Standards as epistemological practice. A study of how Danish school leaders use assessment findings in the development of leadership practice

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ABSTRACT

During recent years, we have seen an increase in the complexity of school leadership as knowledge work. The new forms of knowledge available to school leadership, such as performance data and survey-based data, raise the expectation that leaders make relevant use of these knowledge resources. Theory and policy claim that new knowledge is of instrumental use in leadership decision making, yet there are important limitations to this strand of efficiency thinking. The paper analyzes leaders’ use of organizational assessment data for the purposes of developing their leadership practice. The paper constructs this empirical object as a composite of general quality standards and specific knowledge about each school. Accountability practices are taken to be specific to particular schools and professional organizations. The paper explores how school leadership practices can be researched as an interplay between quality standards emerging from abstracted knowledge resources such as theory and strategy, and local knowledge work. It may be difficult to balance these forms of knowledge work, and that may explain why leaders often find it hard to use new knowledge resources. The task of making sense of the flow of knowledge and new standards becomes a complex, comprehensive and time-consuming part of practical leadership.

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Intro on context

During recent years, Danish educational policy has become increasingly focused on quality and accountability. Since the last major reform in 2014, Danish schools have been governed with increased emphasis on improving student learning and increasing the efficiency of the school organization (Undervisningsministeriet, 2014). With the reform, Danish educational policy followed the international trend of increased focus on testing and assessment. This has meant that Danish school leaders are developing new forms of knowledge work in response to new policy demands (Kliim-Due, 2014).

The empirical focus of the paper is the assessment of the school organization as it takes place at three schools in Denmark. This is about issues, such as the level and forms of professional cooperation, professional learning, mutual trust and strategic alignment.

While policy and international research literature present a wealth of knowledge about how to organize schools – some of which are becoming standards – Danish public governance and leadership have been characterized by the idealization of what we might call reflexive standards. In the contemporary Danish welfare state, standards take the form of calls or appeals for professionals and citizens to develop their own standards (Andersen & Pors, 2014). In such advanced forms of ‘soft governance’ (Moos, 2012) education comes to play a key role in the ambition to strike the right, efficient balance between, on the one hand, autonomy or self-governance, and on the other, the development of higher quality standards and higher levels of efficiency.

Research contribution

Based on practice-relevant analysis of the interplay of standards coming to the school from the outside, as well as knowledge objects circulating in local, professional contexts (cf. Nerland & Jensen, 2012), this paper aims to contribute to the understanding, first, of school leadership as knowledge work and, secondly, of professional standards as emerging from knowledge work carried out by leaders.

Research question

How do quality standards of professional practice (for leaders and teacher) emerge in the conversations of leadership groups involved in organizational assessment?
Literature review

During the last decade, educational research has developed new ways of describing and understanding emerging practices of data use in schools (Jimerson, 2014; Proitiz, Mausethagen, & Skedsmo, 2017) associated with new policy focus on accountability across the globe (Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti, & Sellar, 2016).

During this time, we have witnessed the diversification of the methods applied to the use of data. Coburn and Turner emphasize the importance of studies on data use focusing on practice, rather than outcomes or technologies (Coburn & Turner, 2011). In a similar vein, Spillane (2012) argues for researchers to employ a broad concept of practice, drawing from both organization, social psychology and network theory (Saltrick, 2010; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Taken as a whole, these studies mark a turn away from efficiency and implementation studies to social science analysis focused on social performativity, that is, the ways in which data impacts and, in turn, is impacted by social practice.

School leaders, in these perspectives, are seen as performing accountability in complex, multifaceted practices. This calls for adequate social analysis of the ‘grey zones’ (Pettersson, Popkewitz, & Lindblad, 2017) between national policy and local professional work. In Scandinavia, Werler and Færewaag have charted the forms of top-down accountability in Norway and their consequences for how teachers create ways to use data in spite of system-level shortcomings (Werler & Klepstad Færevaag, 2017). In Denmark, Jensen and Krogstrup have analyzed a similar trend leading away from New Public Governance and into practices more influenced by the ideals of co-creation (Jensen & Krogstrup, 2017, p. 45), that is, the networked decision-capacities of local actors.

In line with the general turn to social science analysis, educational research has focused on specific empirical objects, such as school leadership (James, Spillane, & Zoltner, 2011; Koyama, 2013; Liou, Grigg, & Halverson, 2014), administration (Wayman, Jimerson, & Cho, 2012) and teacher’s use of student achievement data (Little, 2012; Marsh, 2012). During recent years, as shown by Proitiz et al. (2017) and Mausethagen, Proitiz, and Skedsmo (2018), this literature has been dominated by studies focusing on of teacher’s use of data.

