

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITION

Towards new forms of educational leadership? The local implementation of *förstelärare*[†] in Swedish schools

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In 2013, the Swedish government launched a reform of career services for teachers that introduced *förstelärare* ('first teacher') as a new category. This article presents results from an ongoing research project about the implementation of the reform in a municipal local context in public schools with attention to leadership practices *förstelärare* engage in and the impact on the educational leadership of the principals. The theoretical framework for the analysis provides perspectives on the interdependencies between and within different levels and sub-systems in the school organisation through the concepts of *nested learning systems* and *distributed leadership*. The main results indicate that the introduction of *förstelärare* strengthens the idea of distributed leadership through the fact that *förstelärare* engage in leadership practices mandated by the principals. However, it also challenges existing collegial structures through an increased need for collaboration and interaction among both principals and *förstelärare*.

Keywords: *educational leadership; advanced skills teachers; school improvement; career pathways for teachers*

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Global processes are reshaping the educational systems of the Western world (Resnik, 2008). New public management models are being implemented to govern schools, which from the Scandinavian perspective has put pressure on principals to balance the demands from a market-oriented discourse while maintaining a democratic educational culture (Moos & Møller, 2003). Transnational discourse on standard-based measurement, accountability and teacher professionalism influence national educational policy and trickle down to the district and school levels. In this case Sweden is no exception. A recent example is a reform of career services for teachers (CST) that has introduced categories of teachers – *förstelärare* and *lektor* ('lecturer') – without any analysis of the implications for educational leadership and the school organisation.

In the Swedish context the reform might potentially have significant implications for leadership in schools because it is considered a 'horizontal' and 'flat' system, where the principal is the educational leader according to school law. We do not know the impact in a local setting or factors that could make this reform pertinent to leadership issues in the school system. In international curriculum and educational leadership research there is an ongoing discussion on approaches to policy as leadership in terms of enacted practice and curriculum making.

Following the argument of Michael Uljens (2015), it can be claimed that any educational leadership theory must deal with on the one hand curricular issues such as the relationship between institutional education and economics, politics and society, and on the other hand the moral and value-based aspects of professional leadership.

This article presents results from an ongoing research project about the implementation of the CST reform in a local context in municipal and public schools. The focus is on the relationships between agents on the different levels involved, mostly *förstelärare* and principals, and in particular leadership practice. The research questions are as follows:

- How do *förstelärare* describe and understand their role in the organisation, especially in relation to issues concerning educational leadership, their fellow teachers and principals? What are the general leadership practices they engage in?
- In what ways does the introduction of *förstelärare* impact the educational leadership of the principals? What might be the long-term implications for leadership practice in schools?

Of course context matters and a crucial point is that implementation 'factors' that bring about change are

[†]The Swedish term *förstelärare* will be used throughout, which in English is translated as 'first teacher'.

embedded in practice. This point implies that the question of educational leadership in a local setting must be theoretically addressed. The theoretical and conceptual framework for this study provides analytical perspectives on (1) the interdependencies between and within different levels and sub-systems in the school organisation, providing the arenas for leadership practice; (2) how formal leaders look at their role as leaders, their understanding of leadership practice and in what ways the leadership of others can be supported and encouraged. In this paper a framework drawing from the concept of *distributed leadership* will be outlined for analysing the characteristic features of how the *förstelärare* perceive their role in the organisation. However, before that the main dimensions in the CST reform will be presented.

The CST reform in context

The CST reform wasn't something that just came out of the blue. International reports like *Teachers Matter* (2005), *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top* from McKinsey & Company (Barber & Mourshed, 2007) and *Creating Sustainable Teacher Career Pathways* (Natale Fisk, Bassett, Gaddis, & McKnight, 2013) serve as important factors for underpinning transnational policy discourses concerning teacher quality and effectiveness. Another facet is the accountability movement in the United States, building on the assumption that teachers are to be held responsible for poor teaching and low standards among pupils (Ingersoll, 2011). Over the last 20 years we have seen a number of policy initiatives to prevent teacher turnover and increase attraction to the teaching profession through various programmes and career pathways for teachers. Other dominant features of curriculum policy solutions circulating in transnational curriculum policy discourses are higher standards of learning, literacy and numeracy as primary aims in curriculum reforms and indicators and attainment targets for student achievement, to ensure curriculum planning according to the evaluation criteria (Hamilton, Stecher, Russell, Marsh, & Miles, 2008).

