Leadership Strategies in Diverse Intake Environments

Brit Bolken Ballangrud[1]
> Associate professor, University of South-Eastern Norway

Jan Merok Paulsen
> Associate professor, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Abstract

The case study subjected in this paper was designed to illuminate how school leadership strategies and interventions mediate external demands, in the form of the academic press, for raised outcomes, imposed from the policy environment on a school with a heterogeneous pupil population. The Norwegian research site is situated in a demographic environment of low pupil socioeconomic status, a group of factors that in other systems predicts 60%—70% of academic achievement. More specifically, the intake environment in which the school is situated is characterized by high ethnic heterogeneity and, for some parts, low scores on parents' social welfare indicators. Data was collected from a school characterized as low performing, defined by pupil achievement on national tests, yet these outcomes had been progressing over time. Findings are based on observations as well as interviews with school leaders, teachers, the superintendent in the municipality, and pupils, together with a pupil survey. The paper analyzes various leadership strategies and interventions as mediating functions between the external academic press from the school district level and the internal cultural context of the school. Specifically, the findings suggest that building a core culture of inclusive ethos for all pupils, paired with pedagogical collaboration, and democratic and servant leadership, are important devices for mastering this form of diversity. The leadership practices and collaborative focus were furthermore anchored in a systemic and more integrative school organization that purposefully combined hierarchical structure with horizontal elements in a matrix-like design.

Keywords: leadership strategies; low-performing schools; systemic school organization; capacity building; trust

Introduction

There is today a broad consensus among scholars as well as practitioners about the significance of pupils' socioeconomic status (SES) as a decisive set of framing conditions for pupil learning, and thus, shaping the possibilities for school leaders and teachers to

---

[1] Corresponding author: brit.ballangrud@usn.no

maneuver within the policy arena (Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003). Specifically, poverty and ethnic heterogeneity, the latter factor measured by the number of minority languages, have been shown to have a systematic negative impact on pupil performance (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). We find the same in Norway, although this picture seems to be a bit more complex in a Norwegian context—where we also find heterogeneity and variation in school performance in these groups (Hermansen & Birkelund, 2015) inside schools and between schools (Andersen, 2013; Bakken & Elstad, 2012). On the other hand, case studies show that schools operating in challenging intake environments can turn a challenging context into a scenario of strong school improvement—more or less against the odds (Johansson & Quing, 2012; Okilwa & Barnett, 2017). Based on this understanding, it is possible to draw four school profiles, in which actual school achievement progression on national tests is coupled with the SES intake environment, illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Four school scenarios based on progression and pupil SES

Intake environments	Low SES status	High SES status
Strong progression in test results	**A**: Invisibly high-performing schools	**B**: Visibly high-performing schools
Slow progression in test results	**C**: Visibly low performing schools	**D**: Invisibly low-performing schools

Category C portrays a clearly visible low performing school largely determined by the challenging socioeconomic environment, whereas category B is quite the opposite. Category D is situated in environments characterized by high pupil SES status. Further, achievements in the case of D are good but significantly lower than for B. Thus, this prototype is often normatively described as a school that *should deliver better*. Category A is most commonly described as a high-need well-performing school (Okilwa & Barnett, 2017), with reference to its capacity for achieving strong pupil progression against the odds related to its situation of operating in a demanding socioeconomic intake environment. The school in this case study has been in an improvement cycle from category C towards A.

The case study aims to identify the enabling and constraining factors in schools' efforts to raise the quality of practice, and how these factors interact with leadership strategies and interventions. The empirical basis of the paper is a longitudinal single-case study (Maaløe, 2002) where the researchers investigated leadership interventions and school change strategies over a time span of 18 months. The study is a part of a Norwegian–Swedish research collaboration derived from the International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP)[2], and a case study protocol originally developed for ISSPP was

---

[2] For more information about ISSPP: https://www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/

adapted to fit this explorative study[3]. Data collection encompassed single interviews and group interviews with school leaders during the research period, as well as teacher interviews, observations, pupil interviews, and a pupil survey.

