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Historical Amnesia: On Improving Nordic Schools from the Outside and Forgetting What We Know

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Abstract

A number of initiatives have been put forth over the last decade to improve quality in Norwegian schools. Many have been nationwide government-initiated programs. However, several studies express concern about the actual effect of these programs, and some also point to a lack of local anchoring and involvement of teachers. In this article, I draw on studies of one such program. *Ungdomstrinn i utvikling* (*Lower Secondary in Development*) was a five-year school-based competence development program in more than 1200 lower-secondary level schools. We found that the local start-up phase and the co-determination of the teachers were crucial, and few schools drew on knowledge from the 1960s in Norway on how to organize dialogue seminars so teachers might have a chance to participate in the local design of the program and establish a shared understanding and knowledge of the challenges at hand. Instead, we found examples of a transaction perspective and an "order and deliver" model of competence development. I discuss this as a possible consequence of the influence of instrumental management theory and why the Nordic cooperation model, even though challenging for school leaders, local union representatives and teachers, would be a better approach to school development. Lastly, I argue that we should avoid historical amnesia and that we would probably be better off if we revived the knowledge from the 1960s and after on co-generation and collaboration.

Keywords: school development; educational leadership; national culture; co-creation

Introduction

Moos (2013) argues that leadership thinking and practices are formed by discourses, policies, and literature as well as by national and local traditions, values, structures, and practices; it is thus essential to gain a good understanding of the institutional context and the historical and societal background in and against which educational leadership is situated (p. 282). In line with Moos, Shirley (2016) claims that educational systems ought

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to be understood on their own terms, from the inside out. The intention behind this article is to contribute to the understanding that Moos and Shirley call for, where a sensibility to national culture and local context become pivotal. I first make a sketch of a Nordic cooperation model for the co-determination of employees, developed in Norway in the 1960s by employer and employee associations, and the knowledge of how change programs should be initiated and carried out that this model represents. I then show how influence from instrumental management theory was more evident in the *Ungdomstrinn i utvikling* (*Lower Secondary in Development*, "UiU") program than knowledge from the 1960s and after in Norway on how to conduct change programs. I subsequently discuss possible consequences of an influence from instrumental theory and why the Nordic cooperation model, even though challenging for school leaders, local union representatives and teachers, would be a better approach to school development. Lastly, I argue that we should avoid historical amnesia and that we would probably be better off if we revived the knowledge from the 1960s on co-generation and collaboration.

The backdrop: A Nordic cooperation model

When the *Septemberforliget* (the September Agreement) between the employer and employee associations was entered into on September 5, 1899, in Copenhagen, Denmark, it led to a shift towards greater cooperation between the parties, where democratic rights, working conditions and ways of collaborating were increasingly put on the agenda (Irgens & Ness, 2007; Irgens, 2016, cf. p. 335 ff.). A higher degree of mutual recognition and a cooperative spirit were gradually established, which facilitated ongoing work and problem-solving. This model, often referred to as the Scandinavian model or the Nordic model, was adopted in Sweden in 1906 and in Norway in 1907 (Nielsen, 1992, 1996) and some years later also in Finland. Through the years, it led to a democratic practice also embedded in labor law and political provisions (Irgens & Ness, 2007; Nielsen, 1996), making the collaboration between the parties into a tripartite cooperation, with state authorities as the third party. Trust and mutual respect grew and laid the foundation for cooperative experiments in improving work life and productivity, and the Nordic model developed from a work-life model into a Nordic cooperation model (Øyum et al., 2010, p. 9).

A series of cooperation projects in the 1960s in Norway between the employer and employee associations was instrumental, where a systematic testing of partly autonomous work groups occurred.[2] Models for the co-determination of employees and knowledge of how change programs should be initiated and carried out to obtain real and, to some extent, durable change, were developed (Emery & Thorsrud, 1976). For example, the local start-up phase should involve as many members of staff and leaders as feasible to estab-

[2] Known as *Samarbeidsforsøkene LO/N.A.F.* These ideas caught the eye of the Japanese, who used them in their quality revolution.

lish a shared understanding and knowledge of challenges at hand as well as how to identify and operationalize possible solutions. These methods have been variously known as "dialogue conferences," "dialogue seminars" and "search conferences" (Qvale, 2003). Studies of the last decade's government-initiated school development programs reveal that the Nordic cooperation model´s co-determination and knowledge of how change programs should be initiated and carried out, have scarcely been employed in Norwegian schools.