A model with *advanced skills teachers* (AST) was adopted and developed in the early 1990s in Australia. The AST classification consisted of three different operative levels: (1) classroom teaching, (2) team of teachers/the school and (3) the school district. The ambition was to create career paths in order to restructure the teaching profession, increase the attractiveness of becoming a teacher, keep skilled teachers, improve the quality of teaching, give professional support to colleagues and introduce newly employed teachers. According to Watkins (1994), a problem in the implementation was that the teaching skills that were required were rarely controlled. The CV and interview played the most important part in the classification process (Watkins, 1994). In a later study, Ingvarson and Chadbourne (1997) observed a tendency

for AST teachers to be marginalised and to create small isolated 'enclaves'. A common mistake during implementation was that the role and position of the AST in the leadership and management structure was unclear (Ingvarson & Chadbourne, 1997).

The AST system was later introduced in England and Scotland. Early studies of the implementation in England suggested that the ASTs experienced a heavy workload and blurry roles. Another dimension was a shift in focus from teaching to leading and managing pedagogical development work and that being an AST was more likely a career path towards senior leadership outside the classroom (Sutton, Wortley, Harrison, & Wise, 2000). In a survey on attitudes and views among teachers and principals about the AST grade, Blake, Hanley, Jennings, and Lloyd (2001) showed that the grade had the strongest support among classroom teachers with a few years of experience. The highest resistance towards the grade was to be found among principals and senior teachers with many years of experience (Blake et al., 2001). A later study indicated that the AST themselves see their appointment as a recognition of being skilled teachers and they experience a higher professional status. Moreover they believe that their work influences the quality of teaching and student achievement (Fuller, Goodwyn, & Francis-Brophy, 2013).

The CST reform in Sweden was part of a larger government 'package' of restructuring the national curricula and school system – both in public and private schools (this study only concentrates on the public schools in the municipal organisation). As a reform concerning the teaching profession it is unprecedented in the history of educational politics in Sweden. While most reforms over the last years have been centrally controlled and mandatory, the CST reform is actually optional. The state authority allocates a number of positions for *förstelärare* and/or lecturers, and funding is based on higher government grants (about €540 for a *förstelärare* and about €1,080 for a lecturer per month). The reform is founded on the principle that the responsible authority creates, designs and appoints the *förstelärare*/lecturers (PM, 2013), which means that there is variation between municipalities regarding the number of *förstelärare*, their positions and assignments, recruitment and the organisation for *förstelärare*. There are however directives for the appointment. A *förstelärare* must be certified and have a minimum of 4 years of documented excellence in teaching. It is required that the teacher have the ability to improve student achievement and teaching. In order for a teacher to be appointed as a lecturer, a PhD or licentiate degree is necessary (Skolverket, 2013; Statsbidragsförordningen, 2013:70).

The general job duties of the *förstelärare* include responsibility for introducing newly employed teachers, coaching other teachers, initiating pedagogical discussions

and leading projects aimed at improving teaching, being responsible for exams in upper secondary school or adult education, supporting student teachers on internship and leading a subject. An important aspect is that *förstelärare* are in no way responsible for the budget, staffing or performance of any formal tasks that principals do. The principal leads the school and is responsible for the educational leadership, which also is regulated by the Swedish School Law (SFS, 2010:800).

In 2014 the former government expanded the reform to include about 17,000 career services, that is about one out of six teachers (Skolverket, 2013). Today there are about 14,000 *förstelärare*, and the new government recently decided to ‘freeze’ the number of *förstelärare*, a decision made before there was any fundamental evaluation of the effects and output of the reform.

Curriculum reform and nested school systems

The theoretical framework of this study is based on curriculum theory. The so-called frame-factor theory provides perspective on how ideas and values on an overarching level – the societal or ideological level – influence and shape the curriculum level and in the end the school level, with its classroom context and the teaching (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). A curriculum is more than a collection of documents that are used to manage a country’s school system. It embodies expectations, values, notions and views on the role of school in society as expressed by the state authority (Wahlström, 2009). The CST reform illustrates the somewhat paradoxical character of the Swedish school system, which on the one hand is a decentralised system, but on the other is under state control through audit and evaluation. Researchers today speak of a process of ‘re-centralisation’ (Adolfsson, 2013; Englund, 2012).

Over the last several years the Swedish school system has experienced a series of changes, and a lot of pressure has been put on local school authorities: new curricula, new school legislation and a new grading system. In order to understand the transfer and transition of the ideas and values embedded within the CST reform through a complex and multi-layered organisation such as the school, this study uses a slightly adapted form of Lauren Resnick’s (2010) concept of nested learning systems. The model describes the intermediating layers of the school organisation and complements the frame-factor theory, because it draws attention to the intersection between the curriculum and the school levels. Furthermore it makes it possible to discuss the communication, interaction and content in the reform processes vertically and horizontally at the different levels of the school organisation: the local authority level, school level and teacher/teaching level. An important aspect is that the system consists of nested sub-systems, for instance teams of teachers, the classroom, the school management team and so forth.

