

Lejf Moos *Editor*

# Transnational Influences on Values and Practices in Nordic Educational Leadership

Is there a Nordic Model?

Studies in Educational Leadership 19

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# STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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VOLUME 19

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 Springer

*Editor*  
Lejf Moos  
Department of Education  
Aarhus University  
Copenhagen, Denmark

ISBN 978-94-007-6225-1                      ISBN 978-94-007-6226-8 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6226-8  
Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013934356

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Printed on acid-free paper

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# Forewords

## John MacBeath: Questions of Culture and Context

There is something unique about Nordic countries that inadequate description for a group of nations each with their own distinctive cultures and histories but nonetheless conjoined by common values and a shared 'Weltanschauung'. Is there something in the air in these northern states that creates their unique perspective on social and intellectual life? What accounts for their stubborn resistant to the blandishments of politicians and the seductions of statistics? As Pasi Sahlberg has written in his book *Finnish Lessons*, Finland's high-performing education system is owed to adopting policies counter to those of most Western education systems – standardisation and prescription, transfer of models of administration from the corporate world, high-stakes accountability policies – control and punitive inspection. He writes:

As Finnish teachers were exploring the theoretical foundations of knowledge and learning and redesigning their school curricula to be congruent with them, their peers in England, Germany, France and the United States struggled with increased school inspection, controversial externally-imposed learning standards, and competition that disturbed some teachers to the point that they decided to leave their jobs. (p.5)

Resistance and compromise in this brave new world of indicators and league tables will determine the extent to which Nordic countries can retain their position in areas where they have traditionally scored highly, such as on quality of life and child well-being, and in Geert Hofstede's international rankings of 'power distance' and 'tolerance of ambiguity'. These social measures are reflected in the cultures, leadership and ethos of Nordic schools which have traditionally held their privileged place as the most democratic and inclusive of educational systems. 'Power distance' and 'tolerance of ambiguity' are defined respectively as:

The extent to which members of the organizations accept and expect the equal or unequal distribution of power. Cultures that endorse low power distance expect and accept power relations that are more consultative or democratic. People relate to one another more as equals regardless of formal positions and contribute to and critique the decision making of those in power. In high power distance countries, the less powerful accept power

autocratic and paternalistic relationships, ceding to the power of others based on their formal, hierarchical positions

Tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity refers to the ability to accept and feel comfortable in unstructured situations or changeable environments and to have as few rules as possible. These are in contrast with organizational cultures and leadership which proceed with careful changes step by step by planning, by implementing rules, laws and regulations.

A textual analysis of the chapters in this volume juxtaposes two vocabularies, one of enduring values and the other of impatient prescription. On the one hand, we read of ‘culture’ and ‘context’ and on the other of ‘consumerism’ and ‘control’. ‘Power’ competes with ‘voice’, ‘participation’ with ‘prescription’ and dirigiste decision-making with deliberative democracies.

These are some of the tensions revealed in these chapters as we travel virtually across these northern landscapes. Once there was trust and now there is accountability. Once there was dialogue, now there is a politicised discourse. It confronts us with dilemmas. Is there a happy resolution to be found in the marriage of internal and external accountability? What underlies the plea for professional autonomy? Does it address the inherent tensions between individual freedom and collective responsibility? What do we understand by the ‘trust’, a recurring leitmotif in these chapters? Has there been too much trust, failing to address the autonomy teachers once enjoyed behind the closed doors of their classrooms, their own protected domains?

In response to the global imperatives and the recognition that complacency and self-satisfaction are the enemies within, these chapters reveal the extent to which different countries within the northern alliance are adopting greater centralisation, monitoring and sanctions for noncompliance. Power distance and power distribution are emerging in new forms. There are perceptible and distinctive shifts in quality assurance from bottom-up to top-down, differing attempts to address the balance between central and local authority.

