CHAPTER 7

COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES AMONG SUCCESSFUL DANISH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Abstract: This chapter aims at conceptualizing and investigating the meaning of successful school principalship within the context of Danish comprehensive schools. It presents findings from case studies of eight Danish schools with more detailed analysis from two schools. We outline the educational context for the Danish schools and give a short account of our point of departure for the analysis. Our perspective in this study is that leadership is about communication, decision making and community building at several levels in schools. At the beginning of the project we conducted a series of interviews with stakeholders in the schools. Later on we observed and interviewed a number of key stakeholders in the schools and that is the basis for our case studies. Our findings show that although there is a high degree of consensus amongst the schools and their stakeholders, there are also different points of view. Patterns of successful leadership communication are described.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTEXT: DANISH EDUCATIONAL CULTURE IN TRANSITION

The 20th century Danish comprehensive school evolved out of the development of the Danish welfare state (a largely Social-Democratic project) and a consensus-building dialogue across political parties. The school was looked upon as a vehicle for promoting equal opportunities and as a place for acquiring knowledge, skills, and values to prepare students for life in a broader sense. That was done with reference to the concept of “Bildung”, traditional, egalitarian and nation-building school ideas and inclusive welfare thinking.

Since the beginning of the 90s, however, the Danish comprehensive educational system has been undergoing a process of thorough transformation under the influence of strong international currents: neo-liberal currents have linked...
educational thinking very closely to the economy and to neo-conservative trends of back-to-basics, more subject-oriented teaching, re-introduction of testing at all levels of primary school, pressure to harmonize within the European Union, inspiration from and fear of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), individualization and so forth. The understanding of leadership, professionals, and learning are thus undergoing profound change (Krejsler, 2005; Moos, 2003).

For example the responsibility for finances and administration of the ‘Folkeskole’ (primary and lower secondary school, students aged 6–16) was devolved to municipalities and from there to schools. The traditional site-based management was redefined when schools were made financially autonomous and accountable.

The school leader now manages large parts of the budget in collaboration with School Boards, which have a parental majority membership. The Acts, and therefore the responsibility for objectives of the schools, remain in the hands of Parliament and the Ministry of Education but the interpretation and administration of the curriculum – which is fairly broad in its demands – is given to municipalities which often leave it unattended, and to the schools themselves. At present the New Public Management (NPM) tendencies that focuses less on processes and more on outcomes and on accountability, is gaining momentum. In Denmark, schools must post the results of school leaving tests on the Ministry’s website. The government issues binding national ‘goals’ (usually every two years) that are much tighter and more prescriptive than the curriculum used to be; it has also introduced plans for more testing of students in grades 2, 4 and 6 in addition to the end-of-school test in grade 9. There is a focus on economic incentives like merit pay for teachers. In addition there is a focus on top-down management and decentralization.

School leaders, it seems, (Moos, Carney, Johansson, & Mehlbye, 2000) are caught in the cross-fire between: the national objectives for schools, which focus on liberal education (the ‘Bildung/Dannelse’ of children to become citizens in a democratic society); the local authorities’ demands for financial accountability; and, the school culture – teachers used to be very autonomous and are therefore not eager to be managed or led by the ‘new, strong, visible’ school leaders described by Government and local authorities.

SELECTING SCHOOLS AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS

The Danish educational system does not yet produce league tables of national test results or inspection reports. Thus, to establish success criteria to use in selecting our case study of schools we asked superintendents from a number of districts to point to one or two principals whom they regarded as successful on the basis of the district’s evaluation, student marks and peer acknowledgement. When we approached stakeholders in schools, we asked them to tell us what the characteristics of successful schools are, and how they would describe the successful principal in their school.