The following model describes the general aspects of the nested school system (Resnick, 2010):

The sub-systems are shaped by specific conditions and constituted by their own internal logic. Even if they are separate entities there are interfaces between them where curriculum and reforms are transferred, translated and negotiated. Due to various contexts, interests and relations within each sub-system, agents use different strategies and make meaning out of policy and reforms in their particular way. This aspect is essential to keep in mind when it comes to exploring the arguments and views of district school administrators, principals and *förstelärare*. These agents are on different levels, where *förstelärare* actually constitute a new sub-system concerned with issues regarding educational leadership and school development.

Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (1998) argue that the process of educational reform implementation is framed within a ‘conditional matrix’ of context-specific conditions, social agents and their actions. In this respect the implementation processes are not linear or mechanical but characterised by a ‘co-construction’ (Datnow et al., 1998). Agents use different strategies and make their own meaning out of policy. This situation leads to different outputs, which is also underlined in the research on school reform and school effectiveness (Sterbinsky, Rossa, & Redfield, 2006). Principals and teachers are crucial as social agents in curriculum work related to sustainable school development. One example appears in a study done by Adolfsson and Håkansson (2014), who claimed that an important factor is principals’ understanding and learning of how to manage long-term school improvement, as well as principals’ ability to challenge their teachers.

Nested school systems highlight interdependencies as well as the independence between agents in the processes of curriculum reform implementation in the local context. While such structures might be superficially perceived as mere administrative processes in the governance of schools, we must be aware of the potential implications for leadership, since it is hard to separate the structural dimensions of educational leadership from the pedagogical (Wahlström & Sivesind, 2015). The introduction of *förstelärare* can in many ways be said to challenge the predominant notions of leadership in a school system that is traditionally characterised by a culture of collegiality and equality between teachers.

A central concept for the study is leadership, and in the next section the concept of distributed leadership will be discussed and later used as a lens through which to examine and discuss the relationship between principals and *förstelärare*.

Distributed leadership

A traditional view on leadership is that it depends on individual characteristics and qualities. Against this notion

there are those who claim that leadership as a practice is relational (Pierce & Newstrom, 2007) and enacted by and stretched out over the people in an organisation (Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). In their work on leadership practice and its connection to the improvement of teaching and learning, Spillane et al. (2001) and Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) developed a distributed perspective on leadership practice where it 'is constituted in the interaction of leaders and their social and material situations' (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 27). Leadership is something that is co-performed or 'co-produced', as the Swedish researcher Ann Ludvigsson (2009) pointed out in her study on how principals and teachers understand each others' thoughts and actions in everyday work. Other Swedish scholars like Helene Årlestig (2008) and Monika Törnsén (2009) underlined the importance of a leadership practice and structures that contribute to frequent communication between teachers and principals in matters concerning teaching and learning.

A general observation in research is that distribution of leadership functions and roles has a positive impact on organisational development and change (Harris, 2012; Larsen & Rieckhoff, 2014; Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2007). Even though the number of impact studies are limited, there are indications that what Leithwood et al. named *planful alignment* tends to have more positive implications for school improvement processes in both a short-term and long-term perspective in comparison to other patterns of distribution (Leithwood et al., 2009). A similar argument was made by Hallinger and Heck (2009), who underlined that sharing of leadership responsibility from the principal to teachers underpins the creation of effective professional learning communities in schools.

It is an undisputable fact that distributed leadership has been one of the most influential and contested concepts in research on educational leadership for more than over 10 years (Harris, 2012). The focus on the idea of shared or multiple leadership has resulted in a great number of studies. In brief, over the last years we have seen a booming trend in the usage of distributed leadership in research. One reason for this boom is that the concept has paved the way for new perspectives on leadership practice (Harris, 2012, 2013). At the same time some researchers question the empirical evidence for distributed leadership (Harris, 2012; see also Jones, 2014) and the tendency to use it as a universal solution for managing organisations (Jones, 2014). Critics also argue that it is a 'rhetorical' and politically correct concept that reflects the hegemony of accountability and a neo-liberal agenda on quality in global education policy. It is currently in sway among politicians, officials and school stakeholders (Corrigan, 2013).

One of the most important features within the framework of distributed leadership is that leadership practice involves multiple agents with both formal and informal roles and rests on the interaction of people in an organisation (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003; Spillane et al., 2004). An essential aspect is mutual trust, and the following quote from Alma Harris (2013) captures both the salient features of the concept and the implications that redesigning an organisation according to the principles of distributed leadership may have for its agents:

Distributed leadership implies a fundamental change in the way formal leaders understand their practice and the way they view their leadership role. Distributed leadership means actively brokering, facilitating and supporting the leadership of others. It does not mean, as some would suggest, that everyone leads or that everyone is a leader/.../Distributed leadership underlines that heads are only a part of leadership practice in any school as there are inevitably many other sources of influence and direction. (pp. 546–547)