The present paper aims to contribute with analysis of a subject less covered, namely the use of assessment data measuring and monitoring organizational practices in schools. It builds on research strategies based on looking at data use as knowledge work (Hermansen, 2014) in order to turn attention to the social processes involved as leaders utilize data in their professional practice.

Theoretical framework. Knowledge, responsibility and epistemic practice

The paper takes its theoretical point of departure in the sociology of knowledge as applied to educational research. Here, we find arguments for the insufficiency of instrumentalism (Hermansen & Nerland, 2014, p. 190) and a blueprint for understanding school leadership – as well as other professional practices – as knowledge work, carried out in the interplay of policy, organization and professional practice (Hermansen, 2017). This paper researches leadership conversations as a form of knowledge work. Conversations are an important part of ‘what leaders do with knowledge’ (Nerland & Jensen, 2012, p. 116). In its most basic form, knowledge work is about how social actors make practical use of knowledge, based on their ‘potential in local activities’ (ibid. p. 104.). In the cases presented here, leaders work with assessment data and feedback-conversations, discussing data unique to each school and its organization.

The extended responsibility for the outcome of education associated with recent school reform policies in many countries is inseparable from an extended epistemic responsibility (Nerland, 2018). The responsibility has been associated primarily with the knowledge objects of student performance (Biesta, 2009, p. 34; Werler & Klepstad Færevaag, 2017) and the assessment of organizational efficiency and learning (Halverson & Kelley, 2017; Proitiz et al., 2017; Schildkamp, Vanhoof, van Petegem, & Visscher, 2012). Common to these forms of epistemic responsibility is that they emerge in the interplay of what Lingard et al. label ‘global epistemic policy communities’ (Lingard et al., 2016) and local professional communities. To think of this as a knowledge problem is to commit to a closer look at how school professionals act as knowledge workers and actors engaged in micro-political processes of interpreting and translating professional standards and policy into local contexts and processes (Gunnulfsen & Møller, 2017; Saltrick, 2010).

The paper aims to make this complex situation open for analysis by thinking of standards of organization and assessment data as examples of epistemic objects (Knorr Cetina, 2001; Nerland & Jensen, 2012). Epistemic objects are ‘conceptual and material artefacts’ (Hermansen, 2017) characterized by a level of constancy or object-character, such as in the case of this paper, assessment tools that support practical school leadership (that is, directed at solving complex problems) by providing a research-based knowledge foundation (Halverson & Kelley, 2017). It is a key theoretical claim of this paper that epistemic objects play a key role in the organization of professional practice, because they provide orientation in the complex realities of professional work. They are in other words valuable because they offer leaders a key to understanding complex problems.
Such objects thus also play key roles in the social construction of ‘expert communities’ across professional fields (Nerland & Jensen, 2012, p. 102). Leadership groups in schools, we will argue, can be considered expert communities because they are actively responsible for developing responses to new educational standards of quality and accountability. Teachers also form experts groups that may in varying degree be aligned with leadership groups in their views of the world.

Epistemic objects are artefacts that circulate in the knowledge work of school leaders, in this case employed, shared and communicated in the conversations of school leaders. When seen from the point of view of practice, objects come to provide access points for actors to what Nerland and Jensen label ‘wider machineries of knowledge construction’ (2012, p. 108), such as the interplay of educational ideas and concepts on the global scale. Standards, we will argue, may be thought of as an example of the interplay of such ‘machineries’ and local practices. Standards emerge when leaders relate to epistemological objects as tools for their reflection on roles, identities and practical issues, and asse the importance of ideas and concepts for their specific organization. Standards, then, provide occasions for leaders to link specific, mundane practices to values and ideas that reach far and wide across institutions and cultures. This is the kind of demanding knowledge work that comes to the fore in globalized and reformed educational practice.

The social interactions around epistemic objects, argue Hermansen and Nerland, may be studied and thought of as ‘emergent and constructive dimensions of practice’ (2014, p. 191). This means that leaders may seek to actively construct epistemological objects and practices to fit their situation. Kelley and Dikkers support this idea when pointing to ‘emergent conversations’ as objects of study (Kelley & Dikkers, 2016). Such emergent properties of practice are multifaceted and complex, involving a wide range of actions, emotions, reflexions and tactics by those involved. They are not merely functional, aimed at dealing with professional issues, but also emotional and dealing with issues and identity.