Most studies of leadership practices in schools situated in low SES environments are drawn from Anglo-American contexts, and thus they do not necessarily capture the full picture of how school leaders balance the demands of the authorities in a Nordic democratic leadership context. The opposite is more typically the case, as studies of school principals' leadership orientations in the Nordic cultural context suggest that international models, such as transformational leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000) and instructional leadership (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), do not paint the full picture. For example, in a sample of Norwegian school principals, norms of democratic and distributed leadership were strong additional components in the school leaders' preference structure (Aas & Brandmo, 2016). Thus the current paper aims to contribute to Nordic school leadership research by exploring how school leaders operating in a challenging socioeconomic intake context over time work systemically with schools' internal and external determinants of school improvement. More specifically, we discuss systemic capacity building, leadership interventions, and the growth of an internal culture of inclusive ethos for all pupils' learning and well-being.

Theoretical framework

An integrative and systemic school organization

The relationship between structure and improvement, that is, innovative learning in organizations, is at the heart of developing the school toward a more integrative organization. Generally, the relationship between exploratory learning and organizing structural forms is inherently uncomfortable, a tension rather than a compatibility (March, 1991). No doubt structural form is important for improvement in schools, but the relationship is significant yet not clear-cut because learning and improvement require both change and stability (Marks & Louis, 1999). Impediments for organizational improvements

> … include limited and fragmented structures for coordinating activities within the school and between school and community, low interdependence in teaching roles, and formal decision-making processes that are viewed as unfair or arbitrary by many participants. (Marks & Louis, 1999, p. 713)

---

[3] The ISSPP protocol included three interview guides for principal interviews, interview guides for teacher groups and pupil groups, and suggestions for a principal survey within the school district and a pupil survey at the school level. In the current case study, the principal interview guides were adapted linguistically to fit the Norwegian context. Moreover, some themes that visibly did not match the actual context were omitted. During the interview sessions, the first interview followed the main sequence of the interview guides, whereas in the second and third interviews with the principal the extent of adaptation increased.

While a systemic organization undergirded by organizational routines and formal roles promotes exploitation of knowledge, the same structural elements may also inhibit exploration and risk-taking—elements which are important for innovation (March, 1991). Not surprisingly, schools often must struggle to create structures in which individual participants, teacher groups, and school organizations as a whole can learn (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2014). A Norwegian study of how school leaders harvested learning from external project participation suggested two key elements of an organizational learning capacity: cross-departmental forums set up with the purpose of sharing knowledge in order to make sense of what other schools did to succeed, in combination with the sponsoring of individual members to perform roles as learning facilitators. In the same study, strong group autonomy to adapt learning goals, choosing learning methods, and altering work sequences were shown to be important drivers for effective learning (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2014).

Leadership interventions

It is generally acknowledged that the internal school context plays a mediating role on the relationship between intake context and school results, implying that school results can be indirectly improved by school leadership interventions through their impact on culture and capacity building (Johansson & Quing, 2012). Johansson and Quing (2012) followed this line of argument, and, based on their cross-case analysis of schools operating in disadvantaged environments, they suggested that space and time are also essential for school leaders to succeed in transforming the internal context. By implication, this means that the impact from leadership practices will vary throughout the developmental phases. Leadership intervention is most commonly triggered by a perceived mismatch between externally imposed demands and expectations, on the one hand, and the school's actual performance on the other (Falk, 2003, p. 197). Specifically, in the early phase, the following leadership interventions were found to play a crucial role (Johansson & Quing, 2012):

- Developing a clear educational direction for the school
- Promoting an inclusive ethos so that children from different backgrounds were integrated into one warm and welcoming school culture
- Building vision and raising expectations
- Defeating embedded pessimism
- Distributing leadership
- Establishing clear standards for formative and summative assessments, and through classroom observation evaluating and monitoring teaching
- Enhancing targeted and coherent staff development

Leadership interventions are most commonly the product of purpose and design, and they typically follow a cyclical pattern in the fashion of a spinning wheel. Moreover, effective leadership intervention is not solely the work of a single leader; rather, it is a

distributive leadership project purposefully designed by a band of leaders in order to meet perceived and collectively identified needs (Okilwa & Barnett, 2017). In effect, these cyclical changes are suggested to build collective capacity of members of the school organization to store and retrieve action programs that can be adapted to future situations, which also embraces the need for developing a mutual climate of safety, caring, and trust between school leaders and teachers (Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016).

