Chapter 10
Successful Nordic School Leadership

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10.1 Introduction

It is not often that one can make Nordic and international comparisons within the same project. In the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP), we were able to do so, because the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish case studies were part of an international project, including eight educational systems. In the project we were interested in finding out how school leaders influence the teaching and learning in their schools. We conducted case studies based on visits to 4–5 schools in each educational system. We observed and interviewed stakeholders in 2003–2004 and returned to the same schools after 5 years to find out if and how the school leaders had been able to sustain *success*. In the ISSPP we cross-analysed our case studies, looking for characteristics in principals' behaviour that could shed light on which leadership characteristics explained successful student outcomes.

Taking the ISSPP as our starting point, we knew that there are differences between the Nordic situation and the situation in the UK and the USA. We were reminded of this as the criteria for choosing case schools were that they had improved their score on the national league table in the past 3–4 years, that they had good inspection reports and that the school leaders were considered successful by their peers. The first two criteria were easily fulfilled in the UK and the USA, where they have national databases for this information. This was not the case in Denmark,

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Norway and Sweden, though so we had to go different ways in identifying case schools.

For this chapter our guiding research questions are as follows:

- What has characterised recent changes in the external context of school leadership?
- How is leadership reflected and enacted in practice in order to respond to changing external and internal expectations?

The major part of the analysis in this chapter was built on the comparisons we made at those stages (Moos et al. 2011). Thus, they are robust foundations for the comparison between Denmark, Norway and Sweden, finding similarities and differences in the way school leaders act and think. Being part of the international project, we are also able to compare the Scandinavian findings with the non-Nordic education systems, and therefore, we are able to discuss if there is a uniquely Nordic model of school leadership.

10.2   Theoretical Perspectives

In our analysis we draw on different theoretical perspectives. Ideas about distributed leadership form the basis for our study of school leadership. Distributed leadership can, however, take many forms. We have chosen to build on the work of Spillane and colleagues and the notion that school leadership is best understood as a distributed practice, encompassing both the school's social and situational contexts (Spillane et al. 2001; Spillane and Orlina 2005). This perspective implies a focus on leadership tasks and functions and on how these are distributed among both positional and informal leaders within the school organisation. Such tasks and functions would typically include identification, acquisition, allocation, coordination and use of the social, material and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for teaching and learning processes (Spillane et al. 2001; Spillane and Orlina 2005). As such, this also allows us to consider the managerial dimensions of leadership involved in maintaining the conditions necessary to help an organisation achieve current goals (Cuban 2001). At the same time, interactions between leaders and other agents are brought to the forefront. Leadership is therefore seen as 'an influencing relation' between leaders and followers that takes place in situations (Spillane and Orlina 2005; Woods 2004; Woods et al. 2004). This understanding takes into account that the principal cannot be sufficiently informed to make all decisions in a school nor can she/he be present in all places and situations where decisions need to be made. In this way we consider the influence of leadership twofold: making the decisions and, at the same time, producing the premises for decision-making of followers (sense-making or setting the scene) (Moos 2009).

Since recent changes in all three countries imply a movement from input-oriented towards output-oriented school governing, we have chosen emerging practices of

accountability as the focal point for our analysis. Researchers have developed different typologies for describing how different key actors in the school system are held to account. The typologies have been developed over time, and as such, they differ according to how accountability is defined. Some researchers regard accountability as systems, while others describe accountability in terms of different forms, processes or social practices. While older typologies seem to focus on institutionalised accountability related to different spheres and roles in a hierarchy, more recent versions express how forms of accountability are included in what is referred to as performance management and directed towards individuals (cf. Ozga 2009). We have chosen to define accountability as the management of diverse expectations generated within and outside the organisation (cf. Romzek and Dubnick 1987). These expectations differ according to direction, clarity and consequences and imply processes where the distribution of different functions, tasks and responsibilities are clearly defined. The expectations can sometimes be contradicting, and the degree of authority and control of key actors, such as school leaders, can differ. In order to differentiate between different types of expectations for our analysis, we have been inspired by the work of Moos (2003), Firestone and Shipps (2005) and Sinclair (1995).

The first category is managerial expectations and the extent to which they have changed at the national and local levels, as interpreted in acts, regulations, policy documents, evaluation procedures, official standards and criteria for success and accountability practices. This can also be linked to increasing demands from the marketplace: competition between schools and schools' financial situations. In Denmark and Sweden, we have seen that free choice of school has led to increased competition among schools. In Norway there are very few private schools.