Over the years there have been a number of leadership functions identified in leadership research. Spillane, Camburn, and Stitzel Pareja (2009) have for instance provided a distinction in principals' leadership between administrative tasks (scheduling, budget, staff), curriculum and instruction tasks (planning lessons, instruction in classroom, assessment of students), professional growth and fostering relationships (Spillane et al., 2009). In the analysis of leadership practices in the work of the *förstelärare* this study uses four categories developed by Leithwood et al. (2009):

- Setting direction: This function includes the articulation and fostering of a vision and goals for the group/organisation; expectations.
- Developing people: A leader gives personal attention and presents intellectual stimulation and support for each individual, which in turn becomes a way of forming practices and values for the work of the individual/group.
- Redesigning the organisation: Improvement can be facilitated by the creation of collaborative structures and processes. The leader has the function to promote an organisational learning culture that support the learning of both teachers and students.
- Managing the instructional program: Monitoring the progress of students' achievements and school improvement; staffing and protecting staff from external pressure that is negative; allocating resources.

In their study on patterns of distributed leadership in a large urban school district in Canada, Leithwood et al. (2007) underlined – similar to the conclusion reached by

Harris in the quote above – the importance of facilitation and support from the formal school and district leaders. In particular the principals played a key role for the teaching staff through creating conditions and a culture allowing them to develop their leadership capacity (compare Harris, 2013). Leithwood et al. (2007) came to the following conclusion:

Distributing leadership to others does not seem to result in less demand for leadership from those in formal leadership positions. However, it does produce greater demand: to coordinate who performs which leadership functions, to build leadership capacities in others, and to monitor the leadership work of those others, providing constructive feedback to them about their efforts. (p. 63)

In the analysis of the empirical material an interesting aspect is to what extent *förstelärare* might both legitimate and strengthen the ideas of distributed leadership in schools, but at the same time may also challenge, to some extent, existing leadership relations and authority – primarily that of the principal. Furthermore, how do leadership issues play out depending on how the reform is enacted by the municipalities? An essential dimension is the specific conditions and the contextual and situational factors in the five municipalities, factors that influence issues regarding leadership distribution and relations. In the next section we present a general distinction between the organisations for *förstelärare* in the municipalities.

Methodological considerations and empirical material

The overall research design is to map the implementation of the CST reform from the visions and strategies, recruitment, management, organisation and processes on the different levels in the school organisation. Expectations and conceptions of the introduction of *förstelärare* on separate levels are investigated. The material consists of documents produced by the local authority; semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives from the district level ($N=15$), principals ($N=25$) and *förstelärare* ($N=36$); and questionnaires from *förstelärare* ($N=48$) and principals ($N=26$). Considering the goal of studying the notions, views and beliefs among the different actors in a leadership practice, this study exclusively uses methods for qualitative data (Bryman 2004). By using a combination of methods the aim is to collect a wide range of qualitative material and perform a systematic analysis of how different actors and stakeholders involved in issues concerning leadership and school development express their expectations of the *förstelärare* and how they perceive implications of them as new actors within and between different sub-systems. Five mentioned were included in the study (Table I).

The CST reform has played out somewhat differently in the five municipalities (Alvunger, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c,

Table I. Statistics on the *förstelärare* and inhabitants in the five municipalities.

Municipality	Inhabitants	Number of <i>förstelärare</i>
A	26,500	20
B	30,000	39
C	40,000	45
D	65,000	60
E	86,000	75

2015d, 2015e). Of course there are similarities, but the municipalities allow us to see nuances in how the reform is implemented. In three of the five municipalities *förstelärare* are employed for a limited time of 2 or 3 years while in the remaining two they are permanently employed as *förstelärare*. Even if the assignments of the *förstelärare* to a great extent are similar between the municipalities there is a general difference between the two different ‘clusters’ of organisations:

- *A differentiated organisation:* *Förstelärare* operate on different levels (district, school, teacher/teaching level), school-based, across schools and with a specific affiliation to the district level.
- *A decentralised organisation:* School-based assignments for the *förstelärare* without any close involvement from the district level.

Of course there are variations within the two clusters, for example in the first cluster one organisation has *förstelärare* operating on three levels with different assignments and the other one is a network-based organisation with *förstelärare* on two levels. In the latter organisation there is a strong connection between the district, school and teacher/teaching levels. In this study the general distinction between the two clusters will be used for discussing similarities as well as differences in how leadership is distributed and what long-term implications for leadership practice there might be in schools.

