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Conceptualizing Professional Commitment-Based School Strategy: A Finnish Perspective

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Abstract

Core values inherent in the Finnish comprehensive education system can in many respects be interpreted to cluster and cohere around a Bildung discourse, which is paradoxically seen against the backdrop of the system's stable high rank in PISA, the hallmark of an outcome discourse. Yet the point is that within the frames of a Bildung discourse, the themes in focus for curricula go beyond basic skills with a similarly strong focus on societal values and culture. At the process level, Finland is more deeply and strongly infused with a policy culture that is more compatible with the Bildung tradition than the Anglo-Saxon outcome discourse—with its core values of organizing and leading for relations and teaching. As noted by Finnish scholars, such cultural traits of the Finnish system are viable and can be interpreted as associated with institutional path dependency, anchored in longstanding agrarian and social-democratic values. The current paper interprets these cultural traits also as manifest at the local level around a school strategy model close to the one characterized as a professional commitment strategy in the early 1990s by the American scholars Susan Rosenholtz and Brian Rowan. The purpose of the paper, however, is to advance this theoretical understanding a step further towards a conceptual model of commitment-based school strategy. This paper is, thus, a pure conceptual piece. To elaborate the early insights from the 1990s further, a case drawn from Helsinki primary school is used as an empirical illustration.

Keywords: school strategy; teacher commitment; community of practice; Finnish policy culture

Introduction

Recent studies of school governance in the Nordic countries have described a political and cultural contest between the legacies of strong welfare-state institutions grounded in a participatory democracy with significant local autonomy for municipalities, on the one hand, and a competing model derived from transnational bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), on the other (Moos, Nihlfors, &

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Paulsen, 2016). The latter model typically is manifest in strong recommendations of accountability, high-stakes national testing regimes, and enhanced indirect state steering through national quality assurance systems—hallmarks of an outcome discourse (e.g., Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2013; Varjo, Simola, & Rinne, 2013). The tensions are most visible in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, where the governments have established and institutionalized comprehensive multi-level quality assurance systems that, to a large extent, are matched with transnational bodies such as the European Union (EU) and OECD.

Although there are clear political and cultural similarities among the Nordic countries (Kofod, Johansson, Paulsen, & Risku, 2016), it is evident that Finland represents a different system case. For example, according to the European Commission, Finland is one of the few countries in Europe in which there is no direct control from the national level to the school level (Simola, Varjo, & Rinne, 2015), specifically, Finland does not have any school inspection, and national evaluations do not rank schools. This image has received considerable attention because Finland has been considered as one of the most successful countries in terms of high student achievements in the OECD international tests. On the other hand, with its cultural roots in social-democratic egalitarianism (Silander & Välijärvi, 2013), Finland is the one Nordic country that most distinctly deviates from the OECD agenda (Sahlberg, 2011).

Moreover, Finnish municipalities enjoy significant autonomy in creating a framework and governing schools in collaboration with professionals (Moos & Paulsen, 2014). Although schools must attend to national evaluations (and conduct local self-evaluations), the national systems of assessment are only loosely coupled to the work of local politicians, school superintendents, principals, and teachers (Simola & Rinne, 2015). Not surprisingly, as noted in a Nordic comparative study of local governance, Finnish local school politicians "are quite satisfied with the evaluation system. They seem to think that evaluation reports compiled by the schools themselves give boards a good picture of the real quality of individual schools" (Paulsen & Moos, 2014, p. 170).

From a conceptual stance, the model through which Finnish municipalities govern their schools and their school leaders corresponds fairly well with a school strategy conceived by Brian Rowan as a commitment model in his 1990 policy review (Rowan, 1990; Rowan & Miller, 2007; Paulsen & Høyer, 2016). Contrary to a strategy model based on external evaluation, inspection, and control, the commitment-based model (of how to govern schools from the district level) stands out differently (Rowan & Miller, 2007). According to Rowan, the professional commitment model advocates the creation of "working conditions in schools that enhance commitment and expertise of teachers" (Rowan, 1990, p. 353). This conception of educational reform takes cultural control as its basic mechanism, as "we would expect 'cultural' control to replace formal controls and teachers to base their commitment to personal identification with the school rather than loyalty to superiors" (Rowan, 1990, p. 359). The core elements of a commitment-based model of school strategy are teacher empowerment, vibrant learning communities, and

professional and organizational commitment embedded in a culture of mutual trust between school administrators and teachers (Rowan, 1990).