The second category relates to expectations of the public – of the local community and parents – and to what degree these have changed in the course of the project. In our case stories, local political and community expectations are more important than national political expectations.

The third accountability category is professional expectations. This category refers to the how school leaders believe they best meet the needs of pupils, staff and the school organisation; we compare our data on the subject from the first and second rounds of data gathering. Closely linked to this are possible changes in cultural and ethical considerations with respect to the needs of the children and adults affiliated to the schools and school leaders' understanding of the societal aims and purposes of education.

The different types of expectations relate to different logics, which emphasise societal concerns, political pressures, bureaucratic concerns, top-down management, responses to market dynamics, professional responsibility and ethical principles. These logics can exist in combination or parallel to each other, and they can easily conflict (cf. Firestone and Shipps). If we look at the relationships between the different categories, they are linked to different areas. For instance, responses to political, managerial and public accountability are more likely to be linked to external accountability dynamics, while professional expectations often relate to school internal processes. However, schools seem to vary in their configuration of the

elements that comprise their internal processes, e.g. teachers' sense of work responsibility; the collective expectations of staff, school leaders and parents; and the organisational rules, incentives and processes that encourage or compel external as well as internal accountability practices.

10.3   Changes in the External Context of School Leadership

In the UK, the USA, Australia and Canada, school governing structures and processes have changed markedly since the early 1980s, and Denmark, Sweden and Norway have experienced considerable changes since the early 1990s. These developments were influenced by new public management (NPM) reforms, which can best be described as an overarching set of principles that are being played out in various ways in different countries (Hood 1991, 2007; Johansson and Lundberg 2002; Moos 2009). In general, this set of principles accentuates a focus on flat and flexible organisational structures, hands-on professional management, evaluating performance according to explicit standards, flexible structures and management by objectives and results (Heinrich 2005; Olsen 2002; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004; Rhodes 1999). In contrast to Anglo-Saxon countries, NPM reforms in Scandinavian countries have been characterised as *modernisers* rather than *marketisers* (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). This means that the reforms followed managerial and user-responsive strategies rather than competition and marketisation strategies. In the field of education, these reforms involved a decentralisation of finances and administration from states to local authorities or institutions: a powerful tool for making the education systems more user-responsive, more efficient and cost-effective. However, decentralisation was also seen as a governing strategy, which provided greater opportunities for active participation at the local level and thereby strengthened democracy (cf. Karlsen 1993).

However, this decentralisation trend in the 1990s has been coupled with more central regulation, establishing systems for evaluation and monitoring educational quality. In the Scandinavian countries, these developments have taken some time, but they were speeded up by the first and especially the second PISA reports. In Norway standardised testing was introduced for the first time in 2004 (in the fifth and eight forms) and a national quality assessment system in 2005. Because the evaluation of the standardised tests showed that the quality of these tests was inadequate, they were improved and introduced again in 2007. Since 2006 there have been nationally initiated projects, focusing on developing standards which are referred to as local indicators of goal achievement. In Sweden the right-wing alliance government has increased the number of national tests and compares Swedish results with the international PISA results. The government has also introduced a control agency, the Swedish School Inspectorate, which is still trying to find its place as a control agency. In 2006 Denmark decided to introduce national tests in all forms. There is no inspection.

Moreover, in all three countries, curricula and standards for student achievement are predominantly developed at a central level and observe cross-national frameworks, e.g. the European Framework. These curricula can be characterised as competency-oriented, as they emphasise the development of basic competencies in literacy, numeracy and science (Karseth and Sivesind 2009; Sivesind and Bachmann 2008). This makes it easier to develop standards which can be used to assess and compare student achievements nationally and internationally (Moos 2006).

The fact that the schools in these three countries now have different types of information and results, which can indicate the degree of success, provides a foundation for new emerging accountability practices. In Denmark and Norway, the municipalities, as *school owners*, are in charge of quality development in schools. In general there is a strong focus on reporting to the municipalities, and the schools' results on the standardised tests represent a powerful means for holding school leaders accountable. The extent to which the schools' results are linked to consequences in terms of soft accountability mechanisms differs from municipality to municipality.

