CHAPTER 6

SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPALSHIP – THE SWEDISH CASE

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Abstract:  

Purpose: In this article we present the general situation in the Swedish compulsory school system and explore hypothesis about the relationship between structure, culture and leadership as preconditions for successful principalship. We outline, on the basis of earlier research, arguments that a successful principalship depend on how principals act on structure and culture with a purpose to contribute to changes that should lead to successful schools. A successful school is defined in Swedish law and policy documents as a school that show high performance both in academic and social goals

Methodology: Four different schools were chosen as successful schools. All schools have increased their academic results the last four years. If the social goals are reached, will be an empirical question in our analysis. The principals have been working in the schools for at least four years and are perceived by our informants as being successful principals

Findings: The findings support our hypothesis that successful principals contribute to the success in reaching academic and social goals of their schools by their strategic work with changes of structure and culture. The principals act on structure and culture with a clear link to the opinions and culture in the school district. We find that a school can be viewed as successful of parents, students and teachers even if the social goals are not fulfilled. In conclusion, to be able to understand and work with the culture and structure of the school district, is vital for successful principalship

INTRODUCTION – THE SWEDISH EDUCATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

Historically education has been highly centralized in Sweden. Until the middle of the 1980s the allocation of resources for each school was decided by the State Regional Boards of Education and principals throughout the country where appointed by the National Board of Education. Educational policy in recent years has been dominated by an active reforming process. The structure of responsibility and management has been altered.

The present School Act was established in 1985 by the Riksdag. It introduced decentralisation of power from the state to municipalities. However, there remains
a national curriculum, one that has been in place since 1994 with accompanying course outlines, timetables and grading system (Proposition 1992/93, p. 220).

All children between the ages of 7 and 16 are both entitled and obliged to undergo education within the public sector school system, or at an independent school approved for compulsory schooling. Children in need of special support may go to special resource schools.

Education in Sweden has the dual task of embracing both the traditional knowledge mandate and a democratic ‘citizenship’ mandate. The School Act states that: “All activity in schools shall proceed in accordance with fundamental democratic values”. The state also guarantees that international declarations and agreements in the field of education are applied in the school sector.

Since 1991 the municipality is the main authority responsible for primary and secondary education in Sweden. Municipalities act as an employer to school staff, and are responsible for teacher in-service education. Therefore today’s compulsory schools can be organised in various ways but has to have a principal in charge and follow the national curriculum.

WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL?

The point of departure for analysis of the four case studies of successful principals discussed in this chapter is the conflict between the demand for clearer structure and a better use of resources and the need for basic cultural changes regarding school development and school improvement in the learning of both social and academic goals. We focus on the relationship between structure, culture, leadership and authentic learning for adults and children in the schools of our four successful principals. The informants for our study are principals who are viewed as successful.

The first question to confront is: what is a successful school? The output from school as an organization needs a focus on if and what students learn, but it’s not enough to think of learning as purely academic learning. Schools in Sweden also have to fulfill a civic mission, or what we call “social goals” for schools.

A way to start a discussion about how to define successful schools, is to argue that schools are positioned differently in relation to the two main goals of schooling most school systems try to achieve (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 above can be analysed from different ideological angles. In cell A of Figure 6.1 are schools that successfully combine both social goals and academic knowledge, is the only type that describes a successful school. These goals can only be fulfilled in schools that take the full responsibility for ensuring that pupils acquire and develop the knowledge that is necessary for each individual and member of a democratic society. This is the school enshrined in Swedish law and policy documents.

Others would prefer cell C schools arguing that the basic mission of schools is about learning academic knowledge and that schools should strive to achieve excellence in such learning only. In Sweden this view is quite widespread in spite of official policy. Yet again would argue that real success occurs when a school in