Since Rowan's review, however, there has been extensive interest in the different ways through which state and school districts exert external control toward schools (e.g., Hudson, 2007; Helgøy & Homme, 2006). In contrast, not much work has been undertaken to advance the understanding of how a commitment-based strategy plays out in practice. Although the concept of teacher commitment, measured at an individual and group level (see e.g., Somech, 2005), has been used to capture teachers' professional binding to their students and schools in a great number of articles, the organizational properties into which such individual teacher traits are embedded tend to be under-investigated. There is, as such, a gap to be filled in the literature in terms of advancing the conceptual understanding of commitment-based school strategy.

The current paper follows this line of reasoning and, based on an illustrative case drawn from Finnish primary schooling, a theoretical discussion of professional commitment as a strategy model, enacted at the district and school level, is discussed. Support for this theoretical assertion is drawn from empirical works on Helsinki primary schools (see Hjertø, Paulsen, & Thiveräinen, 2014; Paulsen, Hjertø, & Thiveräinen, 2016, for details) and more recent work on Finnish school governance seen from the perspective of school superintendents, school board members, and school principals (Risku, Kanervio, & Pulkkinen, 2014). Furthermore, the paper draws on recent historical and sociological work on the policy culture of Finnish education, which provides insights for understanding the political and cultural context in which local school strategy is embedded (see Silander & Välijärvi, 2013; Varjo et al., 2013; Simola, 2015).

Understanding the Finnish policy culture of education

The Finnish success in OECD rankings

Since the first OECD-PISA reporting in 2001, which measured performance for 15-year-old students in literacy, mathematics, and science, the Finnish primary school system has consistently performed well (OECD, 2013). Finnish school performance has been characterized by a narrow achievement gap within a student cohort in terms of a relatively small portion of variation between the highest- and lowest-performing achievement categories. Correspondingly, the between-school variances on the PISA achievement scales have been significantly small: Finland's between-school variation on the PISA reading scale in 2009 was approximately 7 percent compared to 42 percent in other OECD countries (OECD, 2010).

With its cultural roots in social-democratic egalitarianism, Finland is the one country that most distinctly deviates from the Anglo-Saxon accountability movement in basic education, which emphasizes making school principals and teachers accountable for students' learning outcomes. Moreover, Finnish municipalities have resisted implementation

of studies that could be used as ranking lists (Silander & Välijärvi, 2013; Varjo et al., 2013). As noted, Finland has

> not followed the Anglo-Saxon accountability movement requiring schools and teachers to become more accountable for learning results. The evaluations of student outcomes have traditionally been the task of each teacher and school. (Simola et al., 2015, p. 233)

Evolution of a trust-based collaborative culture

According to scholars, a trust-based culture formally became visible in Finland in the early 1990s: "All traditional forms of control over the teacher work had disappeared by the beginning of the 1990s" (Simola & Rinne, 2015, p. 264). Finnish teachers enjoy significant freedom from state evaluative control compared with their European colleagues, and "this can be interpreted as very high trust in the work of teachers and the culture of schools, which may legitimate the rare, rather autonomous position of teachers and school welfare institutions" (Simola & Rinne, 2015, pp. 264–265). Moreover, local autonomy for municipalities and schools has been a stable feature of Finnish curriculum policy, which means that broad national frameworks are adapted and developed toward practice by local actors. Specifically, Finnish municipalities, backed by their national association, have resisted implementation of national evaluations and tests that could be used as ranking lists (Silander & Välijärvi, 2013).