School development programs: Learning from an exemplary case

The UiU program may serve as an exemplary case. The author was part of a research team following this nationwide government-generated initiative, running from 2012 to 2018, as a school-based competence development program in more than 1200 lower-secondary level schools. Professional training for teachers and school administrators was to occur in local schools with assistance from universities and university colleges (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2012). In the study conducted the year the program officially finished (2017), we noted the challenges of anchoring and involvement and identified the initial phase in local schools as decisive for the school development efforts' success (Postholm et al., 2018).[3]

In some cases, school leaders left it to teachers to find ways to apply their new pedagogical knowledge; in others, they adopted a top-down style and applied centralized decision-making, which left little room for co-determination and seemed to have more in common with American-inspired management roles (Hofstede, 1980, 1993; Moos, 2013). A systematic use of dialogue seminars in the initial stages was hard to find. According to Kolb (1984, p. 26), learning may be seen as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." However, teachers were seldom systematically involved in designing the transformation process. This does not imply that teachers were not involved in the processes of transforming what they had learned (for example, didactic knowledge, and skills) into local knowledge about how they should improve their teaching. For example, principals had access to teachers designated to assist them in the process of leading the transformation, and some schools also had a special development team of teachers for the principal to draw on. Yet the systematic involvement of the teachers in the early stages in a search for answers to questions such as *What is the best way in our school/team to ensure a good transformation process* or *How should we work in order to produce knowledge that may improve our teaching*, were rarely seen.

A second research group also pointed to the lack of genuine anchoring and involvement in the UiU program and found that one in five teachers did not know that their school was in the program or did not know which focal areas they were supposed to be working

[3] The study comprised focus group interviews (Patton, 2002) with teachers and school leaders in nine schools and teacher educators in the university, who served as facilitators in the schools, as well as surveys. The method is described at length in Postholm et al. (2018, pp. 323–368).

on (Markussen, Carlsten, Seland, & Sjaastad, 2015). Weak anchoring had also occurred in earlier nationwide programs (e.g., Blossing, Hagen, Nyen, & Söderström, 2010; Dahl, Buland, Mordal, & Aaslid, 2012). However, when the UiU program was launched by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training on the government's behalf, teacher involvement was a central element in the school-based competence development model chosen as a main strategy for the implementation (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2013). Both teachers and school leaders in our study also stated that collaboration was important to improve the quality of their schools (Dehlin & Irgens, 2018). It might, therefore, be surprising that we found so few traces of systematic teacher involvement in the co-creative tradition described in the introduction.

Competence development: Order and deliver?

As I have tried to show, even in a program such as UiU, where the intention was that the development should be school-based and collaborative (Postholm et al., 2013), there were several examples of weak local anchoring and a lack of systematic involvement, similar to previous programs. This may indicate that the knowledge from the cooperation projects in the 1960s about how to initiate and carry out local development, as described by Øyum et al. (2010), Qvale (2003), Klev and Levin (2009), Elden and Levin (1991) and others, had been forgotten or ignored by local authorities, school heads and union representatives.

If this knowledge was intentionally ignored rather than forgotten, one possible explanation could be that principals, because of outside pressure to change schools they had experienced for years and the many programs they had been exposed to, may have chosen not to involve their teachers more than a minimum when the new program was launched in their schools. They may have decided that the school had reached its limits when it came to handling transformations (Dehlin & Irgens, 2018).

This is a possibility that should be studied further. It still leaves a question unanswered: If not the Nordic model of collaborative leadership and co-creation, what characterizes the theories and ideologies of school leadership and development that have influenced the principals?

The intention behind the UiU program was that competence development should occur in schools and be organized in collective learning processes. The principal was supposed to lead the processes, with support from teacher educators from the universities (Postholm et al., 2018, p. 17). In the program's early years, an order and deliver rhetoric that seemed to reflect agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) became evident among principals and their university collaborators. Competence development was seen as a transaction. Principals ordered lectures and other competence measures from the universities, and teacher educators were then expected to deliver (Postholm et al., 2013). When the schools were dissatisfied with what was delivered, or teacher educators with how it was received, it was often explained as resulting from an unclear contract or a lack of skills on the part of the other, a lack of either ordering or delivering skills. However, it soon became evident

that this model seemed to have little effect on local school development (Postholm et al., 2013), and in the spring of 2015, the Directorate of Education stressed that teacher educators should primarily take on roles of competence partners and facilitators rather than give lectures (Dehlin & Irgens, 2018, p. 245).