Results

Förstelärare on their role in the organisation

Regardless of whether we talk about a differentiated or decentralised organisation, *förstelärare* have similar views on the reasons why they became interested in working as *förstelärare* in the first place. All of them share a deep interest in the improvement of teaching and/or supervising colleagues. They hope that their colleagues will see them as a ‘catalyst’ for improvement. Some refer to the possibility of receiving a mandate from the principal and legitimacy within the organisation to produce new ideas and lead projects. Many of the *förstelärare* state that colleagues mostly are positive about their appointment,

but of course they have encountered different kinds of resistance:

It is a challenge to achieve improvement/change because it isn't obvious that colleagues agree on what is necessary to improve or might not even share the view that something has to be improved. It requires a lot of work to get everyone to board the train and to move in the same direction. (Förstelärare)

Apart from troubles such as motivating and creating incentives for improvements there are also examples of envy and suspicion. Still förstelärare describe themselves as highly motivated. Very often they refer to the fact that the reform is new and that neither the organisation nor the principals and colleagues have had time to adjust.

It is possible to discern a number of general features in the leadership practices of the förstelärare. One feature is facilitating management and capacity building, because förstelärare see themselves as important agents for collegial learning and for leading and organising activities for professional development among their colleagues. Förstelärare – both in the differentiated respectively the decentralised organisation – take on responsibility for initiating and promoting a learning culture, not least through providing efficient meetings, learning communities and an atmosphere where teachers challenge and encourage each other. Examples of tasks are mentoring, leading discussions on recent research, peer assessment, advising and helping teachers with particularly difficult pupils and so on.

Another general feature is *visualising and systematising*. A key strategy for the förstelärare is to be systematic, visualise how they and their colleagues work and analyse results from pupils. One teacher argues that it is about 'to make colleagues change the way they think, in some cases how they teach but also to make them turn their questions inwards from time to time instead of always directing them outwards'. A number of förstelärare claim that they finally feel they are in a position that allows them to make changes and to make a difference, especially within areas where principals or colleagues lack both time and resources. Something good has to come out of the assignment and there is a loyalty towards the collective to 'deliver'. Expectations from colleagues and principals may sometimes be tough to tackle.

A third general feature of the leadership practice of the förstelärare can be characterised as 'brokering', that is interfacing between the various sub-systems in the school organisation: teachers, special education teachers, school management and so on. Besides the strong emphasis on being a mentor and support for teams of teachers or single teachers the förstelärare express that they look at themselves as significant partners to the principals. In this respect they also act as brokers between teams of teachers and the principals. The following quote is a good

illustration of visualising and systematising, brokering and facilitation management and capacity building as general features:

In my assignment we have started from 'the top of the organisation' by supporting the principal to create a sustainable organisation that benefits the teachers' work. The creation of goals and meeting structures, that there are reasonably large teacher teams responsible for a limited pupil group and where you have a shared responsibility. It is also about developing the systematical quality work, from actual research. For me the whole assignment is about combining theory and research with the current phase we are in and the needs that exist in our schools, based on various kinds of analyses. (Förstelärare)

A dimension that förstelärare underline, whether they work in a decentralised or differentiated organisation, is that school leaders must stress the importance of teacher participation and must legitimate their assignment in front of the staff. Förstelärare emphasise that they cannot work on their own, and maybe the most important factor is that the principals be well informed and engaged:

I talked about this with my principals during this semester, that I only show up once a week or so. What happens during the rest of the week? How are we supposed to keep up the work, that is quite important. I am like a kind of external actor/.../. For the staff I am only there once a week mostly/.../. Something must happen when I am not there/.../. there must be available information. At those times the principal must provide support. (Förstelärare)

In order to be able to perform their tasks förstelärare call for 'time and places for change'. Besides the time deficit there is a lack of arenas to meet in. Such meeting places seem hard to establish and as one of these teachers puts it: 'It is a precondition to have a natural arena for encounters if you are supposed to promote development'. In many ways förstelärare feel that they have to create meeting places and this might strain relationships with colleagues who have no extra time. In addition to this förstelärare call for firm leadership from the principals with explicit and reasonable assignments. Confusion and uncertainty about the purpose of an assignment creates an extremely complicated situation for förstelärare in the school because their mandate may be called into question:

We haven't been given any conditions to perform our assignments in a good manner. No explicit time in our services, the services are occupied with other things when the assignment is unclear. The principal is not clearly communicating to the other teachers what they can expect and which areas I am working with. (Förstelärare)

An interesting remark is that *förstelärare* working across schools and on district levels in differentiated organisations to a greater extent tend to experience a somewhat more complicated relationship with the principal regarding leadership than other *förstelärare*. It is obvious that some have difficulties in finding their position and role within the organisational structure:

It has been quite difficult to stand between the expectations from the school and the expectations from the district authority. The school management has considered it a way to reward skilled teachers to work with something they are good at while the district authority has totally different expectations where the focus more is to visualise the process, report, analyse and so on.../Then you receive different signals from the district authority and school management about deadlines, what you ought to work with and who is responsible for what. (*Förstelärare*)

Another example of how *förstelärare* at the district level may experience their role in the organisation is that the relationship to their principal changes:

