities, principals are becoming bicoles (Koyama, 2014), a notion used by Lévi-Strauss (bricolage) to identify the capability of adaptive behaviour and to use available resources to solve multiple problems in a proper way. Thereby, demands for leading the core service of schools have engendered the need for situation-specific enactment to improve the learning outcome of students (Pors, 2014; Pors & Andersen, 2015). What on the surface looks self-evident however has changed conditions and requirements for school principals.

What doesn’t appear so openly is how a simple question like: “How could we improve the learning outcome of students” is enough to involve a whole series of actors by constructing networks and assemblages to orchestrate new conditions and possibilities to define and fill out the societal expectations on educational leadership.

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate how translations at a policy level draw a map and create a framework for redefining certain ways of organizing and practicing school leadership today. It is a part of
my PhD and shows from an actor-network perspective how tracing the emergence of truisms in the field like ‘teaching by objectives’, ‘core service’, ‘digital learning platforms’, ‘professional learning communities’ and ‘student-centred leadership’ can be explained and analysed by relations among forces embedded in the Black Box of educational leadership.

The power by which ‘evidence-based practice’ has swept across the school-landscape in Denmark during the last decades remain inexplicable and opaque when relations of forces made to stand apart. Therefore, this paper aims to show how actors at a policy level construct conditions framing the possible outcome of negotiation and interaction.

My research question for this part of my PhD is:

**How do demands for ‘best practice’ create conditions and possibilities for educational leadership at elementary schools in Denmark?**

**Theoretical approach:**

The theoretical framework for my investigation on upcoming demands for educational leadership is an Actor-Network Theory approach. ANT is a sociological school of thoughts arisen in the eighties launched by Latour, Law and Callon (Blok & Elgaard Jensen, 2009). A central notion in ANT is the ‘generalized symmetry conception’, which requires using the same system of terminology to analyse social phenomena as well as natural.

The point in this view is capturing the influence of non-human as well as human actors. Therefore ANT rejects conceptions solely regarding the social. Reality, in this approach is constructed through actors in networks and the links between them (Latour, 2005; Ratner, 2013). Everything in the social and natural world is treated as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located (Law, 2009). This performative aspect allows a sensitivity towards contextual conditions constructing society, and in this case new conditions and possibilities for organizing and performing educational leadership.

As Latour (1986) calls attention to, the amount of power someone has exercised – human or non-human - varies not according to the power someone has, but to the number of other people who enter into the composition. Those compositions are seen as translations in networks. The forte of ANT is to analyse, examine and describe relations and interactions between humans, instruments, technology, institutions, systems and concepts performing particular worlds (Latour, 2005).
Translation is a central concept in ANT. To translate is making to words equivalent, but translation also implies betrayal according to a French phrase: Traduction est trahison = Translation is treachery because making two things equivalent also implies changing them (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987; Law, 2009; Law & Hassard, 1999). In this sense, interactions always change the involved. ANT is interested in any actor or relation being conducive to stabilize or destabilize a network.

**Method:**

Methodological this paper has it’s starting point at a school in a municipality in the eastern Denmark where I am doing my empirical study. To trace how school leadership at a policy level has been framed during the last decades, I have constructed my preliminary empirical findings for this part of my inquiry on observations, semi-structured qualitative interviews and informal ethnographic interviews, policy documents, reports, homepages and newspaper articles.

The strength of an actor-network approach by tracing translations and assemblages of human and non-human actors, is the capability to illuminate how, in this case, specific ways of framing capacity building at schools had such a tremendous impact nationwide in Denmark. Remarkably, is why e.g. Hattie’s research on ‘Visible Learning’ spread like wildfire in Denmark contrary to other countries. Hattie himself is lost in wonder of his great renown in Denmark, he told a colleague of mine at DPU.

Callon (1986) divides the translation process into four stages: ‘problematization’, ‘interessement’, ‘enrolment’ and ‘mobilisation’ and so do I.

**The emergence of fellow players and the power of knowing**

More than a strong theory (Latour, 1999), ANT rather is a method to deploy the actor’s own world building. A set of sensibilities that are utilized and deployed in the study of phenomena (Gorur, 2013; Latour, 2005).

Based on above mentioned disappointing results on international ranking lists, the Danish prime minister, in his speech at the Opening of Parliament in 2003, proclaimed to break away from what he called “roundtable discussions” at schools (Statsministeriet, 2003). In a Danish context, this notion refers to a caricature of the lopsidedness of earlier pedagogical discourses a school. In particular regarding missing demands and expectations and an excessive use of student influence without any academic goals. His point, a political awareness of the learning outcome, and the need of knowing how to improve them, emerged. Politically his announcement was followed up by a new curriculum in 2003 and nationally binding common goals regarding student outcome at elementary schools in Denmark.
This official problematization (Callon, 1986) of the quality of the elementary school led subsequently to extensive changes which involved several other actors and made them indispensable. Numerous researchers were engaged in investigating reasons why countries like Finland, Singapore and Canada had high performing school systems. New methods introduced in the educational field by the OECD, like quantification, comparison of large numbers of countries and benchmarking, made “best practice” an obligatory passage point in the network of relationships they were building. The notion OPP is used by Callon (Callon, 1986) describing a pivotal point through which any stakeholder in the field had to pass and alliances had to be forged because no one could answer the question: how to improve the learning outcome of students alone.