Trust-based leadership practices

Trust is defined as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395), and the reference point in this study is the school principals' propensity to trust their superintendents. As noted, "Trust is necessary for effective cooperation and communication, the foundations for cohesive and productive relationships in organizations" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 549). Yet leadership interventions also embrace the inherent delicate balance between control and trust in modern organizations (Sørhaug, 1996), where trust also is built by means of openness about when and how control is exerted: "Principals also garner the trust of their faculty by being open in both information and control" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 69). The point is that interpersonal trust is a particular critical condition for people to change and develop within an asymmetric power relationship typically inherent in the line between the teachers and their school principal (Louis, Mayrowetz, Smylie, & Murphy, 2009). Notably, there is also a strong link between interpersonal trust and teachers' sense of empowerment in decision making: "When teachers not only have involvement but also influence over organizational decisions that affect them, the conditions necessary to foster mutual trust between teachers and principals become manifest" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 69).

Distributing leadership

The concept of distributed leadership originally took as its starting point the observation that the complexity of schooling requires decision-making authority to be spread among formal leaders and non-leaders across the school organization. This *leader plus* argument was elaborated by Spillane and colleagues. They empirically captured a range of school principal tasks performed by deputy principals, middle leaders, and teachers close to the classroom settings (Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2009). However, as argued by Leithwood and colleagues, distributed leadership does not reduce the workload of the band of leaders, because this approach

> … does produce greater demand: to coordinate who performs which leadership functions, to build leadership capacities in others, and to monitor the leadership work of those others, providing constructive feedback to them about their efforts. (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 40)

In a Nordic study we found strong link between Finnish teachers' experiences of distributed leadership practices enacted by their principal, and their perception of being trusted in day-to-day pedagogical processes (Paulsen, Hjertø, & Thiveräinen, 2016).

Methods

Case sampling

The sampling of the case school for this study was determined by results from national tests in reading and mathematics. In order to identify the potential progression drivers of a low-performing school, one selection criterion was that the school's performance was poor over the last three years, but was improving on the national tests. Another selection criterion was the employment of the same principal in the three-year period. To understand how the progression drivers and the interaction between the school district and the individual school worked out, the case school was selected from a municipality with a strong emphasis on the use of school performance data to enhance educational progression. At the same time, the research site was selected because it is situated in a local environment with heterogeneity in pupil SES, yet characterized by an overwhelming portion of pupils from immigrant groups and parental low-income categories. The performance profile of the school, in terms of scores on national tests, can be perceived as progressing upwards from a low-performing stance.

Data collection

The ISSPP protocol with its interview guides was the point of departure. Six Norwegian researchers translated and adapted the semi-structured interview guide to the Norwegian setting. All interviews were conducted in locations chosen by informants, lasted approximately one hour, and were audiotaped. The taped interviews were transcribed, and the team of Norwegian researchers collaborated in the analysis of the transcripts aiming to identify emergent themes and characteristics, strategies, and contexts of leadership and management in the selected schools and municipalities. This procedure enabled us to combine inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis (Eisner, 1991). In the first data collection phase, the researchers spent three days at the research site, interviewing the principal, the leadership team, two teacher groups, and two pupil groups. The first phase was followed by two subsequent visits, where second interviews were undertaken, as well as conducting a pupil survey.

Descriptive narrative of the case

Background

The school subjected to the case study is a combined primary and lower-secondary school with 530 pupils and 60 employees. The principal has been in this position for four years, and he has earlier been a middle manager and teacher at the school. All school buildings were constructed about ten years ago. A modern library occupies the middle of the center building and an administrative department, located in a separate wing of the center building, are both characterized by open doors and glass walls and presents a transparent and inviting image for visitors.

The principal described the school's working milieu as good, and this image was confirmed throughout the interviews with teachers and pupils, and by the pupil survey. The principal described the school as fairly attractive among the teachers in the municipalities; this concurred with descriptions from the department leaders and teachers during the interviews. According to the principal, the working milieu of the school is characterized by some noise and conflicts about minor issues, and more discussions and a common focus on important issues such as the pupil environment, learning milieu, values, and organizational issues. The pupils described the learning conditions and classroom ethos in a positive manner. They also described their teachers and the school and pupil environment as positive. Although the school is having difficulties with recruiting parents from immigrant groups to attend parental meetings, other parental groups signaled that education is important. Many individuals conveyed high expectations for the child's career choices, according to the teachers. The main picture, thus, a school characterized by low socioeconomic status and significant cultural heterogeneity.