A tangled web of reasons behind the Finnish mystery

Hannu Simola and colleagues have suggested a comprehensive framework for understanding the Finnish mystery in education, one that emphasizes historical and institutional path dependency on the national level, contingencies bound to the economic recession in the 1990s, and accompaniment by pure coincidences driven by the arrival of time (March & Olsen, 1976). First, Hannu Simola has shown that historical contingencies have played an important role. Both the welfare state model—the change of the occupational structure away from an agrarian society—and the construction of a unified school system came late in Finland, and in contrast to the societal development in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, these transformations occurred simultaneously rather than sequentially in Finland.

> The high belief in schooling as an outgrowth from the contingent conjunction of three societal changes came exceptionally late in Finland: the expansion of schooling, the modernization of the occupational structure and the construction of the welfare state. (Simola & Rinne, 2015, p. 257)

The second factor, path dependency, is manifest in the cultural roots where Finland has been bound to social-democratic and agrarian values of equality (Varjo et al., 2013), which has made convergence to the global neoliberal discourse an extremely difficult project.

The third explanation coheres around several coincidences in the 1990s and 2000s. Under the severe economic recession in the early 1990s, high-level municipal autonomy

in the cost-intensive service sectors such as comprehensive schooling was needed to master financial cutbacks in school budgets while national politicians prioritized educational quality. Without shifting decision-making to the local municipal level, municipalities could not successfully cut the budgets. As a consequence, the national framework of quality assurance (CAE) has been easy to buffer and has only been loosely coupled to the municipal school authorities' decision-making processes and the work in the schools:

> It is thus obvious that the radical process of municipal autonomy, which was spurred on and deepened by the recession of the 1990s, was one of the factors that buffered the implementation and technical development of an effective QAE system in Finnish comprehensive schooling. (Simola et al., 2015, p. 243)

An illustrative case

The empirical analyses in brief

The illustrative case subjected to this paper was a theory-based field study in Helsinki primary schools, which constitutes the case used for conceptual advancement. The empirical base for the case was built from 246 individual teacher responses from 10 schools. All participants were asked to evaluate their leadership preferences, professional learning, experience of being trusted, commitment, and level of efficacy. Moreover, a second statistical model tested teachers' experiences of their principal's leadership practices, which related moral and distributed leadership to teachers' sense of empowerment in their work domain (WDE) and classroom domain (CDE). Survey items were drawn from Marks and Louis (1999) yet carefully adapted to the Finnish linguistic and cultural context. The study resulted in two published articles in 2014 and 2016 (see Hjertø et al., 2014; Paulsen et al., 2016). Despite the valued contributions provided by these papers, findings were not advanced toward a more generic framework for school strategy and local governance. Thus, a theoretical advancement is sought by further discussion of the conceptual and theoretical implications enabled by the statistical relationships predicted in the two analyses.

Revisiting the social-cognitive learning path

The point of departure was the assumption that Finnish schoolteachers' social learning in communities of practice was an important part of the local Finnish school culture, and Wenger's original theory was linked to teachers' sense of commitment and efficacy through the measurement model developed by Susan M. Printy (2008). Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) defined a community of practice as

> a unique combination of three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain. (p.27)

At the heart of this conceptualization lies the crucial point that community membership is regulated solely by engagement in the group's practice and not by formal affiliation or structural position. This means by implication that external teacher colleagues, who do not work in the focal subject group, department, or even the same school, but who share the same knowledge domain, can in principle also be included as valuable members (Paulsen, 2008; Printy, 2008).

When teachers engage in open communication and collective reflection with external but trusted colleagues, these interactions bring broadened and contrasting perspectives to those teachers' instruction. As posited by Printy (2008): "Particularly where the community is tightly bonded as a result of shared values, learning is restricted to confirm the rightness of existing thoughts and actions" (p. 189). Therefore, local and external engagement are both important properties that define social learning in a community of practice, which we asserted in the first model (Hjertø et al., 2014).