He is my boss, the principal at my school.../but since you have a quite big assignment as a part of the position.../which is something other than teaching at my school so to speak and the principal as responsible... In addition to this it is the district authority and the development manager here which I, it is ambivalent. I sense a split here.../My principal is not so much a principal for me anymore, he will be it on paper when we have conversations about me as an employee and negotiations about my salary and so on (*Förstelärare*)

The examples from the *förstelärare* above illustrate how these teachers sometimes can feel like a ‘satellite’, separated from but in orbit around the leadership structures of the organisation. It is also more common for *förstelärare* at the school and district levels in differentiated organisations to express the concern that there might be too much pressure on the teachers if several development projects run at the same time. In this respect there are some examples of clashes between *förstelärare* on different levels:

I have experienced that there are collisions between our assignments.../we have *förstelärare* from last autumn and from this year that will come out to the schools and start new projects. An ongoing project is about developing teaching in maths, a project for improving reading achievement will probably start next year. It collides, you cannot have so many development projects. Everybody is struck by ‘development fatigue’, I believe. There is also not enough time. (*Förstelärare*)

In order to solve such conflicts, *förstelärare* at the district level call for opportunities to better coordinate their

efforts and cooperate more. In one of the differentiated organisations, networks between *förstelärare* – led by the development manager – have been established to deal with such issues.

A network structure in differentiated organisations in fact seems to be a successful way of handling coordination and it also serves as a collegial community for *förstelärare* who work alone at their schools. By exchanging ideas and examples of leadership issues in the networks, *förstelärare* are able to communicate ongoing projects and share experiences more easily, regardless of whether they are working at the teacher/teaching or district levels. The development manager is important to the networks and is also well informed and updated about current developments because of meetings with *förstelärare* from different levels. In turn this is helpful for the district leadership, because they are constantly updated and made aware if certain actions or interventions are required. In the other municipality with a differentiated organisation there are no networks, but *förstelärare* at the district level occasionally meet the development managers for briefing and reflection on the assignments.

In four out of the five municipalities, *förstelärare* (not so much in the network-based organisation described above) clearly express the need for common arenas and meeting places. Whereas there may be a risk of conflict between projects in differentiated organisations, *förstelärare* in decentralised organisations are not (in general) aware of what the other *förstelärare* are working on at their schools. Furthermore, they are directly connected to the principal and there is no involvement from the district level. However, the main aspect is that there is no arena for exchanging and communicating and this lack is something that *förstelärare* point to as problematic. In one of the municipalities there are ‘temporary’ networks of teachers that are supported by the district authority. These networks in some ways serve as a communicative space for working with common themes or studying research, but they are not exclusively for *förstelärare*. Some *förstelärare* in the other municipalities have taken the initiative to establish informal groups.

Implications for the educational leadership of the principals

The general view of heads of administration, development managers and principals is that implementation by *förstelärare* doesn’t directly change the formal responsibility of the principal as educational leader. At the same time the *förstelärare* might contribute to a changed role for principals and shifts within leadership practice from a long-term perspective. According to representatives from the district level, the relationship between principal and *förstelärare* is of critical importance for the success of school improvements and the manifestation of

educational leadership. The CST reform is a way of working with internal changes and improvements, or as a development manager puts it:

We will use the förstelärare as a catalyst for school development. They will have an extremely solid foundation with their education and other things that will result in them partly challenging their own principal in matters concerning science-based school development and in ways you generally don't think about [as a principal, DA], because you are so occupied with other things. In that respect I see that they can challenge the principals in the educational leadership in a good way. You need that kind of challenge in your leadership. (Development manager)

According to the district level – regardless of the organisation – the principal needs support in educational leadership and ‘there is a risk that they get overtaken by some of these förstelärare in thoughts and understanding and so on for how you lead school improvement, how you get young people to learn, what is meant by research-based teaching and a scientific approach’. A general expectation from the district level is that förstelärare will create a new dynamic in the organisation and force the principals to be more actively involved.

The principals haven't experienced any direct consequences from their educational leadership. Rather they expressed that they delegate responsibilities to förstelärare, which diminishes the need for constant monitoring and evaluation of ongoing projects. Principals choose different organisational models concerning the management of their schools. Some include förstelärare in the school management team with the argument that ‘the principal doesn't have to work with every case’. A few principals directly reject the idea that förstelärare should be part of the school management. The overall picture is that the principals see positive effects in terms of having received support and someone to discuss things with. Even if förstelärare are involved and may be responsible for defining areas of improvement it is always the principal who decides and distributes the assignments, especially in decentralised organisations. In differentiated organisations, the assignment for förstelärare at the district level is approved by the district authority, but the principals of course have their say. Such assignments are mostly initiated by the principals themselves.

The principals stress that they must equip the förstelärare with ‘the right tools’. One aspect is the matter of trust; förstelärare must have a mandate from the school management and help them to find time for cooperation. A number of principals admit that they could have been more explicit about assignments and more actively engaged:

Two of the förstelärare have been working together with a group of teachers that meets every week.

