Leaders of the profession and professional leaders. School leaders making sense of themselves and their jobs

Jakob Ditlev Bøje, University of Southern Denmark, Department for the Study of Culture
jdb@sdu.dk, 0045-65506550
Lars Frode Frederiksen, University of Southern Denmark, Department for the Study of Culture
frode@sdu.dk, 0045-65503915

In most of the Western world, high expectations of educational leadership exist. School leaders are regarded as important actors in the implementation of reforms, which are occurring at an increasing pace. Furthermore, they are regarded as professionals who can make judgments on behalf of their pupils, teachers, and schools. However, becoming a school leader is an underexposed process that typically involves a departure from one’s previous professional identity as a teacher. In this article, we study this process by analysing qualitative interviews that were conducted with three school leaders in the Danish primary public school (Folkeskole): a young member, a middle-aged member, and a senior member. Our point of departure is Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, as well as narrative theory. We find that all school leaders construct professional identities in continuation of their teacher identities but that these differ along the lines of what we refer to as professional leaders and leaders of the profession.

Introduction

In most of the Western world, there is an increasing focus on educational leadership. School leaders are regarded as guarantors of the ‘change imperative’ suggested by neoliberal policies (Apple, 2001; Eacott, 2011; Ball, 2008; Hall, 2016). Furthermore, this position is sustained by educational researchers claiming evidence that school leaders are one of the most significant factors influencing students’ learning, which is measured by their performance (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, 2011). However, these claims are contested and debated from other and less causal positions, stating the multifaceted and hard predicable aspects of leadership practice (Gunter, 2016; Møller, 2016).

In Denmark, educational leadership has been a keyword in the latest reforms of the Folkeskole—the public primary and lower secondary school—which accounts for approximately 80% of the youth cohort (Ministeriet for børn, undervisning og ligestilling, 2017). As a result of reforms of this institution, school leaders have been granted more power in the sense that they are able to control teachers’ work to a higher degree than previously (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2012). The aim of these reforms has been to make the Folkeskole more competitive, setting aside previous ideals of equality, democracy, and social integration, as well as the teaching profession. In accordance with this new and strengthened position of school leaders, professional training has been placed on the agenda, with an aim of professionalization of school leadership. Various discussions are occurring regarding how best to train the future leaders (COK, 2017; Den Offentlige, 2017; Kommunernes Landsforening, 2017). Do they need a master’s degree, or do

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shorter courses suffice? Should the training be academic, practical, or both? In what sort of combination? Which organizations should be allowed to offer training, and which should not? Some discussions relate to whether school leadership is a new and emerging profession and consider recruitment, responsibility, certification, and training in these terms, including the new associations, which organize school leaders (see e.g. Lederforeningen, 2008; Moos, Carney, Johansson, & Mehlby, 2000). These questions are also present in the international context, as illustrated by the current publishing of comprehensive international handbooks on school leadership education and preparation (e.g. Lumby, Crow & Pashiardis, 2008; Young, Crow, Murphy & Ogawa, 2009).

However, the idea of school leaders as an emerging profession presents some problems. First, the majority of school leaders are already professionals—that is, they are teachers (European Commission, 2013). Thus, becoming a school leader and establishing a new profession implies a departure from one’s previous profession and professional identity. This is a different and somewhat contradictory process compared to what is usually meant by professional training and professionalization (Abbott, 1988; Evetts, 2003; Parsons, 1954). Furthermore, the starting point of the possible professionalization of school leaders is a political demand—not a jurisdictional claim made in relation to a recognized societal task. In other words, school leaders are not so much in a process of professionalization ‘from within’ but, rather, in a process of professionalization ‘from above’ (Evetts, 2011). This makes their project fragile and indeed political.

In this article, we will focus on the construction of professional identities and, more specifically, on the construction of school leaders’ professional identities in the tension between what can be called leaders of the profession and professional leaders. That is, the first among equals (a vanguard in the professional complex, according to a Parsonian perspective) and a more distinct leader identity associated with business, management, and accountancy.4 We will attempt to look beyond some of the manifest expectations of school leaders, including expectations of their training programmes, and will aim to show how being and becoming a school leader is a far more complex, nuanced, fragile, and sometimes contradictory process. We will do this by studying how school leaders narrate themselves and their schools and, thus, construct what can be regarded as a tertiary habitus (as a leader) that builds upon, but, at the same time, differs from, a secondary habitus (as a teacher).11 This contribution is relevant due to the increased attention to school leadership, including the recent attempts to professionalize school leaders. The concept of professionalization has not been conceptualized in any precise way when it comes to school leadership. Will this imply a process similar to that of the established professions? Or is the suggestion a new understanding of professionalization and professionalism?

On this basis, we pose the following research question: How do school leaders construct professional identities, and what might be the implications of these? The structure of the article is as follows: First, we present the state of the art. Second, we present our methodology. Third, we analyse the school leaders’ narratives. Thereafter, we conclude and discuss our findings.

State of the art
In the following sections, we will outline our field of study, covering three interrelated issues: (1) school leadership; (2) professions, professionalization, and professional identities; (3) and school
leadership education and preparation.

**School leadership**

Perspectives on school leadership are almost infinite, and the related theoretical approaches are numerous. The discipline may be characterized as multi-paradigmatic and as assembling a plethora of interests stemming from politicians, practitioners, academics, and the public. Nevertheless, two major positions can be discerned.

Based on an alliance between political and academic interests, the research on educational leadership has historically been dominated by a *rationalistic* and somewhat *instrumental* approach (Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson, 2011) that emphasizes the leaders’ roles and responsibilities for the successes or failures of individual schools. This approach has been labelled ‘the theory movement’ (Eacott, 2015), and subsequent research within this tradition has revolved around issues such as school effectiveness, evidence, what works, and best practice.