Influenced by instrumental management theories?

In the years prior to the UiU program launch, a turn towards a static, objectivistic view of knowledge had occurred in the education sector, according to Lillejord (2011). A study of how Norwegian teachers' teaching style had changed from 2001 to 2012 showed the same; teaching had become more a matter of content delivery in 2012 than it had been in 2001. The authors explained this turn as a consequence of imperatives originating with the OECD but with roots in an American behavioral tradition. This ideology had been imposed upon the education system, the authors claimed, through management by objectives, accountability, and testing (Imsen & Ramberg, 2014).

The order and deliver model we found among principals and teacher educators in the UiU program may reflect this static and objective view of knowledge (Blackler, 1995; Ertsås & Irgens, 2014, 2016). When competence development takes the form of transaction and content delivery, it also becomes a question of efficient implementation of what is conveyed through courses and other competence measures in the hope that some of this content delivery can improve students' learning (Dehlin & Irgens, 2017, 2018; Halvorsen, Skrøvset, & Irgens, 2016; Irgens & Ertsås, 2008; Nygaard & Bramming; 2008; Nygaard & Holtham, 2008).

A static, objective view of knowledge is typically found in management theories referred to in the literature as structural, instrumental, positivist, functionalist, objectivist and machine-like (e.g., Easterby-Smith, Thorp, & Lowe, 1991; Ghoshal, 2005; Martin, 2003; Morgan, 1986; Putnam, 1983). They are examples of what Wallace (2007) calls management science, with efficiency based on an instrumental rationality as a common core. These theories, including the agency theory that could be traced in both vocabulary and practice within the UiU program, have been dominant in American business schools and have been exported globally and achieved hegemony in the management curricula in large parts of the world, according to Czarniawska (2003), Ghoshal (2005) and Mintzberg (2004). They have also been imposed upon school systems in many countries in the form of instrumental and imperial prescriptions for educational change (Shirley, 2016). A series of scholars (e.g., Beck, 2013; Biesta, 2009; Imsen, 2012; Krejsler & Moos, 2008) have criticized their influence on education, an influence evident in Scandinavian education systems since the turn of the century (e.g., Imsen, 2012, Krejsler & Moos, 2008; Moos, 2013; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013; Plauborg, Andersen, Ingerslev, & Laursen, 2010; Skedsmo & Møller, 2016). How strong this influence has been in the UiU program is not possible to estimate on the basis of our studies. However, it is fair to say that particularly in the first years of the program, we found more examples of a transaction perspective

than a systematic use of co-creative work forms in the Nordic collaboration tradition (Dehlin & Irgens, 2018; Postholm et al., 2013; Postholm et al., 2018).

When management theory and culture collide

After studying differences between national cultures, Hofstede (1980, 1984) concluded that many American-inspired management theories simply collide with the culture not only in the Nordic countries but also in many other parts of the world. Nevertheless, fifty years after Hofstede undertook his first studies,[4] both Shirley (2016) and Moos (2013) describe how the American influence on education has not only continued but has become stronger. This has not been frictionless. Shirley (2016) portrays how the ideas have been forced upon education systems and schools through top-down policies and control mechanisms, and Moos (2013) depicts a clash between two different discourses in the education field. On one hand, we have an American-inspired, result-oriented discourse with emphasis placed on management through objectives, national standards, tests, and external accountability. On the other hand, we have a European, and especially Nordic, participant-oriented discourse, with emphasis on trust, the development of professional, personal and social skills, and the use of formative evaluation and dialogue. The first discourse, according to Moos, is concerned with how students are educated into useful workers, the second discourse with democratic Bildung.[5]

Here we may be close to one possible explanation of why it seems so difficult to change practices in Nordic schools from the outside, through top-down management. Culture programs us (Cassirer, 1944), and different national cultures do so differently (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997), with consequences also for work organizations (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Leer-Salvesen, 2000). In European working life, and in Nordic countries in particular, cultural programming has resulted in high expectations when it comes to co-creative, democratic leadership. Brodbeck et al. (2000), in their study of cultural variations of leadership prototypes among 22 European countries, revealed that in the Nordic cluster of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, successful leaders were characterized as nonautocratic and participative.