Here we as principals haven't been directly involved. That may be a disadvantage. We ought to be more engaged in monitoring.../We should also evaluate the relationship between the local authority and the principals so assignments are distinct, so that the förstelärare don't experience a double rule. We as principals own the process but are supported from the local authority. (Principal)

How relationships and leadership issues are formed between the förstelärare and his/her colleagues depends to a great extent on the förstelärare, according to the principals. A förstelärare that is known to be skilled and hard-working easily receives a mandate, but it is tough because in many ways they have ‘to lead without being the boss’. Principals can also identify weaknesses like ‘shortcomings in leadership, to be able to mentor and have the courage to question traditional patterns and notions’. The following quote from a principal clearly shows how the reform impact on the organisation and collegial relations:

Locally it is a tremendous change, almost a paradigm shift. This is actually about creating small hierarchies in the school with individuals that have certain responsibilities, förstelärare, development teachers [active on district level, DA].../ from a flat organisation where you, you know, have had a quite equal status, you know, get individuals with a different responsibility and added to this another salary. And it is by no means the responsibility that stands out in the eyes of others, but the salary. (Principal)

The principals describe situations where there has been some jealousy and *Jantelag* (tall poppy syndrome). At the same time they underscore the fact that the CST reform has meant increased quality and that tensions in the teaching staff mainly are an initial problem. Förstelärare introduce methods and ideas that have come from the teachers themselves and this factor is very important. This dynamic means a change ‘from below’, and according to many of the principals this change is much easier than when the principals must ‘point out what has to be done’. In the area of collegial collaboration and learning they see great progress.

Even if principals in general have a positive image of the CST reform they also express concerns, for example for themselves as a professional group. The reform primarily attracts those among the teaching staff with leadership qualities. Furthermore, the substantial salary increase is regarded as problematic because some förstelärare receive higher pay than the principals, which is considered unfair. In this respect the future recruitment base for principals may be at stake and some principals might quit their jobs.

According to the principals, it is sometimes difficult to ‘sync’ school improvement work with all the teachers that

ought to be involved. Even if the förstelärare are leading the work it is still the principal who has to make sure that the other teachers are able to participate. Yet another issue is that staffing becomes much more problematic when there are many förstelärare. If a förstelärare is the only teacher in a subject or a combination of subjects at a school, it may complicate teaching because the förstelärare simply don't have time to teach. According to school law, a pupil is guaranteed to be taught a certain number of hours in a subject. While this problem is relatively limited in schools in decentralised organisations (because the förstelärare is placed at his/her school), it is more complicated in differentiated organisations with förstelärare operating across schools or at the district level. Schools with many förstelärare become especially vulnerable according to the principals.

It is obvious that the introduction of förstelärare will influence the educational leadership of the principals. An interesting aspect is that some principals see eventual changes in educational leadership in the future, but they believe it is too soon to draw any conclusions because the reform is so new. One development manager stated that 'shifts [in the leadership between principals and förstelärare] will probably first be visible from a long-term perspective. A key factor that will contribute to such changes is believed to be continuous professional education for förstelärare.

An interesting dimension is that principals see possible consequences for the management of schools, especially if a new principal is employed in a school with prominent and dominant förstelärare. The förstelärare possesses knowledge about the local school culture, aims and visions, which might make it difficult for a principal to set new goals. Another risk is that principals might delegate all administrative tasks to the förstelärare and take a step back. In municipalities with differentiated organisations there is also a concern that the förstelärare at the district level will become detached and isolated from the work at their own school. Finally there is an aspect put forward by the principals indicating that the förstelärare impact on their possibilities to be educational leaders. In all of the municipalities the principals call for common platforms and arenas for discussing experiences, how the assignments for förstelärare are formed, school development, recent research, management, their role as educational leaders, continuous professional development, their own learning and so on.

Discussion

This article has pointed out general aspects of how förstelärare describe and understand their role in the organisation, the leadership practices they engage in and the impact on the educational leadership of the principals. In this closing section we relate the results to the four categories of leadership functions put forth by

Leithwood et al. (2009) and to Resnick's (2010) nested school system model for a discussion of possible long-term implications for leadership practice in schools.

Förstelärare consider themselves to represent educational leadership through being process leaders who create a culture built on mutual trust, turning the focus of school improvement from a 'top-down' perspective to change 'from below'. They become brokers and a link between school management and their colleagues, even if there are difficulties with envy and suspicion due to their salary. Moreover they visualise different practices and foster awareness (concerning e.g. assessment) that influences collegial discourse. Förstelärare are 'facilitators', promoting capacity building.