In summing up, Lejf Moos poses the question: ‘are the transactional influences homogenising educational politics and practices, or are traditional values, cultures and discourses persistent?’ It is a rhetorical question, one that finds complex and nuanced answers in a close reading of these country and cross-country reports. A careful reader will emerge with an enhanced understanding of what unites these countries of the north but also less prone to stereotypes and easy generalisations about ‘Nordic countries’.

Professor Emeritus, Cambridge University, England

John MacBeath

## **Peter Mortimore: Nordic Leadership: Something Worth Keeping**

In 2012 I visited an exhibition of new Nordic architecture at the beautiful Louisiana Museum outside Copenhagen. Though its subject was not education, the question it asked was similar to that of this book: has globalisation superimposed an



international mode, is there still a Nordic model underpinning the different national styles?

The answer was left to the visitor to decide on the basis of the exhibitions' plans, models, installations, pictures and films. What, for example, could be the possible connections between a community centre in Greenland, a preschool in Sweden, a primary school in Finland or a hotel – suspended above a hill – in Norway?

I observed a striking contrast of form and design, but could I also detect some common themes: the awareness of light, a sensitivity to weather conditions, bright colours, use of natural materials and the sense of a need for public participation – perhaps best evoked by Jan Gehl's panorama of everyday life in the space between the buildings of a modern city?

The five education case studies and the six thematic chapters in this book are the equivalent of the models and installations. The reader has to review the evidence and decide whether there is a common Nordic model underpinning the different education systems and, particularly, in their approach to school leadership.

As a participant in two of the three annual NordNet residential meetings – and a frequent visitor to Nordic countries – my view is unambiguous. Despite the different landscapes, histories, cultures, languages, education systems and even politics – so clearly demonstrated in the case studies – I still find common foundations: openness and contestability, the search for equity, the protection of the years of childhood, trust of teachers, local control – through ownership of schools – and a patient search for quality. I think I can discern the idea of 'a school for all' in the culture of Nordic countries – though the experiments in more market-based philosophy are having a negative effect, as a recently published article demonstrates (Sundberg and Wahlstrom 2012).

As the introduction to the book notes, these values are under threat. According to the Finnish case study – even in the Nordic country judged by PISA to be its most successful system – 'education has increasingly come to be considered a private good, rather than a public good'.

The ideas that make up 'new public management' with its focus on financial reward as the sole motivating factor and its denigration of teachers as 'knaves not knights' (Le Grand 2003) are taking their toll and damaging public confidence in education systems. The allure of the market – with its promise of choice and personalisation – will be strong until, when the damage has been done, reality reveals its flaws. The growth of private schools and the challenge to inclusion are difficult policies to resist – as the Iceland case study reports.

I am not a fan of the 'Ghengis Khan School of tough educational leadership'. Like most of us, I can be impressed with obvious charisma but find it quickly loses its attractions if it is accompanied by arrogance or the failure to delegate. I prefer consensus builders 'first among equals' according to the Norwegian case study: those who can judge when a decision needs to be shared by all the staff, the whole community (including, at times, the students) and when it is imperative that it is taken, from the front, by the leader.

The school leaders I have observed in Nordic countries are more likely to be those who share and delegate (sometimes, perhaps, too frequently) rather than the

'heroic' strong leaders so favoured in UK and US schools. As the Danish case study argues – 'there is an understanding that the principal or leader cannot be sufficiently informed to make all decisions in a school'. This implies that there has to be a sound balance between the professionalism of the school leader and that of the class teacher. An issue not always easily resolved, as discussion of the theme on professionalisation reminds us – 'the leadership type, tasks and role resulting from this (re)professionalisation may conflict with the teacher ideal increasingly promoted by teacher education in the Nordic countries since the 1970s'.

An open – distributed – style of leadership is worth fighting for. It is a model not only for schools in Nordic countries but for those working in other professions everywhere. As our world changes, and technology plays a bigger part in everyday lives, it is imperative that we retain the positive qualities that make up our humanity. Leadership needs to be thoughtful – but not selfish. It should pull communities together rather than divides them. It appears to work best in the Nordic countries. Hopefully, it will have an increasingly important role to play in the future.