Nerland and Jensen (2012) have studied the emergent character of practices involving how experts use objects to confirm and explore their knowledge and experience, as well as to establish ownership and emotions of belonging. Nerland and Jensen argue that we may expect ‘expert communities’ to emerge in association with knowledge objects, and that actors may come to identify strongly with such communities. They become ‘emotional homes for expert selves’ (Knorr-Cetina in Nerland & Jensen, 2012, p. 116). In a micro-political perspective, this identification may create internal conflicts between groups of actors, while on the other hand develop motivation and loyalty.

In the organizations literature reviewed above, we find helpful conceptual models for how such knowledge work may play out. The production of knowledge may be organized by plausibility (Weick, 1995) and social acceptability (Hallett, 2010), rather than rational reasoning. Employing these concepts we may come to understand how the conversations of leaders are influenced by their relations and group dynamics. Organization theory argues that such emphasis on social construction is important because it allows us to study how identity, belonging and social conflict become key factors in knowledge work. Actors, according to Nerland and Jensen (2012), thus seek to mobilize the support of other actors to strengthen their agendas.

**Methodology: motivation, competence and the object of study**

The analysis presented here is based on structured group interviews and feedback conversations at three Danish elementary schools. Interviews were conducted during the winter of 2015–2016.

At the time, six schools from the same municipality participated in a development project aiming to create organizational capacity for student-centered leadership. This group of schools were aiming to build on their work on the theory of Viviane Robinson (Robinson, 2011). Of these six schools, three volunteered to participate in a research project on data use, hosted and funded by University College Capital from 2014 to 2016.

The schools are identified as School T, School R and School K in this paper. The schools provide education for grades 1–10 and are small- to mid-sized Danish public elementary schools with from 4 to 700 students. Staff size is 60–100 and leadership consists of one principal and 3–4 section leaders. The three leadership teams formed relatively coherent groups. Two leadership groups had worked together for more than five years while the third had two members with less than one year in the job. The volunteering schools were characterized by a high level of motivation to create change and learning opportunities for themselves and their schools.

As for their knowledge work characteristics, the school leaders had participated in municipal leadership development programmes prior to the research project. This established a level of motivation and knowledge of the use of data, which made it probable that the teams would actively engage in the knowledge work processes that would be part of the research project. This was important because the study of emerging standards presupposes some degree of active knowledge work. The researchers estimated this level of motivation and competence, as well as their drive to volunteer for learning opportunities, to be above average for Danish
school leaders at the time. Other groups in other situations may have declined to discuss standards or even disagreed on fundamental issues, such as the use of feedback or the relevance of research to school leadership development.

The key object of study was the completion of assessment processes at each school. The assessment used the CALL survey (Blitz & Modeste, 2015; Halverson & Kelley, 2017). The CALL survey is based on educational research and covers five domains: 'Focus on learning’, ‘Monitoring teaching and learning’, ‘Building professional community’, ‘Acquiring and allocating resources’ and ‘Establishing a safe and effective learning environment’.¹ We argue that respondents, who are presented with findings from each of these domains, can be thought of as engaging with standards of leadership and teaching that reside in the corresponding theoretical fields. The analysis looks at such standards as composite knowledge objects.

Empirical data: assessment data, interviews and coding

Researchers conducted interviews of all leadership teams before and after each school had completed the CALL survey. A total of six interviews with a duration of 90–120 minutes were conducted. Transcription takes up a total of 283 pages. Quotes are identified with line numbers that refer to the full, transcribed interviews.

The scope of the interviews conducted prior to the assessment was to identify and gauge the leadership challenges of each school in light of recent reform. The initial interview provided data describing the situation of each school. The interview guide focused on the implementation of the school reform, including the demand for increased assessment. The interview established an understanding of the specific situation of the schools necessary to estimate the effects of the assessment feedback on leadership knowledge work.

After the survey assessment, researchers led a feedback conversation based on reports made by the researchers compiling unique data from each school into five main findings. These interviews after the assessment introduced the report findings to the leadership groups and sought to follow if and how quality standards emerged in their conversations. Researchers presented assessment findings from reports for each school (labelled reports T, R and K), and the subsequent conversation was conducted with the aim of making leaders reflect on their main challenges and leadership tasks in light of this new knowledge about their school. The feedback reports and the transcribed interviews make up the empirical material for the analysis presented in this paper.