This ‘theory movement’ has always been contested, and several attempts have been made to capture the variations in approaches to school leadership and to challenge the rationalistic approach. For instance, Hartley’s (2010) analysis of distributed leadership in education takes point of departure in Burrell & Morgan’s (1979) seminal analysis of paradigmatic variations in organizational studies. Another effort is made by Gunter & Ribbins (2003) who derive six provinces of knowledge production in the field of educational leadership. Gunter et al. (2013) also study variations in distributed leadership by constructing maps for approaches to leadership studies. Møller (2016) sums up with four lines of research rather close to Burrell and Morgan’s approach: (A) the abovementioned goal rational approach with a focus on ‘what works’ and ‘best practice’, (B) interpretive and constructivist studies with a focus on understanding leaders’ work and shaping of identities, (C) critical studies that pay attention to conflicting interests and power structures influencing education and school leadership. These studies are often inspired by Bourdieu (e.g. Gunter, 2016; Eacott, 2011), and (D) postmodern approaches with a focus on analysing and deconstructing dominating discourses.

To sum up, there are no signs of academic agreement regarding school leadership. Thus, school leadership cannot be perceived as an unambiguous, given entity. With respect to school leaders and the understanding of school leadership, there are competing and sometimes contradictory discourses (Rǿsæn & Frederiksen, 2017).

**Profession, professionalization, and professional identity**

Historically, research on the professions—both the classical (e.g. doctors, lawyers, and priests) and the semi-professions (e.g. teachers, nurses, and social workers)—has taken place within the sociology of professions (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977; Parsons, 1954). However, due to today’s closer link between the state and the market, research on the professions is increasingly taking place within organization studies (Larsen & Hein, 2007; Noordegraaf, 2011; Scott, 2008). Indeed, these two fields of research seem to merge—as do professions and organizations—or at least influence each other more closely. Professionals are increasingly employed by large global organizations that are driven by a market rationale; therefore, their professional standards can be difficult to maintain.

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Scott (2008) argues that ‘claimants to professional status have forsaken civic-minded moral appeals—“the social trusteeship” model that had long prevailed—to emphasize instead the value of “technical expertise”, as validated by the market’ (p. 232).

Due to this fusion of fields and forces, the concept of profession has become blurred. In fact, it can be regarded as a floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) that various groups struggle to define from their own strategic perspectives. School leadership is not a profession, according to the classical definition, in that school leaders do not control recruitment and training, have no formal knowledge base, and do not have a monopoly on a recognized, societal task (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977). However, they do exhibit some of the usual traits—for example, the development of a professional ethic (Lederforeningen, 2008)—and measured by a more pragmatic, heuristic, and post-structural definition (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Fournier, 1999; Kipping, 2011), school leadership may be called a profession.

Professionalization involves not only associations, training programmes, and political tactics but also the people who are supposed to be the professionals. The construction of their professional identities has been an issue within various studies. Some describe how civic-minded, altruistic, and client-oriented identities are ‘hijacked’ or even thwarted in managerialist times, assuming a more corporate image (Evets, 2011; Hansen & Bøje, 2017; Kipping, 2011; Waring & Curie, 2009). Others describe how traditional notions of professionalism are, in fact, defended, despite external pressure (Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick, & Walker, 2007; Brante, Johnsson, Olofsson, & Svensson, 2015). Some dwell on more theoretical discussions regarding what a professional identity comprises and how it is constructed (Eriksen & Jørgensen, 2005; Heggen, 2008; Muel-Dreyfus, 2004).

In the case of school leaders, Moos, Kofod, and Brinkkjær (2011) claim (on the basis of survey data) that school leaders have assumed a clear leader identity and have left the teacher identity in the passing. Klausen, Michelsen, and Nielsen (2011) and Nihlfors and Johansson (2013) presented similar findings (also on the basis of survey data with fixed answers). However, all studies find that school leaders are still ‘soft’ in regard to the values and visions of their work—that is, they are more in tune with the public service ideal than the private sector ideal of profit. This might be due to the Nordic welfare state, which is still in place, although it is coming under pressure. Speaking from an in international perspective (and based on qualitative interview data), Courtney and Gunter (2015) described what they call school leaders’ vision work. This implies the narrating of leader identities, which is similar to what we study in this article. According to Courtney and Gunter (2015), school leaders have become omnipotent. The high expectations of these leaders and their work have given them immense power and contributed to the construction of grandiose identities that dominate teachers. Eacott (2011) arrived at a similar conclusion regarding educational leaders in Australia, although he described them as more loyal deliverers of state-initiated reforms. Crow, Day, and Møller (2017), on the other hand, stress the continuing complexity of identity formation among school principals’. They contribute with a theoretical framework for researching school principals’ identities. Lumby and English (2009) highlight the mythic, religious, and metaphysical thinking that often goes with the education and training of school leaders, resulting in a plurality of highly contextual identities. Scribner and Crow (2012), on basis of a case study with a high school leader in a reform setting, identify the various identities

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which must be developed and negotiated. Among others, they discuss ‘the teacher at heart’. This identity comes close to what we research as ‘the leader of the profession’.