Due to increased national output governing of schools, the three Scandinavian countries are tightening the couplings between state and school. In Denmark and Sweden, the major logics, bureaucratic and marketplace accountabilities, make up the basis for all political regimes and thus for the isomorphic development of national governance. The carriers of these developments are dominant political discourses of *competition of the knowledge economies*, effectiveness and *back to basics* and social technologies, like international comparisons, benchmarking, rankings, league tables and contracts. In Denmark the dominant political discourse is changing from traditional democratic *Bildung* to effective *back-to-basics* schooling, i.e. more focus on national level goals and accountability (tests, quality reports, student plans). The couplings between national, local and school levels have changed, so that finances and day-to-day business have been loosened, and goals and evaluations of student outcomes have been tightened.

In Sweden the quality of schools is also a very central element on the policy agenda. The right-wing alliance government is after 7 years still working on improving student outcomes. There is much more focus on international comparisons and measurement, and there is an intense debate over which methods should be used. A state school inspection has been introduced for improvement, via quality control and new national goals, and principal and teacher educations are being implemented. In addition, a new school law was introduced in 2011. In the first evaluation, a principal characterised the implementation process as follows: 'It is like building a roundabout in high traffic!' The process is still running, and the role of the principal has been strengthen so much that we can say it is now an entirely new role.

In Norway there is also increased focus on monitoring student achievements on national, municipal as well as school levels (Skedsmo and Hopfenbeck forthcoming). The policy discourse centres on using student outcomes to improve learning, and elements such as monitoring, control and accountability are concealed (Skedsmo 2011).

10.4   Leadership Functions in the Schools: Responding to External Expectations

Denmark: School leadership can be described as a translation of external expectations into internal direction, and it is often more reactive than proactive. The leadership practice has not changed in the last 5 years, but there is a growing attention to the external demands following the growing national goal-setting and accountability demands. The trend of governments tightening their couplings with schools through the use of more detailed and strict social technologies like testing, comparisons, rankings and benchmarking is producing results in that most of the school leaders are more focused on the effectiveness and *back-to-basics* trends. At the same time, they are trying not to neglect or let teachers neglect the comprehensive, holistic goals.

Norway: In the initial study, we found that school leaders were engaged in motivating teachers according to the aims formulated in the national curricula and priorities set by policymakers and administrators. They were personalising institutional goals and building trust between themselves and teachers. In the three Norwegian schools, this focus has been maintained. However, we found greater awareness of student outcomes in terms of achievements on the standardised tests. In the interviews the school leaders at Brage and Furuheia compared the results of their schools over the last years, and they knew how their schools performed compared to other schools in the municipality and the national average. They accentuated the importance of helping students to live up to their potential. Both schools are recognised in their local community for taking very good care of students with special needs, and this is the reason why many parents want their children to go to these schools.

There is no standardised testing in upper secondary school in Norway. However, compared to the interview 5 years ago, the school leader at Ospelia upper secondary school is also more aware of quality indicators such as dropout rates and the results of the school with respect to the school leaving examination and the craft certificate. During the past 5 years, the number of students characterised by weak academic results and low school motivation has increased. This is due to changes in mobility in this region and recruitment procedures which are based on the students' marks from lower secondary school. The changes have led to greater competition between schools and to nonadmission of students with poor academic results and a history of low school motivation; these students thus have to commute. When the school leader talks about the success of the school in the last years, he emphasises the positive feedback from the school administration at the county level on the school's efforts and accomplishments regarding this group of students.

In spite of greater awareness of school results and comparison with the results of other schools, it does not seem as if new output measures have led to any changes in the schools' practices. The school leaders' definition of success is the same as 5 years ago. All three school leaders are still working on providing a good education for all students according to their needs and abilities. The core values of the schools are also the same, as are the criteria for a good school: to see the whole student and

to get the best out of each individual. The school leaders do not report any changes in how they respond to external expectations, and the schools seem to be recognised for their efforts.

Sweden: The school leaders from our case studies who had been successful had left their positions 5 years later. Interestingly, the teachers in both schools did not accept the new incoming school leaders. The teachers, in both cases, had worked in self-governing teacher teams, and the *second-generation* school leaders had neglected their relations to these teams. Subsequently, teacher pressure made the teachers leave. *Third-generation* school leaders have now been appointed. The teachers have been important stakeholders in the recruitment process this time, and they think that they will be able to cooperate with these new leaders.

In both Denmark, Norway and Sweden, there seems to be a growing awareness of the importance of managing through personal sense-making, setting the scene and the agenda (producing the premises) and in making connections to decision-making in the everlasting, ongoing interactions with teachers and in developing new and appropriate social technologies for those purposes, e.g. teams and annual plan. Therefore, there is more attention to social structures, technologies and school cultures.