Leadership in any culture is a complement to subordinateship, according to Hofstede (1980), and must relate to the values of the employees. Hofstede concludes, "Whatever a naive literature on leadership may give us to understand, leaders cannot choose their styles at will; what is feasible depends to a large extent on the cultural conditioning of a leader's subordinates" (1980, p. 57). The way we develop organizations, including schools, will accordingly become problematic if it collides with the values embedded in the culture and the expectations among the people who are central to local success.

[4] For a critical discussion of Hofstede, see McSweeney (2002).

[5] American management theories of course have many facets. However, it is possible to identify a *mainstream perspective* with strong American roots and, at the same time, a *counterview,* where the latter relies more heavily on a European tradition of hermeneutics and phenomenology (Argyris, Putnam, & McLain Smith, 1985; Irgens, 2011).

Cooperation, dialogue and democratic practice

If there has been influence from instrumental management theory and a turn towards a more static view of knowledge, it implies a turn away from school development characterized by dialogue, co-creation, and co-determination. Whether this is something the teachers accept or not, a lack of involvement may lead to reform fatigue (Ekspertgruppa om lærerrollen, 2016) and may reduce job satisfaction (Locke & Schweiger, 1979), raise the amount of sickness absence (Lawler & Hackman, 1969), increase staff turnover (Jenkins & Lawler, 1981) and increase stress levels (Ivancevich, 1979). As we discussed in one of our studies of the UiU program, absence of dialogue and cooperation in early stages (often referred to as the mobilization or initiation stage; see Anderson, 2010), may also lead to a lack of collective sensemaking: The change program may then be seen as meaningless, it may become harder for the individual to link the new initiatives to existing practices and former change projects the school has experienced, and the result may be a higher degree of perceived complexity (Dehlin & Irgens, 2018).

In other words, even if an autocratic management style may become more accepted in Nordic culture after years of outside influence, this does not mean it will lead to better schools. On the contrary, a positive relationship between participation and the success rate of change measures has long been found in a number of studies in different organizations and parts of the world and also in more individual-oriented cultures with lower expectations regarding participation (Berman, 1980; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; French & Bell, 1990; Gross, Giacquinta, & Bernstein, 1971; Gustavsen, 1990; Purkey & Novak, 1996; Steensen, 2008; Tornatzky et al., 1983; Yin, Heald, & Vogel, 1977). In other words, a change towards more autocratic management may not be wise, even if the culture in the Nordic countries and in other countries with a strong democratic working life tradition should be changing. A better strategy seems to be to build on the knowledge and the values already embedded in these cultures.[6]

A case of historical amnesia?

I have attempted to show that we have a good historical-cultural foundation in the Nordic countries for developing schools based on democracy, dialogue, and participation, thereby reducing the potentially unfortunate aspects of change processes as well as raising the probability that changes lead to genuine improvements. This foundation is partly a result of systematic collaboration between parties in working life and should be well

[6] Maybe then nations that have been the foremost exporters of management ideas could learn from the best practices in our cultures? As Joseph E. Stiglitz writes, “Even if it is granted that the United States is the leader and Scandinavia are followers, there are theoretical grounds for arguing that the Nordic model may in fact be better for innovation, suggesting that if the US adopted some of the Nordic institutions, innovations would be higher, and societal welfare would be improved even more” (Stiglitz, 2015, p. 3).

suited for schools, as they are institutions with the important mission of providing learning and knowledge promoting the development of responsible, democratic citizens. Therefore, as Lund, Rotvold, Skrøvset, Stjernstrøm and Tiller (2010) as well as Tranås (2014) note, it is paradoxical that the cooperation between the parties—labor unions and employee associations—has not been nurtured and developed in Norwegian schools to the same degree as in the private business sphere. We have had a series of central collaboration projects and agreements, but Tranås, for many years a union representative in the Union of Education Norway, claims that local schools have "lacked traditions and systematic practice to make the cooperation between the parties into a mutual resource for the school leaders and the teachers" (2014, p. 37).

If we are to change this, strong leadership is required, not in the sense of unilateral and hierarchical control, but strong through making oneself vulnerable (Argyris, Putnam, & McLain Smith, 1985) through shared control, cooperation, dialogue and democratic participation-based practice (Elden, 1983), since this is the leadership form Nordic culture appears to expect (Brodbeck et al., 2000; Klemsdal, 2009; Lægreid, Nordø, & Rykkja, 2013; Schramm-Nielsen, Lawrence, & Sivesind, 2004). This is also the type of leadership close to what works best in knowledge organizations, where knowledge work rather than procedure-controlled routine work is conducted (Davenport, 2005; Irgens & Wennes, 2011).