Leadership education and preparation
The third issue in our field of study links the two previous issues by asking how future leaders should be educated and prepared for the task of school leadership. Several aspects of this question may be considered. Among these are what the formal requirements of entry and licensing should be, who should decide the aims and frames of the courses, who should provide the courses, and what the actual content, length, and structure of the courses should be. Our case is from Denmark, but these issues are subject to political, practical as well as academic interest which is widespread. International handbooks give account of principles and actual developments in different countries (e.g. Lumby, Crow & Pashiardis, 2008; Young, Crow, Murphy & Ogawa, 2009).

The formal requirements vary between and within countries (Uljens, Møller, Årlestig, & Frederiksen, 2013). In Denmark, all school leaders at the primary school level must achieve a diploma in public leadership. These programmes are offered by university colleges but must follow centrally regulated guidelines. Leaders at the upper secondary school level more commonly possess a master’s degree offered by universities; however, this is not mandatory. These programmes have more autonomy regarding content and form, but they are still controlled through a governmental accreditation process.

Globally, still more countries require formal leadership education, of which the universities are the main providers. However, the regulation of and responsibility for the content are typically placed outside the universities. It is difficult to compare the content and form of school leaders’ training programmes. Although several attempts have been made to list variations in course content (Osterman & Hafner, 2009), beneath the titles of specific courses (e.g. strategic leadership, organizational development, and personal management), variations can still exist.

Many preparation courses reflect the aforementioned variations in the theoretical perceptions of school leadership. This points to a division between two approaches to school leadership preparation—approaches that both make claims to professionalism and professional development. One approach subscribes to a standardized content and focuses on school leaders as loyal implementers of governmental policies. Gronn (2003) referred to this approach as designer leadership. Here, one may observe a kind of decoupling of school leaders from their former profession and, simultaneously, a tighter coupling with the political steering chain. Thus, this approach may be described in terms of professionalization ‘from above’ (Evettts, 2011). In line with this, practical frameworks have been adopted regarding how to create successful school leaders, resulting in what seems to be the formation of a ‘strong’ and unequivocal leadership identity (Simkins, 2012).

The other approach to school leadership preparation subscribes to the more constructivist view. Here, attempts are made to link former professional values with new ideas and ethics of school leadership. Hence, this approach is closer to the traditional idea of occupational professionalism (Cranston, 2013).

In numerous countries, there appears to be a double purpose in school laws stating, on the one
hand, that academic performance is important and, on the other, that democratic Bildung is important. In many cases, the first purpose—due, for example, to regimes of measurement—seems to have priority over the other. How school leaders react to this dilemma depends on their professional values. Moreover, when organizations appear to show reluctance towards externally initiated changes, it may be due to the leaders’ use of their professional judgment: They defend professional and institutional values. To use the words of James March (1984), ‘Sometimes they protect policymakers from the follies of foolish policies’ (p. 20).

Professional training programmes share a common dilemma—the balancing of academic and practical knowledge. In a recently published report by the National Association of Local Authorities in Denmark, which is the employer of public professionals in that country, practical knowledge was generally favoured over academic knowledge (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2017). Based on an assessment of the current supply, the authors suggested changes in the training programme for school leaders. They found that the current preparation course did not provide school leaders with the necessary tools for carrying out their jobs. Thus, they suggested a stronger practice orientation and a greater focus on ‘what works.’ Møller (2016) describes a crucial tension in the development of school leader education in Norway, and it seems prevalent in many other countries as well. On the one hand is the increasing variation in approaches to school leadership research, and on the other hand, partly due to the growing political interest in education and school leadership, an increasing focus on rational theories building on effect studies and best practice.

These positions, disputes, and trends illustrate that school leadership preparation and professionalization are more complicated issues than some politicians and administrators imagine. The process of becoming a school leader may be long and contradictory. It is this process that we seek to examine in this article.

Theory
Theoretically, this article is inspired by Bourdieu’s work (Bourdieu, 1997, 1999; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996; Bourdieu et al., 1999) and, in particular, his concept of habitus, which must always be understood in relation to his concepts of field and capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic). Furthermore, we are inspired by recent applications of this perspective to studies of organizations and leadership (Anderson, 2016; Eacott, 2011; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Meginity & Gunter, 2016; Swartz, 2008). We use this research programme to conceptualise how school leaders may construct a leader identity as a negotiation between prior dispositions (as teachers, middle managers, students, children, etc.) and positions in a social space. As explained by Bourdieu (2005),

… in all the cases where dispositions encounter conditions (including fields) different from those in which they were constructed and assembled, there is a dialectical confrontation between habitus, as structured structure, and objective structures. In this confrontation, habitus operates as a structuring structure able to selectively perceive and to transform the objective structure according to its own structure while, at the same time, being re-structured, transformed in its makeup by the pressure of the objective structure. (pp. 46–47).
In keeping with this perspective, an analysis of leader habitus is not just that. While individuals and their adaptations to social space are the point of departure, their trajectories can simultaneously tell us about the social space that makes these possible or impossible (Bertaux & Thompson, 2007; Bourdieu, 1997).

To stress the productive, innovative, and developmental aspect of habitus somewhat more than Bourdieu did, we will also apply a narrative perspective (Bengtsson & Andersen, 2017; Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017; Czarniawska, 1998; Goodson, 2008; Greimas, 1973; Riessman 2017). Precisely how innovative a habitus (or identity) can be is a significant discussion among followers of both Bourdieu’s research and different forms of narrative theory. Roughly, Bourdieu insists more on reproduction and on analysing habitus and life history in close relation to social structures than most narrative approaches do (Courtney, 2017). At any rate, we will attempt to sensitize Bourdieu’s approach more towards change, innovation, interpretation, and development by supplementing the analysis with a narrative perspective. An argument for this is the fact that school leaders, as opposed to the existences at the bottom of the world analysed by Bourdieu and colleagues in *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu et al., 1999), are not only subjected to social conditions but are also indeed the subjects of these conditions. As important agents in schools, they can interpret, envision, verbalize, and, as such, create the social world. In fact, they are often expected to do so as ‘strong,’ ‘charismatic,’ and ‘sense-making’ leaders (Courtney & Gunter, 2015; Hjort & Raae, 2012; Weick, 1995).