10.5   Expectations of the Public: The Local Community and Parents

During the first school visits, we found that many schools were engaged in providing working relations with parents and the local community. Some of the school leaders analysed the context in which they were located to find out about expectations to schools and to establish alliances and partners in supportive and productive networks. They focus on building good relations with local educational authorities. In many cases this is done via professional organisations and unions and networks.

There is a growing tendency in most of the cases to looking at the local community (including parents) as separate from local school governing (municipal authorities) and very much so from national governing processes. In many of the case schools, there is an increased focus on cooperation with parents. At the same time, the school leaders in more cases are seen as integrated partners in loc.l governance (as part of the authority) in a move to reduce and weaken the power of local authorities and leave more decisions/forms of influence to national authorities. Summaries of the case-by-case accounts are more detailed and diverse:

Denmark: Parents have become a focus for school leaders. In one school this was a result of a temporary dive in student results; in another it was a result of the potential risk of having to merge with another school. There is more focus on collaboration with parents for two reasons: their involvement in re-culturing the school and in the fight against school mergers. The relations to local authorities have changed in some places from being based on dialogue to being based on written principles, procedures and contracts.

Norway: In the Norwegian case schools, parents are required to show an interest in the schoolwork of their children. However, the extent to which the Norwegian case schools collaborate with the parents seems to depend on the challenges the schools are facing and, thereby, the need to collaborate. One of the school leaders has continued his strategy to involve parents as little as possible in school activities. This is due to differences in their socioeconomic backgrounds and the fact that involvement of the parents will accentuate the same differences between the students. At Furuheia the school leader has purposefully involved the parents in solving discipline problems, which was a big problem for the school a couple of years ago. To be able to solve these problems, the school needed to collaborate extensively with the parents. At Ospelia upper secondary school, the students are older, and therefore, collaboration with parents is not that emphasised. However, the school leader has continued his work on increasing student participation, and the school has a well-functioning student council, which meets regularly with the school leader. As mentioned earlier, the school leader had very positive experiences of hiring a social counsellor to take care of students with extra needs. In addition, this school, as an upper secondary school that offers vocational training, collaborates extensively with local companies and industry. Compared to the situation 5 years ago, the school has established partnerships to the benefit of the students as well as the companies.

Sweden: Parents want their children to have a pleasant time, both in school and in their spare time. They also want their children to focus on getting good marks, so that they can go on to the next school level, but not necessarily very high marks. The success of schools is often measured according to local community expectations with less weight given to national expectations. This causes some tensions in schools. Both schools have very good community relations and are supported by the parents. The parents really like that no child is left behind, even if it means that the schools have not yet succeeded in both this broad commitment and in producing excellent marks.

At the second visit, most case schools had expanded their community work considerably, some in relation to parents and others in relation to new partner institutions and enterprises. In most places there are clear indications of a move towards systems leadership for many reasons: schools are looking for support from parents; they are forming partnerships with social and cultural institutions that can support schools with challenges which are not easily, if at all, met within schools; some schools are forming partnerships with institutions and enterprises in order to facilitate a broader learning area for their students; and then, some schools are networking with authorities and policymakers at several levels to try to influence the context and expectations of their school.

10.6   Responding to Internal Expectations

In the first round of visits, we found, in accordance with other research, that an important leadership criterion for student success is the school leaders' attention to the core tasks of the school: teachers' practice in the classroom, interactions

between teachers and students and students' peer relations. The school leaders set and continuously raised the standards and expectations and produced improvement plans, and they put much effort into providing instructional support. Moreover, they were engaged in promoting reflection and modelling desired commitment, values, norms and practices. They continuously worked on building capacities that fit with the new demands and expectations of policymakers, parents and students, and many places constantly struggled to build persistence for challenging circumstances.

In the meantime this work had been continued. Thus, in all schools there seems to be a growing awareness of the importance of leading through personal sense-making, setting the scene and the agenda and producing the premises for decision-making, focusing on interactions with teachers. More attention is paid to the social structures, technologies and cultures of the schools in order to achieve collective aims. Important means for school leaders to influence this seem to be establishing team structures, supporting the teamwork of teachers, making annual plans, etc., to clarify the priorities of the school and set the direction.