Readers – read this book and decide: is the Nordic model just for architecture, crime thrillers and restaurants, or do you believe it should continue to underpin your different education systems?

Professor Emeritus, Richmond, England

Peter Mortimore

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## Jim Spillane: School Leadership Research Context and the Context of School Leadership

School leadership is a growth industry. Indeed, organisational leadership in general is an industry on the rise. Books on the subject, albeit only a chosen few from those published, appear to have a ready market among education scholars, practitioners, policymakers and sometimes even the lay public. Moreover, the sway that the ideas put forth hold among consumers is often a better predictor of market share than the soundness of scholarship. In the education sector, work in Canada, the USA and other English-speaking countries (e.g. UK and Australia) appears to have cornered a very large share of the market on school leadership. (Though it is tempting to think of approaches to education and its improvement in these countries as roughly similar, that would be a mistake; even the USA and UK show tremendous differences). While there are several potential explanations for this large market

share, all of which are beyond the scope of this foreword, the monopoly does illuminate a concerning puzzle for empirical research on school leadership: considering the diversity in the designs and origins of ‘education systems’, research and policy initiatives (sometimes, though often not, derived from research) frequently treat national sociopolitical systems and geopolitical regions as incidental or, at best, simply settings.

The book sets out to examine how the nation state and geopolitical regions are an important context for understanding school leadership. Using cases from the five Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – the authors explore national education discourse as it relates to school leadership. The country cases are coupled with cross-case analyses conducted by identifying key themes such as ‘leadership for democracy’ and ‘quality control’. Interpreting the work carefully, one finds evidence for extending this argument: the sociopolitical circumstances of the nation state serve not just as the context or stage in which school leadership happens but also as the raw materials (e.g. institutional logics) that constitute and are constitutive of everyday leadership practice in schools.

One way to see this volume is as an effort at pressing the ‘pause button’ on emergent transnational trends and scholarship on education leadership; calling for a ‘time out’ so that we might ponder the current monopoly on education leadership and its consequences for developing a sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon, we easily and effortlessly refer to as school leadership. Should this volume succeed in creating a pause or time out for scholars, policymakers and developers in our field to reflect and reconsider, it will have done a service to the field.

Reading the manuscript, I began to contemplate three issues, not explicitly discussed at length, if at all, in the manuscript but prompted by my own reading. (The value of reading a manuscript for me is often not in the answers I find but in the questions prompted by the manuscript). First, and as addressed in the manuscript, the book can be read as a cautionary tale for those who work in the field of education leadership – researchers, practitioners, policymakers, developers and especially transnational agencies. The caution is simple but significant: to be savvy consumers of research and reform proposals, we must pay particular attention to the national origins of such work. This caution should *not* be construed as simplistic protectionism or naïve nationalism, because it is not. Instead, it is an effort to point out that schools are situated in education systems, and more broadly sociopolitical systems, that differ radically across nations, regions and continents. Most importantly, as I have suggested above, the situation is not simply a context or a stage – it is constitutive of and constituted in practice – be that school leadership or classroom practice. Our field could benefit greatly by not only heeding this caution but also seriously grappling with how to systematically examine the ways in which sociopolitical and institutional settings define and are defined by everyday practice in schools. Simply describing national contexts does not meet that challenge. As I have argued elsewhere, serious empirical investigations of school leadership must attend to the ‘ménage-a-trois’ of which school leadership is the only one partner, in addition to the sociopolitical system (institutional sector) and classroom teaching – the core technology of schooling (Spillane and Mertz in press).