Intake environments

Along the socioeconomic axis, a large number of pupils have a parental background characterized by upper middle class in terms of education and income. On the other pole of the axis, a significant proportion of parents are typical low scorers on social welfare indicators, for example, income, education, and integration into the labor market. As a result, the municipal child welfare authority intervenes in many family cases. Turning to the ethnic dimension, there is also diversity in terms of several immigrant groups that have entered the area at different points of time. About 40% of the pupils enrolled at the school are multilingual, which in concrete terms means that their parents are immigrants. This reflects an environmental context characterized by a large number of immigrants, of which Turks are the main group. These parental groups are characterized by lower levels of education paired with low scores on social living conditions and weaker integration with the local working life. According to the school principal's assessments, the parents express satisfaction with the school services, but some of them have little experience with educational life and are only infrequently connected to parental collaboration.

The municipality is located in a city with a heterogeneous population; almost 30% of residents reflect an immigrant background. As noted, pupils' SES is most commonly treated as an umbrella concept encompassing parents' income, level of education, labor market integration, and a range of social welfare indicators. On this basis, it is fair to suggest that the school is located in challenging surroundings, categorized as low SES. The results of pupils' national tests indicated minor improvements over the last three years. SES is measured as a factor score computed by the PULS software system. For this school, the SES score is 6, which is significantly lower than the national Norwegian average score of 17.5.

Organizational matrix structure of tight and loose couplings

The formal structure of the school takes the shape of a matrix organization. The principal and department leaders are directly coupled to a department structure and teams of teachers through a hierarchical organization. The hierarchical lines go from the principal to each of the five middle leaders through the principal's leadership group,[4] and from the middle leaders to each of the teacher teams. The middle leaders participate in teacher team meetings, and thus, a strict line structure ensures that the leadership core is in charge of setting agendas for teacher meetings. The line structure also ensures that issues taken up in teacher teams are quickly set on the agenda for leadership group decision-making. This does not necessarily mean a democratic or collegiate structure, yet the point is that line structure is purposefully designed for effective decision-making processes. Several horizontal venues and forums, where all school leaders take part in different ways, offer access to professional discussions. The most systematic horizontal structural elements that involve overlap between functional departments and teams are regular weekly informational meetings on Monday and Friday mornings, and Thursday meetings where school developmental issues are discussed. Another horizontal element is subject groups (e.g., mathematics, language, Norwegian), where teachers meet with subject-area colleagues.

During group interviews, teachers expressed the view that the horizontal subject meetings should have more resources for professional coordination, which apparently is a topic for continuous discussion. While the departmental leaders formally appear as action leaders or doers in the line organization, they also operate as buffers for teachers in difficult cases. Interviews with department leaders revealed that they regularly enter the teachers' domain to deal with difficult pupil cases or special education issues that require more human resources. Thus, there is a flavor of servant leadership practices carried out at the street level of the school organization. This image ran through both leader interviews and teacher interviews.

---

[4] The principal's leadership group consists of the principal himself and five middle leaders. One of them is responsible for adapted teaching and special education, and the other four are department leaders (grades 9–10, grades 7–8; grades 3–6; grades 1–2 and activity school). These middle leaders have full-fledged personnel responsibility and limited budget responsibility within their department.

Tight couplings to the school district level of the municipality

The municipality conveys high expectations for the schools, and also a common vision about creating Norway's best local school system. The school director has a large area of responsibility, assisted by relatively few employees at the school office, and he has relatively few meetings with the principals in addition to the regular "leadership talks". The principals have responsibility for budget matters and pupil performance, and they report on their quality systems and performance targets. To support the principals, the municipality development unit has established a leadership network and a leadership development program. The department leaders have increased responsibility for daily management.

Summary of findings

Core culture of inclusive ethos

Running through interviews with teachers, middle leaders and the principal, several layers of rich data descriptions portray the school's core values, and these clustered and cohered around an inclusive ethos for all pupils' well-being and tailoring learning conditions in order to create a best possible match with the preconditions of the pupils from marginalized families. In concrete terms, the principal argued that the dominant pupil group has a parental background with low SES scores, and therefore the school staff's basic positions and values are of great importance. He expressed his view like this:

> We tend to say that there is one thing that will permeate everything, both in terms of our relationships with pupils and to each other, and that is human values, a positive inclusive ethos for all pupils' learning and well-being. And the basic values that lie in meeting people are that you are OK. We spend a lot of time together at meetings, and at parental meetings. We had a meeting for the parents of the new first graders now. And then we say little about our plans, but we talk a lot about our human mind, what we put into it. Because it is important to us, and we try to penetrate our culture. (Principal, p. 3)