In particular, we will make use of the so-called actantial model developed by the Russian formalist V. Propp (1984) and, later, the structural linguist A. Greimas (1973). This model (see below) is based on the idea that when we tell stories we often compose them in terms of fairy tales. Furthermore, fairy tales typically revolve around six dimensions or actants that are connected in a certain manner:

![Figure 1. The actantial model](image_url)

The young man (the subject) arrives at a kingdom, from where the princess (the object) has been kidnapped by a goblin (the opponent). The king (the sender) promises the man who has the power and courage to free his daughter that he will get the princess and half of the kingdom as a reward. The young man sets out to find the princess, and on his journey, he meets a fairy (the helper), who...
grants him three wishes after having sent him on three trials. The young man finds the goblin, and using his three new powers, he succeeds in killing him and freeing the princess. The story ends with a happy wedding and, thus, with the young man becoming a prince (the receiver). We will study whether the three school leaders tell their stories in a similar vein, and we will discuss the differences and similarities.

To sum up, we use Bourdieu to conceptualize school leaders’ identity formation as a negotiation between prior dispositions (first and foremost as teachers) and positions in a social space. This conceptualization also forms the basis of the announced distinction between ‘leaders of the profession’ and ‘professional leaders’: we perceive the first category (leaders of the profession) as a possibility where the leader constructs an identity in rather close association to his or her former professional identity as teacher (cf. ‘the first among equals’). Contrary, we perceive the second category (professional leaders) as a possibility where the leader constructs an identity rather distinct from his or her former professional identity. In addition to Bourdieu, we use narrative theory to achieve a more sensitive analysis of the innovative aspects of school leaders’ habitus. As such, narrative theory is primarily used to structure the analyses whereas Bourdieu is used for the overall conceptualization of school leaders’ identity formation as a negotiation of habitus.

Apart from prior dispositions, other constituents of school leader identity may be taken into consideration. The below model summarizes some of those previously discussed (in state of the art). These are: (A) school leadership professionalization; (B) school leadership preparation; (C) school leadership practice. In our analysis, we will look for ways in which school leaders combine these constituents empirically, relying more on some than others.
Empirical data
Empirically, this article is based on a research and development project which has aimed to qualify school leaders of a Danish municipality. Over a three-year period, these leaders have gone through a practically oriented and context-specific training programme, in which the key elements have been (1) consultants who supervised and provided feedback on the leaders’ everyday practice; (2) leader networks in which the leaders could discuss, and help each other with, challenges at their schools; (3) and programme theories, the purpose of which has been to teach leaders how to formulate strategies and respond to their intended and unintended consequences. During this programme, follow-up research has been conducted to evaluate the project. Two surveys (one of which has been finished) have been conducted to determine the participants’ expectations of and experiences with the project, respectively. Furthermore, the ongoing production of programme theories has been collected as data, showing how school leaders think about and formulate strategies at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the project. To delve more deeply into the processes related to the training programme, three focus schools have been selected based on criteria of variance: socioeconomics, ethnicity, performance in national tests, geography (urban/rural), among others. In these schools, interviews have been conducted with school leaders and middle managers in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the project. Moreover,
observations have been made of school leaders in their everyday practice at the office, during meetings, when addressing teachers and pupils, and so on.

For this article, we will primarily use interviews with the school leaders that were conducted at the three focus schools at the beginning of the project. In addition to representing the socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical positions of the focus schools, these leaders represent different levels of experience and have been selected partly for that reason: one is a relatively young school leader, one is a middle-aged leader, and one is a senior member.

The interviews with these leaders were not conducted following a narrative or life history approach. Rather, they were semi-structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) and composed along three broad themes chosen by the researcher: (1) the leader’s background and route to becoming a school leader, (2) his or her views on his or her school, (3) and ideas for programme theories. However, the leaders spoke extensively in a narrative fashion, telling tales about themselves and their schools. One could argue that the loose interview structure (only three broad themes following a time sequence from the school leader’s past to the present and future) did not exactly prevent this from happening but, rather, coproduced it as a part of the school leader’s performance. Attention to this coproduction will be given in the analysis, focussing on the performative nature of a narrative (Riessman, 2017; Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017).

The stories from the three school leaders are particular and marked by specific circumstances. Thus, it is not our aim to derive a generalized picture of all school leaders, not even in Denmark. We do believe, however, that it is possible to learn from these cases and approach a broader pattern using conceptual generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The cases provide us with ‘generalized possibilities’ (Kreiner 2002: 120) in a space where the actual handling of the dilemmas is specific, but where the dilemmas might be more stable.

**Analysis**

As already mentioned, we will use the actantial model to analyse the interviews as narratives. This obtains for their structure primarily: the extent to which the school leaders’ stories are told following a fairy tale-like composition. Furthermore, to analyse the content of the narratives we will look for what Riessman (2017) and Czarniawska (1998) refer to as the plot: the episodes and actions, which the narratives bind together. Inspired by Bourdieu, we will pay special attention to the ways the leaders tell themselves in relation to their school. That is, how and to which extent these two entities are told to constitute each other as habitus and habitat – instantly or gradually, through a harmonious or problematic process, etc.