Organizational commitment is defined as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982, p. 27) and generally associated with social bonding at the school level and loyalty to school goals. An employee's sense of impact generally is understood as a self-belief that the teacher can positively influence school outcomes for colleagues and that he or she contributes to pupils' learning (Short & Rinehart, 1992). The first Helsinki model showed that primary school teachers' learning engagement in both internal and external communities predicted their level of commitment and sense of impact (see Hjertø et al., 2014).

Revisiting the distributive and moral leadership path

The second model of the illustrative Helsinki case hypothesized that when teachers experienced leadership tasks as being shared among formal leaders and non-leaders at multiple levels of the school organization (at the core of the distributed leadership model), their sense of being empowered and trusted in an important area was increased. Empowerment is defined as "the opportunities a person has for autonomy, responsibility, choice, and authority" (Blase & Blase, 1996, p. 137). In a similar vein, when it was asserted that the teachers scored their principal high on moral and authentic practices, they also experienced being empowered in important domains of their professional work. Moral leadership can be conceived as a social, relational practice that is characterized by dynamic and continuing activities, all of which are concerned with the moral purpose of education (Ehrich, Harris, Klenowski, Smeed, & Spina, 2015). When a school principal is strongly committed to explaining and clearly communicating the school vision, aim, and values, this will have a significant positive effect on teachers' sense of decision-making influence. The second model underpinning the Helsinki case showed that both distributed and moral leadership predicted teachers' sense of empowerment in two areas of schoolwork. Whereas distributed leadership predicted teacher empowerment in classroom issues, the

path from moral leadership predicted both teacher empowerment in classroom issues and schoolwork domain (Paulsen et al., 2016).

Towards a further conceptual development

An interesting aspect of the Finnish school governance system is the loose coupling between the local levels of municipalities and schools and a state-driven quality assurance system, which according to the literature reviewed for this paper can in the official school rhetoric comply with traveling market-liberalist steering policies. This means that national agencies in silent consensus with the local level adapt to local cultures "based on antipathy and resistance to some fundamental neo-liberal doctrines, primarily ranking lists" (Simola et al., 2015, p. 244). The main findings of the Helsinki case suggest building a school governance model on three building blocks of a professional commitment strategy: Teachers' organizational commitment, teachers' sense of impact and teacher empowerment. Further, the findings of the study suggest a professional commitment strategy to be fostered by distributed and moral leadership exerted by school principals and municipal system leaders, relational trust cultivated among actors involved in a local school governing chain, and teachers' social learning in internal and external communities of practice in Wenger's (1998) terminology. The conceptual properties of the suggested model are discussed in the subsequent section and illustrated in figure 1 below.
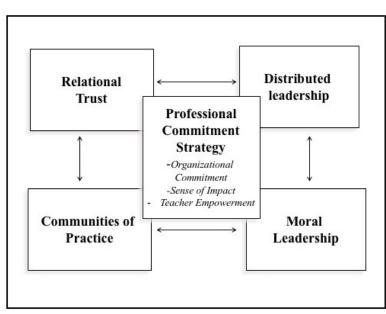
Figure 1: Conceptual model of professional commitment strategy

Source: Author

The conceptual model postulates teacher empowerment, sense of impact and commitment to the school organization to be central components of a professional commitment strategy inspired by the original theoretical and empirical works of Rowan, Rozenholtz, and

colleagues. Prior studies provide support for these assertions by showing systematic interrelatedness between teachers' sense of self-efficacy, sense of impact, organizational commitment, and empowerment in important school domains (see e.g., Somech, 2005; Bogler & Somech, 2004), and these findings correspond with research also from non-educational sectors (see e.g., Kirkman & Rosen, 1999). The model adds some supplementary arguments by suggesting the core of a professional commitment strategy to be interrelated with schoolteachers' social learning in communities of practice. In a similar vein, the model suggests the capacity of the school organization to build relational trust between important stakeholders, students, teachers and leaders to be interrelated to teachers' social learning. Finally, school leadership is linked to school strategy through strong moral grounding and distributive leadership behaviors among school principals.