Moreover, according to the descriptive data that emerged from the interviews, the staff emphasized inclusive values and mutually trusting relationships between staff and pupils, among pupils, and between leaders and staff. This image was elaborated through thick descriptions in the interviews with teachers and leaders. The teachers' express how the values are spread:

> T1: My feeling is that we relate a lot to the closest leader. T2: But the principal's door is always open. T3: But the great educational mindset—I think that an overall leadership lays behind. The daily things are taken by the departmental leaders. But I think the principal is behind the big lines. (Group interview 2, teachers, p. 4)

In discussions and in how they meet situations, they express concrete values. In particular, the category of care for the pupil appeared in the interviews, and it was also reflected in

the principal's expectation of the contact teachers (teachers with coordinative responsibilities), expressed as follows:

> In our area, many pupils who need a lot of care, may have mentally ill parents, poor home conditions, little food in the fridge. You need a good contact teacher who actually makes you go to school instead of shunning. Coming to school and having a good relationship, and learning to learn something and want to learn something. (Principal, p. 4)

Their preferred norms and values have strict implications for recruiting teachers and contact teachers. The group interviews of teachers and the department leaders confirmed their work with values when describing the school's ethos and culture:

> The school culture is characterized by the fact that we have a lot of work on human values. We stand for that. The work done on the foundations is good, and it is reflected in the meetings, the actions and all that is. It is a good idea of humanity. (Leadership team, p.1)

Leadership interventions

Leadership interventions running through the case follow a combinative pattern of designed interventions and responses to practices that systematically over time deviate from the school's preferred core culture. Designed interventions are linked to professional development, in-service training, and monitoring of school results.

School-based professional development

All department leaders and teachers work collaboratively with several school development projects, some initiated by the National Directorate of Education and Training, others by the municipality or by the school. The areas of priority are professional standards for good practice (a project commissioned by the municipality), assessment for learning (national initiative from the Directorate), the use of smart boards, and school leader development (both set up by the development unit of the municipality). In addition, the school is a PALS[5] school. The principal explained:

> PALS will contribute to a good learning environment, and there are also standards for how to behave—social competence—for example, it is defined how pupils should behave when they meet. And not all the teachers like it. And there will be discussions. But the most important thing is that the teacher gets a good relationship with the pupil. And then we do not get a discussion about the handshake, but about how to create good relationships with the pupil. (Principal, p. 10)

In the municipality in which the case school is situated, the municipal development unit was created five years ago to support professional development in schools, both by means of adapted courses for teachers and in-service training directly coupled to practical problems. The interviews with the principal and the two group interviews with teachers, both described the cooperation with the municipal development unit as positive, and they described a supportive unit in relation to several types of competence needs at the school.

---

[5] PALS is a model conducted by the National Development Center for Children and Youth. See: http://www.nubu.no/hva-erpals/category1129.html

There is frequent contact between the unit and the school leaders, and the opportunity to establish school-based competency initiatives (such as lectures and information at staff meetings) on a short notice. The unit also calls for resource people at the schools, with the costs largely covered through the unit's own budget. In addition to addressing ad hoc needs at the schools, the unit organizes scheduled courses for teachers and leaders, and it assists the schools with supervisors.

Standard-based pedagogy

In their school development projects, there was a shared perception that there are certain standards of good classroom education that are more effective than others, and that these standards can be de-contextualized and re-contextualized across groups, classes, stages, fields of study, and schools. The elements that were commonly mentioned during interviews with teachers and department leaders are; relational skills, formative assessment, and microteaching, described as a standard for *the good lesson*. The principal described it like this:

> We try to focus on what research implies. Good relationships with our pupils, being close to them. We have an assessment of learning. We have now called it good teaching practice. We have standards on how we want the good lesson to be. We use it. We have used good lecturers who have helped us with that. (Principal, p. 6)

Implementation of standard-based pedagogy through in-service courses and training was described as a municipality-wide initiative, reflecting an ongoing trend as a large part of Norwegian basic education. The diffusion of these impulses from school owners to school takes place through the unit.

