

Distributed Leadership in Local School Organisations

Working for School Improvement?

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Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i samhällsvetenskap med utbildningsvetenskaplig inriktning vid institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap, Göteborgs universitet, som med tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsnämnden läggs fram fredagen den 18 september 2015 kl. 13.15 i Sappören, Sprängkullsgatan 25, Göteborg.

Mette Liljenberg (2015) *Distributed Leadership in Local School Organisations. Working for School Improvement?* Doctoral dissertation at the Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg, Box 720, SE 40530 Gothenburg, Sweden, English and Swedish text. 234 pages. ISBN: 978-91-87876-03-5. Online: <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/39407>.

Abstract

This thesis takes its point of departure from the recent increased interest in leadership, and especially distributed leadership. Educational research states that if schools are to meet future demands, leadership must rest on trust within the organisation and distributed leadership must be understood, in the frame of professional collaboration and social learning. However, distributed leadership has also been presented as a normative prescription and an officially sanctioned model for how to arrange school leadership in order to meet the increased demand for school leaders.

The aim of the thesis is to generate knowledge about the construction of distributed leadership in local schools within the Swedish context and thereby contribute to the wider discussion of leadership within the educational field.

The study draws on data from a qualitative case study of three schools conducted during the years 2011 and 2012, with follow-up in 2014. In the three schools observations of formal meetings and semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers were conducted and further analysed. The theoretical framework is based on institutional perspectives on organisations and distributed perspectives on leadership. Furthermore, capacity building in school organisations is used as a framework for identifying different areas of relevance for school improvement.

Paper I, Distributing leadership to establish developing and learning school organisations in the Swedish context, examines the influence of distributed leadership and the structural and cultural prerequisites when creating a developing and learning school organisation. Paper II, Teacher leadership modes and practices in a Swedish context – A case study, elaborates on the significance of how leadership is framed in the organisation and the contribution it makes to school improvement. Paper III, Att skapa mening i lärares samarbete och gemensamma lärande. Tre skolors försök, examines how principals' and teachers' sensemaking about improvement initiatives influence the outcome of these initiatives and the possibility of developing teacher collaboration and common learning in the schools. Paper IV, School leaders as coupling agents – Mediating between external demands and internal values, explores how school leaders in their role as coupling agents respond to pressure from the institutional environment and how this relates to the direction of improvement in the local schools.

The main findings of the thesis show that the organisation of distributed leadership at local school level is embedded in the institutional context and in the local history of each school. Of particular importance are locally embedded norms and values that set the conditions for which structures are made possible, for how leadership is understood and for how teachers and school leaders make sense of and shape their roles in distributed leadership practices. The findings also show that the relation between distributed leadership and capacity building is based on the conditions at local level. This means that it is the conditions at local level that provide the basis for the quality of the distributed leadership. Looking at the construction of distributed leadership in the three schools in relation to the transformation of the Swedish educational system, it becomes clear that the construction of distributed leadership at local level is strongly connected to a democratic vision of leadership and trust in the competence of professionals. At local school level few connections between the ideas of distributed leadership and the neoliberal policy movements were detected.

Finally the findings show that formal school leaders have an important role in the construction of distributed leadership at local level if capacity building and school improvement are to take place. School leaders contribute to this by creating favourable structural conditions but most of all by influencing locally embedded norms and values so that a democratic and reflective understanding of leadership that implies 'power-with' rather than 'power-over' (Møller, 2002), as well as a high degree of openness to collaboration, shared sensemaking and trust between different actors can be created.

Keywords: distributed leadership, institutional perspective, school improvement, capacity building, local school organisation, teacher team, school leadership, principal, teacher.