A demanding and ambitious form of leadership

Nordic leadership in a democratic and dialogic tradition is a demanding, ambitious form of leadership, as Holt-Larsen and Bruun de Neergard (2007) as well as Paulsen and Henriksen (2017) note. Employees see themselves as coworkers who do not perform a task just for the sake of doing it; they should since they are both competent and independent, also feel that they possess it. In other words, in the Nordic countries, as in several other European countries, we have high expectations when it comes to democratic, co-creative leadership (Brodbeck et al., 2000). If these expectations are not met, frustration easily arises (Holt-Larsen & Bruun de Neergard, 2007). However, improving conditions for local school development by revitalizing cooperation between the parties and strengthening co-creation and a dialogic leadership role also sets requirements on teachers and union representatives, and may challenge how their role is understood. Tranås (2014) writes,

> Representing one's members when it comes to issues of pay and working hours is an obvious task for a union representative. But this role must be extended to also include professional development and quality in school. This requires the union representative to expand his or her role to include cooperating with the school leaders. (p. 37)

As mentioned, studies of nationwide school development programs have identified anchoring as a major challenge in Norway. Ultimately, the individual school is where local solutions must be found and put into practice, which takes genuine, not merely formal, anchoring (Irgens, 2016, p. 22). This is a knowledge development, contextualization

and sensemaking process since it involves determining *how we in our school should work* to create an even better school, whether this involves reducing noncompletion rates, increasing students' well-being and preventing bullying, increasing students' learning outcomes or other good, important intentions. This is just as relevant whether the school joins an externally initiated national program or initiates the program itself. School development where external knowledge comes head-to-head with local experiences, and new knowledge is created through testing and informed reflection, is best achieved through cooperation, dialogue and democratic practice (Purkey & Novak, 1996). However, school development in the co-generative tradition must also be learned, as shown by a report about teacher roles by an expert group appointed by the Norwegian Ministry. The group found that "professionality among teachers in relation to how to undertake development work appears to be absent in many schools" (Ekspertgruppa om lærerrollen, 2016, p. 171).

Where I have noted that this may be challenging, referring to theory as well as findings from studies of national school development programs, I am not claiming that good development work is lacking in schools. Rather, this should be understood in the sense that we are seeing "a stretch in the team," coming to light both when schools are compared and inside schools, between teachers (Postholm et al., 2013) and that we probably would improve how we develop schools if we revitalized the cooperation between the parties and strengthened co-creation and a dialogic leadership role.

Conclusion

As I have tried to note in this article, in the Nordic countries, we should have the best conditions for innovation in schools if we build on the Nordic cooperation model (Øyum et al., 2010) and the knowledge and values already embedded in our culture. This does not imply that we should become insular, but that we should develop our education system from the inside out (Shirley, 2016).

I have argued that the historical-cultural context we are in, the water we swim in, gives us an advantage. Like fish having difficulties seeing the water, we may still be at risk of overlooking or even forgetting our cultural advantages. Revitalizing the cooperation between parties, where legitimate conflicts of interest are not ignored but where the parties recognize their roles and work together to satisfy common goals in the best interests of both teaching staff and students, would be a matter of building on a strong tradition in our culture. In itself, it is not enough, but it may improve the foundation from which we can succeed in developing even better schools. It may also help us escape a state of historical amnesia. Historical consciousness is not only about understanding the past and the forces and events that have created the current situation; it may also help us see the potential in what exists and what can be developed in the present and the future (Shotter, 2000, p. 247).

A fish may not realize the water until it is out of it. However, seeing the water we swim in from the outside in order to understand its strengths and weaknesses is not enough. We also need to see the world outside the fishbowl from the perspective of where we swim to better understand how the outside world influences us. Shirley (2016, p. 11) illustrates this by showing how, for over a quarter century, policies from other school systems around the globe have been turned into imperatives of educational change and mandated upon schools in an imperial manner. The imperatives have been ideologically driven rather than research informed, Shirley argues, and forced onto other schools and systems even when they already functioned well.

To avoid our becoming victims of imperial attitudes, Shirley (2016) recommends that educators be provided with tools so they can explore an interpretive imperative seeking to understand educational systems on their own terms, from the inside out. However, we also need tools to help with the practical side of locally designing and carrying out school development. Some of these tools were already developed in the 1960s, in our own backyard.

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