10.7   Increased Focus on Student Outcomes

Denmark: The shift in external expectations has had an impact on the inner life of schools. The need to measure outcomes and the more detailed national goals, especially with respect to literacy and numeracy, have brought more attention to these curriculum areas and less to cross-curricular activities. More specialists, like reading consultants, are brought into schools in order to support teachers. School leaders put more weight on new social technologies like teachers' and teams' annual plans and student plans, thereby making expectations explicit. Teacher teams and networks are strengthened.

Norway: As mentioned earlier, in the three Norwegian schools, there is a greater awareness of student achievements. Thus, when the school leaders and the teachers talk about the level of achievement among the students, they relate this to the abilities of the students, their engagement in their own learning processes and how the schools can help them reach their potential. The importance of a good social environment is accentuated and provides a foundation for high-quality teaching and learning processes. In order to enhance student learning, several structural changes have been implemented, such as the use of screening tests to document the level of student achievement in order to meet the needs of the students, increased collaboration in teacher teams and hiring nonteaching staff to take care of the social environment and support students.

Sweden: The *first-generation* school leaders focused on student outcomes and teacher collaboration and thus produced good results and a good climate, while the *second-generation* was more negligent of both tasks and tried to ride on the positive culture, a leadership approach that was not successful in either school. The *third-generation* has begun their regime with focusing on student outcomes. This might become successful if they are also able to collaborate with the teachers.

The case stories demonstrate the changes in school contexts and expectations to schools. The pressure of national aims, performance measurement and accountability has increased considerably in the Scandinavian countries. The school leaders pay more attention to student outcomes, especially when it comes to basic competencies. In order to respond to new expectations, they focus on strengthening the internal capacity of their schools in ways that support student learning in those areas.

10.8   Trust

During the first visits, we found that school leaders were engaged in stimulating teachers intellectually, promoting reflection and modelling desired commitment, values, norms and practices. There was a continuous work on building capacities that could fit the new demands and expectations of policymakers, parents and students, and there was in many places a constant struggle to build persistence for challenging circumstances. During the second visits, we found the following:

Denmark: School leaders often lead in indirect ways by setting the agenda or the scene. Most teachers are working in self-governing teacher teams with a high degree of responsibility and autonomy, but also with new forms of internal accountability. School leaders and leadership teams try to strike a balance between *leading at a distance* and being *at hand* and supportive to teachers.

Norway: With respect to leadership strategies, the school leaders in all three schools say that they express their expectations of teachers and students more explicitly and they observe lessons more frequently, which the teachers support.

Sweden: The successful school leaders who left focused a lot on pedagogical leadership through collaboration with and trust in teacher and teacher teams. The two intermediate school leaders neglected this close collaboration with staff. The third school leaders say they will focus on quality in teaching and collaboration. The question is if the form of this collaboration will please the teachers and the teacher teams. If they are not pleased, we will probably see two more principals leave their positions. And our lesson is that strong teacher cultures are important for principals' chances of success.

It seems to be a common feature of all case schools that both school leaders and teachers insist that teaching is not a technical, instrumental activity but is deep down a matter of relations, interactions, communication and making sense of oneself, one's relations to other people and to the outer world.

In some cases it has become more evident that there is a focus on building and sustaining trust between teachers and school leaders. In some instances the basis for trust is now clarified to a much greater extent than previously. School leaders can trust teachers to be responsible and hard-working.

10.9   Distribution

More work remains to be done with regard to building teacher teams, distributing authority from school leaders and middle leaders to teacher teams and individual teachers. At the same time, there is a growing closeness between school leaders and teachers in professional and personal relations of trust, support and care and, perhaps most importantly, a clear direction and expectations.

During the first visits, school leaders were encouraging collaborative decision-making, teamwork and distributed leadership in a collective culture and in structures that supported collaboration. Participation in decision-making, premise production and connections were part of a safe and secure environment for teachers. During the latest visits to the case schools, we found the following:

Denmark: Leadership teams as well as teacher teams are pivotal features of schools. School leaders' relations to individual teachers, teams and the whole staff are multilayered and often take place in an intricate mix of meetings. Contracts between school leader and teacher teams and individual teachers are important tools for leading.

Norway: In all schools teacher teams have been established. Collaboration and shared leadership responsibility can be seen as part of a process of strengthening the internal capacity in order to respond to new expectations. One of the schools has experienced a big turnover due to retirements and has subsequently hired many young teachers. The new teachers have introduced more extensive collaboration, because they are used to this way of working in their teacher education.

Sweden: The teacher teams are central to the schools. They focus on creating a good above average, but not excellent, school. The school leaders' role is to work with the organisation of the school and discuss quality questions with the teachers, parents and students.