To consider the dispositions and social structures that, following Bourdieu, make these school leaders’ narratives possible, we will begin the analyses with a short section on the biography and workplace of each school leader. We rely here on what the leaders have told us in their interviews, as well as other sources on the schools and their neighborhoods—for example, statistics from the Danish Ministry of Education. Next, we will analyse their narratives.

**The pedagogically reformed—and reforming—leader**

*Biography and workplace*
Our first school leader, Kristian, is an experienced leader in his sixties who, at the time of the interview, was about to retire. Kristian was originally a teacher and maintained such a position for about 15 years. He was then recruited to middle management. This happened in a sort of indirect way, whereby he ‘grew into’ management on the basis of union work and various representative positions. After six years in middle management, he became a school leader at his current school. Kristian has not obtained much formal leader education. In fact, he was a school leader for about four years before he was admitted to a one-year course arranged by the local municipality. Since then, he has not obtained any further diplomas.

When employed as a school leader, Kristian moved from one school (in which he was a teacher and middle manager) to another. This can be described as a move upwards (Bourdieu, 2005) in that his previous school was situated in a socioeconomically and culturally more challenging neighbourhood than his current school. The pupils at his current school do somewhat better in the national tests than the pupils at his former school (as mentioned, we rely here on statistics provided by the Danish Ministry of Education), the parents are better off financially and are more ethnically homogeneous, and the housing surrounding the school is composed primarily of villas, whereas the housing around his former school primarily comprises social housing. However, according to Kristian more poor families have moved into his current neighbourhood and their children have attended his school in recent years because cheap (often interest-free) real estate loans have allowed them to do so.

Narrative
Kristian’s interview conforms quite well to the standard definitions of a narrative. Compared with the interviews of the two other school leaders, Kristian’s is quite long, and he is rarely interrupted by the interviewer. There is a beginning, a climax, and a happy ending, which is, however, disrupted by some recent developments in the Danish education policy. In terms of genre, the narrative can be described as a drama, in which Kristian is the hero who modernizes the school and makes it more pedagogic and in tune with the pupils’ needs, especially those of the socially disadvantaged children.

The narrative has two plots, one of which is overt, and the other is more implicit. The first and overt plot is about Kristian’s modernization of the school. He states:

Well, one could say that the school was in a time warp when I took over. It wasn’t like the fifties, but I started here in 1994, and at that time, the school was definitely backwards in its view of teaching compared to the school I came from. In some ways, the view was effective, but it was that kind of teaching where one teacher has one class one hour at a time. There wasn’t any cooperation or joint venture as regards the task of teaching.

He goes on to include characters—that is, opponents and helpers—in the narrative (Greimas, 1973). The opponents are primarily teachers who are ‘backwards’ in their way of teaching. He elaborates that these teachers are backwards because they are ‘spoiled’ in the sense that the school’s well-off pupils (and parents) have never forced the teachers to think and act pedagogically. Instead, the
teachers have been able to maintain a school narrative in which they and the pupils are described as academically strong:

I quickly discovered this school narrative, which said that the school was an academically strong school. The norm among the teachers was that the pupils should always be academically challenged. And if a pupil was not very good, then more training and challenges were needed.

This school narrative is described as being opposed to the ‘pedagogic’ school that Kristian came from:

I was used to working at the edge of things, you see. I came from XXXX [his former school and neighbourhood], and there, you had to be really sharp. If you wanted to be successful, you had to know a lot about many things, not least pedagogy for guest workers, refugees, and persecuted people.

The following are the helpers in Kristian’s narrative: (1) the poor pupils and their families who move into the area and put pressure on the teachers; (2) a research and development project with the Danish School of Education, which was ‘a bit of a surprise to the personnel. The analysis showed that the culture of the school was inappropriate. The school was divided in two instead of pulling together’; (3) the local school administration, which has supported Kristian both morally and financially; and (4) younger teachers and middle managers who are ‘in tune’ with Kristian’s leadership: ‘Everything I learnt about the staff led to the conclusion that I wanted to be 100% ready when we were to recruit new teachers and middle managers. They had to be in tune with the management of the school.’ However, the most important actor in Kristian’s narrative is himself. In the following excerpt, he describes how he became a more controlling leader than he had expected to be due to the aforementioned challenges:

And it turned out that there was a great need for leadership here. In this sense, I became a more controlling leader than I had expected to be. I had to control all the way down to the formation of teacher teams—who was with who—that someone took minutes during meetings and development work, templates for the minutes, what to do with data, how to summarize data, what future processes to set off, and so on. So, I guess you could say I got used to controlling a lot and perform the kind of leadership that everyone expects today. I think my development as a leader is exemplary of the broader trends that have occurred within the management of the Danish school.

Another more implicit plot in the narrative concerns Denmark’s current education policy. Kristian describes this policy as ‘learning oriented,’ whereas he associates with a ‘general education perspective.’ However, he rarely criticizes the ‘learning perspective’ openly. Instead, he makes comments such as the following:

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Well, this school is not doing particularly well in PISA. We have discussed this . . . (laughs) . . . because what happens when someone like them creates such . . . such data? What can they show, and what can they not show? It has been uphill to get the nuances included.

He also states that ‘if the data only measure the academic performance, and all attention is turned to that . . . well, then you actually only live up to half of the school law. But I guess it’s what’s measurable that counts.’ The laughter and many pauses, as well as the ‘buts,’ ‘wells,’ and generalizations (e.g. ‘someone like them’) suggest that it is difficult for Kristian to integrate this plot into his more pronounced narrative about the modernization of the school. Thus, it can be considered a side track or a so-called deviant life history, which exists beneath a more conformist, dominant, and learned narrative (Goodson, 2008, p. 41).