Response to deviations

The principal stated that teachers' interpersonal skills in relation to pupils are used consciously as a selection criterion for the choice of contact teachers:

> Being a contact teacher at … school, you really deserve it. If you can use that expression then. You do not put anyone to be a contact teacher. We also have cases where I have to say: 'You are not suitable for being a contact teacher now, we must work with this. We will see your relationships with the pupils.' If they are not good enough, they choose to finish. They find new schools. Gradually. When it's ok, I can accept that there will be some vacancy at the end of the year. Then we find new people. That's the way it is. (Principal, p. 4–5)

The principal uses his formal authority to replace class teachers who do not have the necessary relational skills.

Local accountability

The municipality and the school leaders may follow the school's national test results at the 5th, 8th, and 9th grades and further how their former pupils succeed when they enter upper-secondary schools (almost all Norwegian pupils enter upper-secondary schooling when they have finished grade 10 at 16 years of age). The dropout rate of pupils from this

case school is approximately 40%. Moreover, school leaders have analyzed the results at different levels in the organization and found that the school has low results for the 5th grade. At the lower-secondary level, they had sealed the gap, and they reached the national and municipal level.

> If I start with our 5th grade, we are below the national average of all three national tests. I have not been worried because development is so good, so when we get up to the youth stage, we are at or above the national average, largely. And we reach our target area, with a good result. (Principal, p. 5)

The principal described the active use of school results in the follow-up of department leaders and teachers. The individual department leader conducts four to five result talks a year. These are about analysis and interpretation of performance indicators: results of national tests, results from the pupil survey, and feedback from teachers provided in employee interviews. Everything is centered on how the individual department leader follows up his teachers. Furthermore, the principal participates at team meetings held by the department leaders, but in these cases, the principal is a listener. Each department leader discusses the results in his team and with the teachers one by one:

> I attend their step meetings when they have it. They do almost the same with their teachers through the conversation: What do you do with the pupil survey, results on national tests and so forth? And other mapping tests we have. But then I'm sitting and just listening. There will be some sort of follow-up of department leaders. And then through operational meetings and management meetings we follow up each other. (Principal, p. 13)

The principal and department leaders also practice modern management concepts like *pedagogical walk* in the classes. The interviews of the principal and of the teachers' group were quite convergent, and positive, saying that the school has developed a culture over time that it is legitimate for formal leaders to enter the classroom unannounced and observe what is happening. It has become part of the daily practice and appears to be well accepted:

> T3: When the principal visit our classroom, you got positive feedback afterwards. You do not get the feeling that he is there to control us. (Group interview 1, teachers, p. 11)

The teachers in our interviews gave the principal positive recognition for this outreach work, but at the same time, they realized that the complexity involved in the teacher's work means that the principal does not get a real view of the classroom's work.

Academic orientation in recruitment

The school leaders emphasized teachers' subject knowledge when recruiting both in primary and lower-secondary schools. This thinking is also reflected in the organizational principles of the school, by the fact that some teachers specialize in their core subjects and teach the same core subjects in several classes at the same level and in some cases in several grades. On the direct question of whether "the school tends to use subject teachers

instead of general teachers in core subjects in primary school," (Researcher, p. 18), the principal answered:

> Yes, at least if you look at the basic subjects. If there are two parallels, then we put together the basic-subjects teachers in pairs: one that manages different subjects in the class and one that manages mathematics. And then they teach across the classes. And we have had an English teacher who teaches across grades and classes in English. It has been good. There has been a change that has been right and important to us…. Some find it difficult to teach in different grades, and there is more work with it. (Principal, p. 18)

The department leaders decide membership in teachers' teams. They connect the teacher's competence, subjects in classes, and subjects in different grades. In addition, they try to match the needs of competence in the individual subject and the individual class with the teachers' individual preferences, needs and work situation.

Discussion

Above all, the case study suggests a negative impact from low SES scores to be mediated by school leadership and school development. The main argument is that leadership interventions designed and activated for the purpose of building and maintaining internal cultures of strong inclusive ethos, paired with collaborative norms, influence actual behaviors and enable the school to transform its performance cycle in a positive direction. The case study suggests, by means of rich descriptive data, that the pathway from low performing toward an improving status is also intimately linked to leadership practices directed toward building a more integrative organizational design in the form of a matrix. Caring leadership from the middle level, most typically linked to problematic situations in the classroom, emerges as an important component of school leadership in action in the current setting.