As a natural consequence, the Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research (DCER) had founded in 2006. It serves to compile, analyze and disseminate the best currently available knowledge of evidence-informed practice (www.edu.au.dk).

The tendency of focusing on ‘best practice’ regarding educational issues increased with the financial crisis in 2008. The same year as the TALIS report of OECD came, which examined and compared school management among 23 nations. Denmark scored close to bottom in administrative and instructional management at schools (Staunæs, 2015). The government appointed afterwards a ‘flying squad’ to inspect the elementary school. They required research on different topics to explain how and why school systems in other nations were high performing compared to Denmark. Ideas about a reform sprouted and at the reopening of school in 2014, the most comprehensive reform for decades had expected to be implemented.

Meanwhile, stakeholders outside the pedagogical world became involved as well and engaged in shaping the school reform. Definitely to underline a strong macroeconomic interest in ‘best practice’ and learning outcome improvement at elementary schools in Denmark. The Productivity Commission, established by the government in the beginning of 2012 was an assemblage of almost exclusively economists. The school reform is to a great extent based on their recommendations (Produktivitetskommissionen, 2014).

A growing interessement, by Callon (1986) described as “a group of actions by which an entity attempts to impose and stabilize the identity of the other actors it defines through its problematization” - or “how the allies are locked into place”. In Actor-Network-Theory reality is a construct and a process of negotiations and translations in networks. Describing entities or actors as formulating their identity and goals in an independent manner would be absurd.

**Hattie and the enrolment of designated roles and identities**
The research of Hattie (2009, 2011) on student outcome fitted like gloves in contemporary ideas of ‘best practice’ and his ‘visible learning’ (Hattie, 2012; Hattie & Yates, 2014) became a main element of revised common national goals and capacity building at schools translated into ‘teaching by objectives’ by the Danish Ministry of Education.

Universities were in co-operation with colleges of professional education engaged to provide doctoral studies and research-based knowledge on school leadership and school development. Over a couple of years, research grants were annually a part of the Financial Act. In addition to ‘teaching by objectives’ (Hattie, 2009, 2011), Robinson’s research on school leadership (2007, 2011) was introduced and launched in the organizational field (DiMaggio, 1983) by researchers at DPU (Danish School of Education), UCC (University College Capital) and DCER (Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research) as well as civil servants and a growing amount of consultancy firms. Especially DAFOLO – a private company delivering consulting services, and has monopoly on translating central scientific literature, used as the core tools in competence development throughout the country.

During the years, an increasing focus on the role of the principal emerged, seen as the key to efficiency improvement in the public sector. The findings of Robinson on student-centered leadership had a tremendous impact on upcoming development programs up and down the country and several stakeholders proclaimed educational leadership to be of significance.

Additionally, KL (the National Association of Local Authorities in Denmark) had struggled to extend the managerial capacity at elementary schools for decades. They succeeded by signing the working hour agreement for teachers in 2013. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Education initiated training programs for school managers and strengthened the enrollment (Callon, 1986) of a large amount of stakeholders including an increasing number of consultancy service companies. Educational leadership turns out on the one hand out to be one of the main answers to better PISA scores, and on the other hand, to be an instrument of governmental control motivated by the hope for global competitiveness.

Enrolment, defined by Callon (1986), does not imply, nor does it exclude pre-established roles. He wrote, “Enrolment designates the device by which a set of interrelated roles is defined and attributed to actors who accept them”. On the other hand, the debate in several trade journals and in the public space have enormously polarized during the process of mobilization of allies – the fourth stage of translation processes. To mobilize is to render entities, which were not so beforehand, and the process shapes roles and identities of opponents as well.

Conclusion and findings
A natural consequence of ‘best practice’ as measuring rod is a need for documentation and visualization on the one hand, and a belief in and search for causality on the other hand. What matters to contemporary trends in defining educational leadership seems to be what fits in, and can link with current dominant ideas of quality, accountability and scientification (Røvik, 2011; Røvik, Furu, & Eilertsen, 2014).

Educational leadership seems defined by solving societal and economic problems. My empirical study shows an increasing tendency to make organizational and pedagogical decisions based on assumptions and truisms ingrained in contemporary logics constructed through networks. Where leadership is supposed to take place, power and politics are crucial to consider as core aspects of leadership relations (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012), and framing conditions and possibilities for educational leadership as well.

The influence on motivation, knowledge, practices and cooperation of teachers, to improve the learning outcome of school pupils, is constructed and co-enacted in interaction between leaders and their followers, but one could ask if the outcome of assessment criteria like quality, accountability and evidence reduces to correctness and causality, measured by international ranking lists. Learning processes might be more complex.

Upcoming new conditions and possibilities for educational leadership has engaged multiple stakeholders and over time changed their roles. New actors and ambivalent roles seems to be the spin-off of contemporary ideas, launched by transnational economic institutions. Ideas, with which no one can disagree. No one can disclaim the wish for quality in education and it makes no sense to refuse the accountability of principals or teachers. Closure occurs, when spokesmen are deemed to be beyond question. Therefore, in this presentation the origin and framing of educational leadership has regarded as being shaped through translations in networks more than coming from personal skills as it is looked at in parts of the management literature.

The political expectations for educational leadership seems to be translation skills (Røvik, 2007) regarding knowledge based practice and it seems like a simple question has changed the role and identity of transnational and political institutions, research, education, local authorities, principals, teachers and pupils.
Literatur