The clear leader – who wants a co-managed organization

Biography and workplace

Our second school leader, Pia, is a relatively inexperienced leader who, at the time of the interview, was 46 years old. She was originally educated as a teacher, and she has worked as one for 22 years. Like Kristian, she made a step into management from a former position as a trade union representative. A short course called ‘From Teacher to Leader,’ which was offered by the local municipality, played a significant role in this transition. She has not obtained any further leadership education. In 2009, she became a middle manager, and in 2014, she became a school leader, which means that she had been a school leader for one and a half years at the time of the interview.

Pia is a school leader at the school where she also worked as a teacher. In other words, she has not made a move from one school to another in her journey to becoming a school leader. This is rather unusual in Denmark. The norm is to move from one school to another when you become a school leader. The school is situated in a diverse neighbourhood and recruits pupils from both the middle class and the working class; these pupils have ethnic majority and minority backgrounds. Thus, the surrounding housing is composed of villas, as well as social housing. On average, the pupils perform slightly worse on the national tests than the pupils at Kristian’s school.

Narrative

Pia’s interview is more complicated than Kristian’s. It is shorter, contains more breaks and questions posed by the interviewer, is more incoherent, and is even contradictory in places. Furthermore, it does not have a clear beginning, a climax, and an ending. Thus, the interview does not conform to the standard definitions of a narrative. However, it is structured along the lines of past, present, and future. In terms of genre, the main story that is being told can be described as a tale of the leader’s suffering, struggles, and sacrifices, which are accompanied by the teachers and the school as a whole. This tale is supplemented by another story that is somewhat at odds with the first; it is namely a story about a modern leader who reinvents the teachers, the school, and, one might add, herself. Generally, these two stories are not integrated, and one of them is not clearly dominant, as in Kristian’s case. However, some attempts at integration are made.

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The two stories are told through two plots. The first plot, which is related to the past and present, revolves around the running of a school that is situated in a diverse area. Pia states the following:

The school is situated in an exciting neighbourhood, I think, which is characterized by great diversity. We have a big area for villas with families from the upper middle class: teachers, social workers, doctors, and those sorts of people. At the other side of the school, there is a big area for social housing, and until recently, that area was on the government’s list of ghettos. So, there is a certain mix of these two things. Also, it is a school for children with disabilities: learning disabilities, language disabilities, et cetera. We usually say if you attend this school, you meet all parts of the Danish society. You get the full circle, so to speak. And, actually, we think it makes the pupils of this school very strong. They acquire a certain robustness. But it also demands a lot of the teachers who work here. They must be able to handle many things, including parents who have social or economic problems and parents who, on paper, should be great parents, but who are a little too involved in their children’s lives.

According to this statement, the running of the school involves a number of challenges. On the one hand, there are poor and deprived families; on the other, there are wealthy families who make too many demands of their children and, it would seem, the school. Furthermore, the school is challenged by special classes for children with disabilities. To tell this tale about a challenged school, Pia employs certain metaphors (Spicer & Alvesson, 2011), which convey a sense of toughness and determination. In the above quotation, she talks about ‘strong’ and ‘robust’ pupils and teachers who must be able to ‘handle many things.’ When she describes herself as a leader, she employs similar metaphors: ‘As leaders, we must be really, really clear about the direction of this school. We must communicate it clearly and through graphic images so that everyone knows the goal at the end of the day.’ The idea seems to be that the school needs a clear, strong leader who is willing to make sacrifices and who perseveres despite the challenges.

The helpers in this narrative are, first and foremost, Pia’s middle managers and teachers. Thus, she talks about a united school, unlike Kristian, who tends to distinguish more between good and bad teachers. Another helper in the narrative is what you might call ‘the good middle-class parent,’ who joins the cause of the Danish Folkeskole and makes an active attempt to help and integrate children who are less privileged than his or her own:

We have some very educated and well-off families who help a lot: driving kids to and from football, offering an extra bicycle if we are going on a trip, and that sort of thing. Some kids around here do not have bikes, you know.

However, as indicated above, these well-educated and well-off families are, at the same time, opponents:
A new challenge for the teachers is when a parent is all worked up on Monday morning and starts to complain about the arrangement of tables: that the tables are not placed in an orderly fashion or that the arrangement does not suit the needs of his or her child. How do you reply to that kind of challenge? What do you do when someone like that crosses your professional boundaries? We have a challenge there that we try to handle.

Following this contradiction between the helpful and the demanding middle-class parent, a second plot and narrative can be discerned in the interview. It revolves around the future of the school. The middle-class parent also appears as a helper in this narrative, but in a new way. This time, he or she is not someone who joins the cause of the Danish Folkeskole but, rather, is someone who the Folkeskole must indulge and who, in return, helps the Folkeskole to achieve a brighter future. Pia explains this in the following way:

For about ten years, the decision about open enrolment or free choice was made, and it almost tipped over the school. We were practically overrun by families from XXXX [a socioeconomically disadvantaged area], who wanted to get their children out of there. But then, the previous school leader made some... and it wasn’t a question of choosing some children over others. It was more a question of allowing local children to choose a local school. So, the leader and his managers made a short video that they sent home to all families, telling them what the school was like and so on. They also made brochures and information sessions so the parents would not make their choice of school based on what they heard on the streets. And it worked. Now, even families outside the area choose our school as their first priority. And socioeconomically, we think we have made a statement saying choose your local school instead of a private school.