Soft and hard school leadership in action

The descriptive data points to the existence of a two-level system of monitoring the results and top-down external control: from the school district (municipal) level exerted by the superintendent toward the principal, and from the principal toward teacher groupings yet mediated by the middle leaders. From the municipal school owner level, external control linked to monitoring of school outcomes takes the form of result meetings between the superintendent and the principal. These result meetings follow a template with a focus on national test achievements. In turn, analysis of results and inferences for practice drawn from the analysis are put on the agenda in the principal's leadership team. From this decision-making process, the middle leaders translate the messages to their own department, in order to make sense of challenges and to develop sensible action strategies. Although the data is silent about the process through which middle leaders further take on school outcome issues in their own department, and in the teacher teams, it must be counted for a range of adaptation repertoires. A collaborative structure, where significant images of

mutual trust go through the descriptive data, coexists with school outcome issues. It supports the notion that interpersonal trust and external control will typically coexist in the same school (Paulsen & Høyer, 2016), where first-order leaders, that is, department leaders, perform important roles as translators of initiatives, which also encompasses helping and serving leadership practices. There is also a visible trust-based component in the leadership repertoires enacted in practice.

A central part of school strategy and purposeful leadership intervention is strengthening professional commitment to pupils from disadvantageous families—most visible in different areas of in-service training toward the pupil learning environment. In a similar vein, when middle leaders serve as buffering agents, they practice a serving repertoire in terms of taking over difficult tasks (pupil or parental cases) in order to reduce the workload for the teachers, and also to prevent the teachers' possible withdrawal from problematic clients (Lipsky, 1980). This pattern emphasizes that school leaders in this segment must master different discourses— both external control and helping teachers to make sense and master a challenging work context through caring practices and a range of developmental actions (Andersen, 2013; Johansson & Quing, 2012).

Distributed leadership under central watch

Distributed or shared leadership seems to be another leadership strategy in the current case. The leadership design shows the school to be a fairly integrative school in its structural terms, and the analysis suggests that this holistic way of designing a school's structure work was an enabling condition for improvement. The school has several areas for teacher collaboration. Several initiatives in regard to time and space, and different initiatives, projects, and in-service training have been undertaken for developing teachers and pupils' learning. According to the teacher group interviews, they try to reduce their workload through collective discussions and shared commitment. The teachers are engaged in decision making in order to develop special meetings for discussing their subject matter, subject teaching, and learning. The teachers want to develop their subject meetings with more time and resources, to areas where they are able to see, *what is in it for me, my teaching, and my pupils*. Although all the teams have the same responsibility, the teachers in each team organize their teamwork and lead it with certain degrees of autonomy. We may see this as an example of a distributed decision-making practice and empowerment of teachers. In this manner, there is a potential to enable the staff to develop both their skills and their professional learning (Marks & Louis, 1999).

However, distribution of leadership follows a formal line structure of authority, and thus it does not necessarily imply a consistent democratic style. Yet the case narrative shows strong mobilization of professional commitment around learning and training, paired with inclusive norms; yet formal authority and power instruments are employed in cases where teachers do not meet the standards of inclusive ethos in practice. In this case, there is a coexistence of interpersonal trust, professional commitment, and the use of hierarchical power (Sørhaug, 1996).

Leadership interventions

Leadership interventions running through this single case are mostly designed, purposeful, cyclical, and not least, anchored in a systemic structure that enables the school principal to utilize his formal authority. Leadership intervention are furthermore embedded in a core culture emphasizing inclusive ethos, and the principal describes a strong propensity to use his formal power to hire and fire teachers in cases of deviations from normative behavior. The latter is consonant with research on (successful) school leadership in challenging circumstances (Johansson & Quing, 2012), and the current case study confirms that establishing an inclusive ethos—so that all children, independent of their parental background and ethnic grouping, are integrated into one welcoming and supporting school culture—emerges as a strong property of the internal school context. This underscores the moral basis for a school principal's leadership in a more general perspective—as a component of trust-based school leadership in the Nordic context, as suggested by a recent study from the Finnish context (Paulsen et al., 2016).

References

Aas, M., & Brandmo, C. (2016). Revisiting instructional and transformational leadership. The contemporary Norwegian context of school leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration, 54*(1), 92–110. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-08-2014-0105

Andersen, F. C. (2013). Leadership in a linguistically and ethnically diverse upper secondary school – Responding to challenges. *Nordic Studies of Education*, *33*(1), 31–49.