Second, reading the book, I began to reflect on research designs for cross-national comparative work on school leadership that would generate not only robust empirical findings but also practical and useful research findings. By the very act of writing the manuscript, the authors clearly believe that such work is critical to our field. I agree! The focus on the six Nordic countries makes a case for such work. By extension, I am prompted to think about nested designs for comparative cross-national work on school leadership and education more generally. A key challenge in comparative work is careful selection of purposeful cases – nation states where the education systems are known to differ on two or three dimensions that have been carefully theorised to influence the phenomenon of study. Comparative work on school leadership might also sample countries by considering ‘groupings’ of countries (e.g. ‘Nordic countries’, ‘former British colonies’, ‘federal systems’, ‘parliamentary systems’ and so on) and sampling both within and across each subgroup. Of course, this sampling will ultimately depend on the research question. Nested multilevel comparative study designs may prove especially fruitful for scholarship on school leadership.

Third, transnational movements and globalisation more broadly are most likely here to stay. Ideas travel and tend to travel from particular countries and regions of the world to others, though that is apt to change over time if history is any gauge. Regardless of whether we attribute the spread, vitality and ultimate stick of ideas about school leadership (e.g. research findings, policy initiatives, reform proposals) to technology, market forces, efforts of transnational organisations (e.g. OECD, EEC, UN) or something else, I am of the mind we should embrace, or at least acknowledge, this globalisation phenomenon though with the critical eye of a scholar. Moreover, I think the broad diffusion and mingling of ideas from different regions of the world is likely to be beneficial in the long run. Rather than fighting or challenging the transnational networking of ideas and information, we may be better off thinking about how to become more critical consumers of ‘foreign’ research and policy ideas as scholars, policymakers and practitioners (Spillane and Kenney 2012; Spillane and Mertz in press). This is no simple task, but is an important one.

A key challenge in such efforts will involve defining constructs and conceptual frameworks and carefully operationalising these to allow for systematic application across countries in studying school leadership and related phenomena. For example, constructs such as organisational legitimacy and organisational integrity, prominent in scholarship on organisations and new institutionalism, are likely to ‘hold water’ in empirical studies of school leadership that cut across education systems and nation states (Spillane and Kenney 2012). Such a framework will enable the exploration of leadership across countries in that it systematically engages the broader sociopolitical systems in which schools are nest and on which they depend for resources, not simply as context or stage for leadership practice. Critics of transnational and globalised school leadership would do well to see opportunity in these trends. These trends provide opportunities for empirical research, allowing for investigations of how ‘foreign’ ideas, sometimes advanced by transnational organisations (e.g. OECD), get translated and enacted in new terrains. It provides us with an opportunity to explore how ideas as policy instruments (Weiss 1990) travel,

and manage to colonise or not, everyday practice in new education systems. This is an opportunity to understand a familiar phenomenon anew, and that is surely the essence of our efforts as social scientists.

Professor at Northwest University, Chicago, USA

Jim Spillane

## **Philip A. Woods: Nordic Culture as a Resource for Adaptive Response**

One of the things that strikes me about this volume is that its scholarship is informed by a long historical focus, not just back into the nineteenth century but beyond. It is clear that to understand the Nordic countries and their interconnections, and the development of education within this context, the impact of relationships long ago, such as the union of the countries from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, has to be acknowledged. Such historical awareness is largely absent from the dominant discourse and research paradigm on educational leadership and policy in countries like England and the USA. The overriding concern there is the production of propositional knowledge and rationales to justify innovation ‘unburdened’ by the past. Paradoxically, some policies in England during the reforming era since the 1980s have appealed to images of an idyllic past and sought to recreate these in new form. Nonetheless, to understand the cultures we are part of, a critical and reflective awareness of the depth of those cultures in centuries of development is necessary. To have a real feel for contemporary modernity in England, for example, we need to appreciate the revolutionary nature of change that founded the modern form of the country in the seventeenth century and that also went on to have global effects. The latest phase of those global effects is the international policy trends to marketisation, performative culture and managerialism which this book addresses. In that seminal period in England in the late seventeenth century, a vision of society that valued trade, markets, labour power and enterprise – rather than land and territorial bonds – came to have prominence; important to note too is that that period also brought about a decisive shift towards legitimising dissent and the idea that tyrannical leaders could be resisted (Pincus 2009). Democracy and social freedom are integral – if challenged and imperfect – parts of the liberal economic philosophy, which are the roots of contemporary international trends in educational policy affecting the Nordic countries.