Here, in a manner of speaking, Pia attempts to suture the ideology of the Danish Folkeskole (democracy, equality, and social integration) with the reality of the Danish Folkeskole, the past with the future, and the existing narrative with a new narrative. This happens by downplaying the conflict between these two entities—for example, the ambition to help socioeconomically disadvantaged children versus making a school for more educated and well-off families—and simultaneously constructing an argument about the right of local children to choose a local school. Another theme in the second narrative, which seems to separate it even further from the first, concerns Pia as a leader and, more specifically, her leadership and her vision of the school. She explains the following:

Well, there used to be a different tradition at this place. My predecessor had another style of leadership. It was like, if you went into his office, you would get a ‘yes’ or a ‘no.’ It was ‘green’ or ‘red.’ So, what we are doing now as a management team is to try and change that tradition—to ask, ‘What do you think?’ ‘What do you suggest?’ to get away from the directive leadership style and move towards the co-managed organization.
This non-directive style of leadership does not seem compatible with the clear leadership that Pia previously talked about. Hence, Pia makes no attempt to integrate these two styles of leadership. Instead, the non-directive leader and the vision of the co-managed organization seem to be precisely the visions that Pia considers solutions to the dilemma between the ideology and the reality of the Folkeskole.

The philanthropic leader – who offers a co-managed organization

Biography and workplace

Our third school leader, Louise, is also a relatively new leader. At the time of the interview, she was 39 years old. She was educated as a teacher, and she has worked in such a role for eight years. She was recruited to middle management at the school where she worked as teacher. Her school leader thought that she had a talent for management. She has worked as a middle manager for five years. Meanwhile, she completed the Danish national education for public leaders (one year) and commenced a master’s in public governance. She has been a school leader for three years.

Like Kristian, she changed schools in connection with her employment as a school leader. This change can be described as horizontal (Bourdieu, 2005) in that the two schools are quite socioeconomically and ethnically similar. Both are privileged schools that are located in relatively rich neighbourhoods, and both recruit pupils from educated families from ethnic majority backgrounds. Furthermore, the pupils do somewhat better in the national tests than the pupils at both Kristian’s and Pia’s schools.

Louise was recently appointed school leader at another school. Thus, she is, in fact, a school leader at two schools simultaneously. The new school is located at the outskirts of a large city and recruits pupils from mainly rural areas who come from less educated and poorer families than the pupils at Louise’s first school. Furthermore, the pupils at Louise’s new school do significantly poorer in the national tests than the pupils at her old school.

Narrative

The interview with Louise addressed her leadership at the new school. Therefore, the narrative revolves around that. Interestingly, however, Louise connects her leadership at the new school with her leadership at the old school in almost every sentence. She does this in such a fashion that the old school appears as a kind of model for the new school. Furthermore, the narrative about the new school is marked by the fact that Louise is merely an appointed leader. This means that it is difficult for her to take a clear stand on many issues and, consequently, construct a coherent narrative. She cannot very easily make causal relations between episodes, characters, past, present, and future (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 3). However, Louise does tell a story along the lines of a past, present, and future. In terms of genre, Louise’s story can be described as a fairy tale in which she is the philanthropic leader who saves (or attempts to save) a rural school from decline.

The story is told through a plot in which the transformation of bad numbers into good ones is the starting point. Louise states the following:
Well, it’s a school that has struggled for some years to get its numbers up: grade point average and so on. They have really struggled, and they have also had some success. But it’s a school where many pupils are challenged and where their families are challenged. It’s typically someone who settles here because the rent is cheap.

According to Louise, the problem of bad numbers also applies to sick notes, satisfaction measurement, economy, and crossover frequency to further education. In fact, the problem of bad numbers seems to be connected to a more general problem of culture—namely, rural culture:

When I met the parents the first time, it was a bit of a strain. They sat with their arms crossed and looked quite sceptical. Of course, they were nervous that I would come and make their school into a XXXX school [a school like Louise’s old school]. They had been promised by the municipality that it would not be so, that the two schools should remain separate. But that requires enough pupils, you know. And there aren’t necessarily enough pupils in this area. The parents think it’s nice with a small and cosy school where everyone knows each other and where it’s their school more or less. But that’s very costly, you know.

In the above quotation, it is possible to get a sense of the socioeconomic and cultural relationship that exists between Louise and the parents at her new school. It is a relationship in which the parents are looked upon from above and where the parents look upon Louise from below in a defensive manner (Bourdieu, 2005). While Louise often describes the parents and pupils on the basis of what they lack, she also mentions what she would like to give them: ‘This school is really worn out. Just look at it. Old furniture from the 1970s, ugly paint, outdated rooms, and so on. I would like to do something about that.’

More generally, Louise seems keen to supply the new school with the things that the old school had in abundance, even if she realizes that the two schools are not the same and that she is merely an appointed leader. This includes her vision for the ideal organization, which seems to have been realized at the old school:

Here [at the old school], everyone knows me one hundred percent. The staff, the parents, and the pupils—they all know me one hundred percent. They know exactly what I want in every situation. Here [at the new school], they don’t know me so well, so I must get used to communicating a lot. I also do that here [at the old school], but they know what I mean when I communicate. Here [at the new school], a lot of my communication is written—newsletters and that sort of thing. I rarely meet the staff in person and talk to them. So, it’s difficult.