The value of commitment and empowerment

Organizational commitment among teachers has long been recognized as a critical predictor for teachers' quality of work performance. Teachers scoring high on organizational commitment feel that they have high status within the organization and are willing to contribute beyond what is expected of them (Bogler & Somech, 2004). In contrast, the consequences of low organizational commitment are often that "teachers converse more about poor working conditions than about teaching problems and their solutions" (Rosenholtz, 1987, p. 542). The second core component of the model is teacher empowerment. Evidence about the important role of teacher empowerment for school capacity building has continued to emerge in educational research. For example, in their seminal study of 24 site-based managed schools, Marks and Louis (1999) found that teacher empowerment accounted for more than half of the variance among schools in their capacity for organizational learning. Moreover, teachers' ability to draw valid inferences applicable to complex problems is enhanced by empowerment.

> Empowerment is, therefore, not important in isolation but as part of a cluster of school-development characteristics that, when focused on the quality of student learning, have demonstrable payoff at the classroom level. (Marks & Louis, 1999, p. 729)

Sense of impact rooted in self-efficacy

Teachers' sense of impact, as modeled in the Helsinki case, has been broadly defined as

> the teachers' perceptions that they possess the skills and ability to help the students to learn, that they are competent in building effective programs, and that they can affect changes in students' learning. (Short & Rinehart 1992, p. 957)

The concept builds on Albert Bandura's social-cognitive theory conceptually close to the core concept of self-efficacy, defined as "people's belief in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and course of action needed to exercise control over events in their lives" (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 364). High self-efficacy tends to result

in initiating behaviors, high effort, and persistence in the face of obstacles: "Efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (Bandura, 1977, pp. 193–194).

Whereas self-efficacy captures teachers' effort-performance expectancy cycle, sense of impact describes a teacher's self-belief that the effort invested in the work will result in positive outcomes for the school and its students in a subsequent phase (Short, 1994; Hjertø et al., 2014). Many studies show that efficacy expectations at group level are positively associated with learning both for teachers and school leaders (Louis et al., 2010; Eels, 2011), which justifies a strategic emphasis for superintendents and school principals to work purposefully to strengthen schoolteachers' self-belief that they can master the complex work of teaching and collectively make a difference for their schools.

Social learning in communities of practice

The study underpinning the Helsinki case supported Wenger's (1998) overarching idea that social learning in a community of practice is both an inward- and an outward-looking process. Local collegial collaboration in close-knit groups supported the teachers' perception of working in an appraisable school, as well as their feelings of loyalty and their bonds with school goals. Additionally, the results revealed that intense learning engagement with external but trusted colleagues from other schools strengthened teachers' effort-outcome expectancy and sense of impact.

Morally grounded and distributed leadership

Our findings concur with other studies that have demonstrated the strength of moral leadership as an enabling condition for empowering teachers in a manner that supports student learning (Bottery, Wright, & James, 2012). Our findings are also in line with longstanding demands among Finnish teachers to their school principals: Showing respect to teachers and practicing equality norms, such as working for the needs of all students, are central expectations for Finnish school principals (Lahtero & Risku, 2014).

Thus, our study concurs with a contemporary shift in the understanding of leadership, from a one-sided emphasis on the attributes and behaviors of the individual leader toward a more systemic perspective whereby leadership is conceived of as a collective social process that emerges through the interactions of multiple actors (Spillane, 2013). This conceptualization emphasizes that distributed leadership is manifest when teachers and school leaders regularly interact with each other in the performance of leadership tasks (Harris, 2013; Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2009). In this conceptualization,

> the principal is responsible for providing her/his staff with opportunities for participating in decision-making, working with them as partners and devolving authority and power, thus building leadership capacity for all. (Sarafidou & Chatziioannidis, 2013, p. 180)