The organisations of many case schools are becoming team-based networks or webs. Leadership is being distributed from the school leader to leadership teams and further on to teacher teams.

On the one hand, this trend seems to leave teachers more room for manoeuvre, individually and in teams; on the other hand, school leaders develop new ways of making their influence noticeable through different forms of sense-making and through the use of new social technologies like annual plans, team meetings with the management and other regular meetings. In many cases, middle leaders, specialists, are brought in to support teachers.

Generally, there seems to be a trend – occurring at different paces and to different extents – towards recognising that teachers must be self-governing (Foucault 1991), i.e. that they are given room for manoeuvre, followed by strict standards and demands for accountability. School leaders are aware that teachers need to receive support and care in order to manage their choices and room for manoeuvre, thus creating a safe and secure working environment.

10.10   Professional Expectations

In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, there now seems to be more focus on student outcomes, and areas such as basic competencies are prioritised. These are concerned with the broader aims of education, emphasising democracy and *Bildung*.

Denmark: Traditionally the vision of comprehensive democratic *Bildung*, which encompasses both subject matter and personal and social competencies, is still strong, but now this approach is being challenged, and there is much more focus on basic literacy and numeracy. The school leaders worry that they may be unable to sustain this vision.

Norway: The schools focus on basic competencies as well as taking care of key issues related to equity and social justice. The standardised testing and increased monitoring of students' progress are not seen as a problem. On the contrary, it can help schools to focus. None of the school leaders experience external accountability pressure from their superiors at the municipal level or from parents. They rather experience support and recognition because of their reputation of taking good care of students with special needs.

Sweden: The case schools' focus is both on social goals and academic knowledge. Both schools are producing marks above the Swedish average, but could do even better if they focused more on academic knowledge. However, the parents are satisfied with a school that is above the Swedish average.

10.11   Discussion and Summing-Up

Looking at the findings from the case schools in the three countries, three trends especially appear to be common features. The first trend is the way school leaders translate and mediate external expectations to fit internal conceptions.

Translation of external expectations: External stakeholders (government, municipality, parents, etc.) often have a set of legitimate, although often contradictory, expectations of schools. The school leaders seem to take on the responsibility of *mediators*, which means that they translate the expectations into a language and a practice that are acceptable and legitimate to the teachers and other school staff. This is part of the process of school leaders' setting a direction for the school and how they compel a sense of purpose, develop a shared vision and help build consensus for aims and strategies for achieving these aims.

Moreover, the principals in the case schools prioritise developing internal capacity as a strategy for responding to external expectations. For the principals this implies creating suitable structures and nourishing cultures that support internal capacity building. In doing this, all the principals seem to take the needs of the students as a point of departure.

Comparing the Nordic reactions to external expectation with the UK-US reactions in the ISSPP project (Moos et al. 2008), we see an important difference. While the

Nordic school leaders mobilise teachers and middle leaders, there is a strong tendency in the UK and the USA that school leaders take over the command. One example is the privatisation of a struggling school. The school leader gets the powers of a CEO and starts letting a lot of the teachers go (Jacobson et al. 2011). Generally, the UK-US school leaders were more compliant with national standards and high-stakes accountability systems. Those patterns are in line with the traditional norms and values described in the Prelude.

Leading the environments: All the schools are profoundly dependent on their environments, be they political, administrative, community, professional, cultural or other. On the one hand, the principals seem to focus on understanding and interpreting signals and expectations of many stakeholders. On the other hand, they have to be able to communicate and legitimate school priorities and practices in relation to the results achieved to relevant stakeholders (Weick 2001).

We can also conclude from our analysis that both principal leadership and student outcomes can be characterised and described as continuously successful over 5 ears. Sustainability is, according to the United Nations' Brundtland Commission, 'the capacity of organizations to self-renew and, if applied to schools, underlines the importance of ordering institutions in ways that are sustainable in the long term' (United Nations 1987). This means that we have to shift our understanding of school development – and thus of successful school leaders – from the work of individuals towards a more organisational, collaborative understanding: from leader and manager towards leadership. This is not news to the school leaders in our case schools, but it has been underscored in most schools in the past 5 years (Moos et al. 2011).

Again, building on the Brundtland Commission, we must meet 'the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (United Nations 1987). We can focus on the interdependencies between schools and their present and future contexts. The school leaders in our cases know that their schools are placed in and are part of local communities in every respect: culture, social circumstances, economy, history, caring for past and future generations, etc.

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