Bakken, A., & Elstad, J. I. (2012). *Store forventinger - Kunnskapsløfte og forskjeller i grunnskolekarakterer* (NOVA-Rapport 7/2012). Oslo: NOVA. https://doi.org/10.7577/nova/rapporter/2012/7

Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Falk, I. (2003). Designing effective leadership interventions: a case study of vocational education and training. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 24*(4), 193–203. https://doi.org/10.1108/01437730310478066

Hermansen, A. S., & Birkelund, G. E. (2015). The Impact of Immigrant Classmates on Educational Outcomes. *Social Forces*, *94*(2), 615–646. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sov073

Johansson, O., & Quing, G. (2012). Sustaining school performance: school contexts matter. *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice, 16*(3), 301–326. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2012.732242

Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organisational conditions and student engagement. *Journal of Educational Administration, 38*(2), 112–132. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230010320064

Leithwood, K., & Louis, K. S. (2012). *Linking Leadership to Student Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Leithwood, K., Mascall, R., Strauss, T., Sacks, R., Memon, N., & Yaskina, G. (2006). Distributing leadership to make schools smarter: Taking the ego out of the system. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 6*(1), 37–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700760601091267

Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-Level Bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage.

Louis, K. S., Mayrowetz, D., Smylie, M., & Murphy, J. (2009). The Role of Sensemaking and Trust in Developing Distributed Leadership. In A. Harris (Ed.), *Distributed Leadership* (pp. 157–180). Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9737-9_9

Louis, K. S., Murphy, J., & Smylie, M. (2016). Caring Leadership in Schools: Findings From Exploratory Analyses. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 52*(2), 310–348. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X15627678

Maaløe, E. (2002). *Casestudier af og om mennesker i organisationer*. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag AS.

March, J. G. (1991). Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization Science, 2*(1), 71–87. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2.1.71

Marks, H. M., & Louis, K. S. (1999). Teacher Empowerment and the Capacity for Organizational Learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly, Vol 35*(Supplemental), 707–750. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X99355003

Okilwa, N., & Barnett, B. (2017). Sustaining school improvement in a high-need school. Longitudinal analysis of Robbins Elementary School (USA) from 1993 to 2015. *Journal of Educational Administration, 55*(3), 297–315. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-03-2016-0034

Paulsen, J. M., & Hjertø, K. B. (2014). Exploring individual-level and group-level levers for inter-organizational knowledge transfer. *The Learning Organization, 21*(4), 274–287. https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-09-2013-0044

Paulsen, J. M., Hjertø, K. B., & Thiveräinen, S. (2016). Exploring the Moral and Distributive Levers for Teacher Empowerment in the Finnish Policy Culture. *International Journal of Educational Management, 30*(6), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-02-2015-0015

Paulsen, J. M., & Høyer, H. C. (2016). External Control and Professional Trust in Norwegian School Governing: Synthesis from a Nordic Research Project. *Nordic Studies in Education, 36*(2), 86–102. https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1891-5949-2016-02-02

Robinson, V. M. J., Lloyd, C., & Rowe, K. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 44*(5), 635–674. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08321509

Rousseau, D. M., Sitkin, S. B., Burt, R. S., & Camerer, C. (1998). Not so different after all: A cross-discipline view of trust. *Academy of Management Review, 23*, 393–404. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1998.926617

Spillane, J. P., Camburn, E. M., & Pareja, A. S. (2009). School Principals at Work: A Distributed Perspective. In K. Leithwood, B. Mascall, & T. Strauss (Eds.), *Distributed Leadership According to the Evidence*. New York: Routledge.

Sørhaug, T. (1996). *Om ledelse. Makt og tillit i moderne organisering*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Tschannen-Moran, M., & Gareis, C. R. (2015). Faculty trust in the principal: an essential ingredient in high-performing schools. *Journal of Educational Administration, 53*(1), 66–92. https://doi.org/10.2307/1170781

Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, W. K. (2000). A Multidisciplinary Analysis of the Nature, Meaning, and Measurement of Trust. *Review of Educational Research, 70*(4), 547–593. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X03253411

Witziers, B., Bosker, R. J., & Krüger, M. L. (2003). Educational Leadership and Student Achievements: The Elusive Search for an Association. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 39*(3), 398–425. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X03253411