The above quotation is an example of how Louise often connects her old school with her new school, contrasting and comparing them and looking up and down upon them. What seems to make the old school ideal, according to Louise, is the fact that people know her so well. They even know what she might think or want in every situation. Thus, Louise emphasizes the informal and personal aspect of her leadership, and she often uses metaphors that convey such a meaning. Her opponents

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are described as ‘rigid,’ ‘concrete-like,’ ‘cranky,’ or ‘vulnerable’; they include teachers, parents, trade union representatives, and the teacher union in general. The latter is described in the following way:

The trade union is always cranky. The local department is somewhat concrete-like. And the teachers don’t use them. Not at all. The trade union has no general support. They are only for the cranky teachers. So, I think my idea is to turn the whole picture... our greatest job as leaders is to make our staff great.

Her helpers are described as, for example, ‘great,’ ‘happy,’ ‘funny,’ and ‘co-managing’:

I try to work with this organization [at the new school]. I try to make the middle managers great. I mean co-managing so they can make decisions themselves on solid ground. It also applies to the rest of the staff. They must be able to make decisions when I’m not there. In general, I try to lead through leaders.

All in all, the informal, personal, and co-managed organization seems to be the gift that Louise, perhaps without fully realizing it, offers to her new school.

**Conclusion and discussion**

To what extent, then, are school leaders professional leaders or leaders of the profession? Do they regard themselves as leaders with identities distinct from teachers’ or as the first among equals?

Based on the above analyses, which, of course, cannot be generalized in a statistical manner, a general conclusion is that it is not an either/or situation. All three leaders are *both* professional leaders and leaders of the profession. Their narratives show that they all construct a tertiary leader habitus in *continuation* of a secondary teacher habitus—not as a radical *break* with the latter. However, they do this in different ways, whereby one (Kristian) is leaning against the leader of the profession, one is leaning against the professional leader (Louise), and one is caught in the middle (Pia).

Age, experience, and formal education seem to especially account for these differences between the three leaders. As the eldest and least educated member, Kristian has a habitual experience of what the Folkeskole once was, he has made personal investments in and sacrifices for that school, and no matter how much he talks about modern management, he cannot (and perhaps does not want to) escape this experience. As the youngest and most educated member, Louise does not have the same experience—at least not to the same degree and not in a bodily/habitual manner. This might explain why she has other plans for herself and her schools. Again, Pia is caught in the middle, with one foot in the past and one in the future.

This points to the existence of an inter-generational dynamic – involving the role of formal education – which is generally in favour of the professional leader. Leaders such as Kristian may be on the way out of the Danish Folkeskole, and thus the assertion by Moos, Kofod, and Brinkkjær (2011) as well as Klausen, Michelsen, and Nielsen (2011) and Nihlfors and Johansson (2013) may...
eventually prove right: that school leaders assume a clear leader identity and leave the teacher identity in the passing. On the other hand, international studies stress the continuing complexity of identity formation among school leaders (e.g. Crow, Day, and Møller, 2017; Lumby and English, 2009; Blackmore, 2011), and it seems likely that the teacher identity – ‘the teacher at heart’ (Scribner and Crow, 2012) – will continue to be influential. Research into effective school leadership (e.g. Darling-Hammond & Rothman 2011; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, 2011) stresses the importance of this educational background.

Assuming the identified inter-generational dynamic has some scope in the Danish context, it would appear Danish school leaders are, in fact, professionalizing. At this point it is difficult to assess whether this turns out as an organizational form of professionalism (Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2011) or as a more traditional, civic-minded form of professionalism – what Cranston (2013) refers to as occupational professionalism. The answer seems to depend on the extent to which school leaders professionalize a way out of their former professional identity as teachers – and with it the associated ideas of the Danish Folkeskole, equality, democracy, social integration, and ultimately the social contract with society (Parsons, 1954). This again seems to depend on the extent to which market principles and business owner requirements are implemented in the Danish school. According to Courtney and Gunter (2015), these principles may result in an implosion of the nationally regulated school (in singular) in favour of a more differentiated school market in which every school constitutes an independent organization driven by school leaders with somewhat grandiose identities.

In continuation of this, it is interesting to note that Danish school leaders do not so much seem to be in a process of professionalization ‘from above’ (Evetts, 2011). That is, in a context of designer leadership (Gronn, 2003) associated with a ‘strong’, unequivocal, and politically defined leadership identity (Simkins, 2012). This points to the fact that school leadership in Denmark (still) evades some of the technocratic tendencies seen in the international context (Møller, 2016; Crow, Day, and Møller, 2017).

On the one hand, this might imply a qualification of Danish school leadership since there appears to be autonomy to tackle some of the complexities and dilemmas of modern schooling, including opportunities for making professional discretion in unpredictable situations (Abbott, 1988; Cranston, 2013). On the other hand, there is a risk that Danish school leaders, as professionals, may become an exclusive, power-seeking and uncontrolled social group. The analysis by Courtney and Gunter (2015) gives some witness to that, and generally this is one of the drawbacks of the professional organization of work (Larson, 1977).

This brings us to our last point of discussion: what should an education of school leaders look like? Our study suggests the education should be centred not first and foremost on what is expected and imagined of them (by politicians, experts, bureaucrats, etc.), but on who they are, what they do, and why they do it. In other words, the education should be depoliticized and adapted more to local, specific and democratic meaning making. The narratives by the school leaders in this study represent a window into this meaning making process. They show that school leaders are very much in doubt as to who they are, what their task is, and how it should be handled. They talk about it constantly, attempting to make sense of it. Focusing more on these questions in an educational

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programme, and tackling them through academic as well as practical knowledge, could possibly help school leaders construct a professional identity which is not too weak and not too strong.

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i In Denmark, such leaders are often referred to as DJØF leaders; DJØF stands for the Danish Association of Lawyers and Economists.

ii This is in addition to a primary habitus as a child, which will not, however, be considered in this analysis.

iii The names of institutions and persons have been anonymized.