The various strengths of interpersonal trust

As noted by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, "trust is necessary for effective cooperation and communication, the foundations for cohesive and productive relationships in organizations" (2000, p. 549). On the other hand, trust is difficult to observe in empirical terms (Sørhaug, 1996), not least because trust is inherent in many relations and thus difficult to measure mutuality. Moreover, trust is infused with a series of tensions and dilemmas. One dilemma is associated with the idea that trust in organizations is intimately linked to power, as posited by the Norwegian social scientist Tian Sørhaug, "any form of organizing must deal with a paradoxical tension between power and trust" (1996, p, 21), and this symbiotic relationship forms an enduring dilemma for school leaders. In a range of scholarly work, empowerment is treated as a manifestation of trust, as supported by studies in noneducational as well as educational sectors. The point is that the complexity involved in the decisions that teachers must make in their daily classroom work is a function of their ability to draw valid inferences applicable to complex problems, which again is enhanced by empowerment and trust.

Notably, there is also a relationship between interpersonal trust and teachers' sense of empowerment in decision-making. "When teachers not only have involvement but also influence over organizational decisions that affect them, the conditions necessary to foster mutual trust between teachers and principals become manifest" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 69). We, therefore, see the relationship between trust and empowerment as a promising path for theoretical advancement. Another important implication of trust is the one between trust and sense-making in organizations (Louis, Mayrowetz, Smylie, & Murphy, 2009). Karen Seashore Louis and colleagues (2009) suggested that sense-making is a decisive process for whether teachers engage in changes when confronted with demands for a new set of practices. The sense-making process most typically emerges from informal communication that leads to common actions or agreed-upon activities (Weick & Roberts, 2001).

Commitment strategy embedded in a stronger Bildung discourse

As noted, values inherent in the Finnish comprehensive education system in many respects can be interpreted to cluster and cohere around a Bildung discourse (Moos, this issue), which is interesting seen against the backdrop of the system's stable high rank in PISA, the hallmark of an outcome discourse. The conceptual model discussed in the previous section suggests a small number of categories of local school strategy that is compatible with the core characteristics of the Finnish policy culture in education (see Louis & van Velzen, 2012). Specifically, institutional and relational trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2001) between actors at different levels of the governance chain is a core characteristic of this culture and viable in a commitment strategy. At the school level, a commitment-based strategy will be manifest in teachers' social learning in a web of communities of practice stimulated by distributed and moral leadership exerted by principals and school

leaders. Taken together, this model adds a conceptual content close to the everyday practice of school leaders and teachers on how a Bildung-inspired culture plays out at the local level of the Finnish school system.

A final remark

The model suggested in figure 1 must be interpreted in light of the nation-specific policy culture and governance system of Finnish education as laid out previously in this paper. First, Finnish municipalities possess more regulatory autonomy compared with the other Nordic systems, and this unique position can be systematically utilized by local authorities to buffer school leaders and their teachers from the national quality assurance system. In the same vein, as a function of the specific Finnish political culture (Kofod et al., 2016), local authorities in Finland have resisted ranking of schools (Silander & Välijärvi, 2013; Varjo et al., 2013). Moreover, the assessment and evaluation of student learning have traditionally been seen as the sole territory of teachers and schools. The positive path between collaborative learning in schools and teachers' efficacy and commitment, as suggested by the model, must, therefore, be interpreted as contingent of a societal policy culture that also finds resonance in the local democratic institutions in Finnish municipalities. Second, a commitment-based model of school strategy and school development seems to be anchored in a shared understanding of the Finnish school professions about the most important values of schooling as by default. This cultural path-dependency, paired with the strong competence possessed by the Finnish teacher corps, may also add explanatory power to the low variation between schools in primary education.

Moral leadership exerted by school principals accompanied by a democratic and involving approach to decision-making in schools, might, therefore, build on shared values and cultural mindsets of what Finnish teachers and school principals are. Finally, it is fair to assume the Finnish teachers' perception of significant empowerment in their professional domains as an artifact embedded in a path-dependent societal culture with high trust in the work of teachers and the teaching profession (Simola & Rinne, 2015). Thus, as the school strategy model emerging from the conceptual analysis contains generic properties that by first glance seems to be possible to translate to other educational systems, the context-bound and local embeddedness of this form of school strategy should not be underestimated.

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