It should be expected, therefore, that modernity in the form of the advance of markets and performative culture meets, or even encourages in some ways, resistances and creative alternative responses of various sorts (Woods 2011). This book examines in detail what is happening at the confluence of these international trends and the responses of Nordic countries. The insights gained are hugely important for both scholarly understanding and informing policy and leadership practice since the threats to the depth and fullness of education from marketisation, performative culture and managerialism are of international concern.

What we see in the Nordic countries are cross-currents affecting schools and their leadership. There are new modes of accountability, greater expectations regarding outcomes and examples of shifts to more hierarchical and centralised controls, but also generally a lack of ‘high stakes’ attached to accountability measures and the persistence of room and respect for professional interpretation. School leaders being caught in cross-pressures and involved in counter-influences to marketisation and narrow performance priorities were a notable feature of the early reforms in England (Woods et al. 1998: 178–179) and still continue to be a feature as the reforms have been extended (Woods 2011). A danger, however, is what Ball (2008) calls the ‘ratchet’ effect, whereby gradual and small policy changes over time bring about a fundamental alteration of the nature of the education system, embedding market and performative values, practices and identities. To the extent that this is the case, room for manoeuvre and interpretation diminishes. Arguably, however, at the same time, there are counter trends: the problems and limitations of micromanagement through managerialism lead to recognition that more trust is needed in professionals and others on the ground, and the policy emphasis on forging a more entrepreneurial culture in public services like education creates more spaces for local change and the development or renewal of democratic practices (Woods 2013).

One of the consequences of the changes taking place which this book highlights is the uncertainty that is created. The future shape of things cannot be taken for granted. The point that equally needs to be grasped is that the Nordic countries have a distinctive resource from their histories and cultures as they engage with marketing and performative trends. It is the depth of this resource that the contributions to the book highlight, as well as the uncertainties and dangers. That resource includes, for example, as Moos, Hansen, Björk and Johansson put it in the Chap. 8, ‘Leadership for Democracy’, the ‘inherited values’ of participatory and deliberative democracy with a strong focus on equity and the belief that leaders should not control but should influence teachers so they have room for interpretation. The historical and cultural resource of the Nordic countries is invaluable for the conscious development of ‘adaptive strategies’ – that is, strategies which acknowledge the coexistence of instrumental and values-based logics, including the tensions between them, and create possibilities for superordinate values to be achieved and prioritised wherever possible (Woods 2011). An example of such a strategy is school leaders using national plans ‘for our own purposes’ that affirm their inherited values (the same chapter).

Moos, Johansson and Skedsmo (Chap. 10: ‘Successful Nordic School Leadership’) suggest that ‘school leaders in looser accountability systems’, like the Nordic countries, are characterised by reciprocal rather than hierarchical influences and are ‘more inclined to exercise indirect and consciousness controlling forms of power – “selling” – leaving room for negotiations with staff’. A crucial issue is the nature of these reciprocal and negotiating relationships. If their nature is a form of soft but strong socialising power that in subtle ways refashions educators’ identities as ‘enterprising selves’ imbued with the values of markets and performativity, it is still hierarchical control but in a guise that works best in the Nordic culture. On the other hand, if their nature is genuinely democratic, informed by a holistic philosophy of education and an awareness of the need to examine the effects and possibilities of

international marketising and performative trends, these leadership relationships have the possibility of sustaining and renewing the values of democracy and social justice. Achieving the latter requires a commitment to shared critical reflection in the practice and development of leadership, so that action is grounded in dialogue and critique, sober and theoretically informed analysis, a feel for history and an openness to inspiration for the greater good that motivates and sustains progressive change.

Professor at the University of Hertfordshire, UK

Philip A. Woods

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