'Visualising and systematising' as a general feature in the leadership practices of the förstelärare can be related to the categories *Setting direction* and *Redesigning the organisation* (Leithwood et al., 2009). This relationship becomes visible in the articulation of aims and goals for teams of teachers or the school as a whole. In this respect förstelärare promote an organisational learning culture and support the learning of both teachers and students. Furthermore they engage in the creation of collaborative structures, but there are also problems like a time deficit, lack of engagement from colleagues or support from the principal and unclearly defined assignments. Förstelärare encounter various expectations from their peers and principals. In the differentiated organisations förstelärare experience problems related to them being someone from the outside and to needing to be careful not to put pressure on the teachers.

Brokering and Facilitating management and capacity building both stand out as general features that relate to what Leithwood et al. (2009) calls *Developing people*, *Redesigning the organisation* and to some extent *Managing the instructional program*. In terms of being brokers, förstelärare act in the interface between the various sub-systems that are present in the school organisation: teams of teachers, subject teachers, administrators, school management and so on. The förstelärare is an important agent for the principal to legitimate and strengthen ideas of distributed leadership. Since förstelärare – both in the decentralised and differentiated organisations – operate closely to the teacher/teaching level, they are well aware of the current mood in the teaching staff. They also have a sense of the atmosphere in the classroom, which is important for the principal to know about. This might create a sense of shared values in the school.

The organisations for förstelärare differ between the five municipalities in this study where there is a general distinction between the differentiated and decentralised organisations. The differentiated organisations have förstelärare that operate at the school and district levels, and at the teacher/teaching level (the level where förstelärare exclusively work in the decentralised organisations).

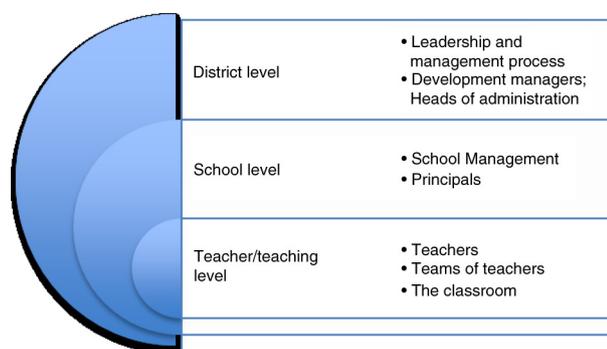


Fig. 1. The nested school system – implementation arena for the CST reform and sub-systems. Adaptation from Resnick (2010).

Out from the model of the nested school systems (Fig. 1), we can see that *förstelärare* as sub-systems can be placed on different levels, even if the most obvious choice is to put and describe them as a sub-system at the teacher/teaching level. However *förstelärare* also work closely with the principal – and are included in the school management – and in some cases they are exclusively affiliated with the district level. *Förstelärare* at the district level in this respect form a sub-system above the teacher/teaching level.

Förstelärare call for collaborative arenas and networks. In four out of the five municipalities they emphasise that they would benefit from such arenas for exchanging ideas and experiences. In the municipality with a network-based organisation it is clear that the *förstelärare* find great support in their network, not least a sense of common identity as *förstelärare*. In each of these organisations there are signs that *förstelärare* form groups for collaboration on a more informal basis. This trend is worth looking into further as the municipalities more fully implement the reform. When *förstelärare* begin working in networks or common platforms that stretch out over their own school they not only create arenas for exchanging ideas and support but something that promotes the forming of a common identity. Furthermore *förstelärare* will have more detailed insight than principals in conditions at other schools, which also is confirmed by the views of the principals in this study. They can argue for changes and resources on a well-informed basis and challenge the authority of principals, not solely out because they are experts in specific fields. From the perspective of the nested school system, *förstelärare* forming a sub-system in between – or if you wish parallel to – the levels of local authority and the school level might be influential. They may exert another kind of leadership practice within the collaborative dimension of the network. Through networks or other similar arenas *förstelärare* might gain a collaborative advantage for working with improvement processes and to exercise educational leadership that cuts across schools. If we hypothetically suggest that networks should become

a salient feature of the municipal school organisation, the question is whether this paves the way for what can be called ‘networked educational leadership’?

Since the CST reform is so recent we have not yet been able to see the full impact of it, but the reform has paved the way for changes in the way educational leadership is practiced. The introduction of *förstelärare* has challenged the existing collegial structures. The need for collaborative arenas and interaction and how the *förstelärare* are positioned in the leadership and management structure of school organisation are aspects that have to be taken into consideration. Above all, perhaps the reform itself is forcing principals to distribute leadership to a greater extent than before, because they now have to deal with a formal position and a teacher who is assigned to handle issues regarding educational leadership? When enacted in the local school organisation, the reform seems to create a more urgent need for principals to organise and work in collegial structures. In this respect *förstelärare* can be said, to some extent, to pose a challenge to existing leadership relations and authority. Ultimately this might indicate that we are approaching new forms of educational leadership.

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Biography

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