



Trust and control in the Oslo school: A study of translation and implementation at multiple organizational levels

Christian Wittrock, Tonje Helen Danielsen and Åge Johnsen

Abstract

In this article, we examine how actors at different organizational levels in the schools in the City of Oslo have theorized trust and control and the relationship between trust and control in trust-based management (TBM). Theorizing, understood as notions of what something means or “is”, is often seen as the core of the diffusion and implementation of management concepts. We study the actors’ theorizations through interviews and document studies at three organizational levels: the city council, the educational agency, and the schools. We found that the municipality’s attempt to implement more TBM may have resulted in less trust in the top agency management among some school leaders, possibly due to internal conflicts in the top management. Furthermore, we found that while trust and control had been theorized as opposites at higher organizational levels, trust and control were not seen as opposites in the schools. Because trust is theorized as being trustworthy by employees, the top management’s theorization of the need for a “trust reform” could be perceived as meaning that employees have previously not been trustworthy. In addition, we found that many school leaders referred to prior education rather than the city’s initiative to implement TBM, as their main sources of knowledge about TBM. Notions of trust, control and TBM at the lowest organizational levels appeared to be decoupled from the theorizing that had been made at the higher levels of the organization. The findings point to challenges in getting an organizational concept to “travel” down through the hierarchical organizational levels and show that notions of and perceived benefits of TBM cannot be taken for granted in all communities of practice in complex organizations.

Keywords: Trust-based management, theorizing, translation of management ideas, implementation, multi-level leadership, public sector reforms.



© Author(s). This is an Open Access-article distributed under the terms given in CC-BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which allows to copy and redistribute remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially given that proper attribution is made, and indicated if changes were made, and that this licence is specified and linked to.