The transcribed interviews were coded applying the key theoretical concepts of re-contextualization, access points to wider machines and community. These codes were used to indicate the instances in which leaders used assessment knowledge objects, how they sought to link the particular objects to wider machines, and how they and other groups in the context identified with the objects. Furthermore, transcripts were coded to identify when leaders used the assessment data to confirm and explore the practices at each the school.

Validity of the case study findings

At first glance, the schools were in similar situations. They were all busy reflecting on what needed to be done following the recent policy reform, and they all participated in the same municipal professional development programme. The initial interviews indicated, however, that the three schools had different starting points and different ways of reflecting on the knowledge impact of the reform.

Therefore, the researchers opted to look at the schools as three separate cases. The strategy of analysis could therefore be committed to interpretation of the conversation of each group (Stake, 1995) in their local context (Flyvbjerg, 2006), while aiming to compare and contrast the three cases.

Taken together, the three cases provide insight into practices of knowledge work in the wake of the Danish school policy reform of 2014. The research design aims to gauge the effects of using assessment data in leadership knowledge work. The design does not provide solid validity, however, for the causal effects of introducing assessment data in leadership groups. There are simply too many possible explanations for why the conversations of leaders develop and, perhaps, change over the course of an assessment intervention. One pressing concern is that views and knowledge claims of leaders does not emerge in conversation as new forms of knowledge, but preexist in some form. Conversations thus confirm, rather than create, quality standards.

The analysis makes use of the theoretical framework to provide critical reflection on whether the conversations refer to the knowledge object of the assessment, or if it more plausibly refers to other objects independent of the assessment (Yin, 2013, p. 323). The sociology of knowledge encourages us look for the histories of knowledge objects and thus allows us to think about how they come to exist and influence the conversations of each particular case. If we can establish an understanding of how each case is influenced by general ideas, we may come to see how cases compare to each other. This is what Yin calls analytic generalization (Yin, 2013, p. 325). It allows us to consider how the conversations of the three groups may be seen as examples of abstract ideas that we may find in other schools grappling with
the challenges of policy reform. This reflection on how the cases may be representative of a wider pool of schools, however, lies outside the scope of the present paper.

Presentation of findings

School T: Data practices, autonomy and the good teacher

Before assessment

The leadership group at School T indicates that they have been preparing the reform transition for at least a year. Therefore, they believe that the content of the reform is ‘nicely aligned’ (31) with their ambitions and efforts up to this point. The group mentions goal-setting and classroom observation as examples of new practices which have been implemented at the school in anticipation of the reform. ‘We’ve researched well’, as one leader comments (247).

This means that the leaders have focused on preparing practices involving ‘data-based knowledge’, including planning for how to use data in the professional organization. The focus on data has raised a host of questions, which provide an indication that the leaders’ views on accountability has been changing.

The group has experienced a local media frenzy in the wake of a national school ranking. The ranking placed School T in the bottom quartile, which drew a lot of negative attention. Leaders report that this has changed their thinking, making them more aware of the power-aspect of performance data. The ranking was a wake-up call, raising attention to the increasing exterior accountability demands. The group, however, is ambivalent with respect to standardized testing. They indicate that while test results may provide useful ‘guidelines’ (171) for leaders, the current test may be flawed or less than optimal. The group mentions questions included in the Danish language test as an example.

Exterior standards and test results invite an attention to detail which this group of leaders believe is dangerous. It can lead to practices of control that may hurt the organization. The group would much prefer that teachers drive innovation and development at school. As one leader says, ‘the best that could happen would be that [the teachers] come up with something on their own’. Teacher autonomy and initiative are seen as sources for the creation of ‘good ideas’ (401). As we shall see, this reliance on distributed leadership comes under pressure once assessment findings are reported and discussed.

After assessment

Before assessment, as we have seen, the group of leaders thus emphasized the importance of autonomy. In their work on the issue of the low ranking, they maintain that teacher autonomy is of key importance. The group of leaders thus stressed the importance of autonomy for both teachers and leaders before they were presented with the assessment findings.

In their review of the findings, however, the leaders discuss two emerging standards: first, the notion of a consistent language, and, secondly, the notion of the good teacher. The group notices that the professional community at the school does not appear to share a consistent language for how to use assessment in teaching practice (Report T). The introduction of this finding creates a shift in how leaders talk about autonomy. They now begin to talk about it as ambiguous and somewhat risky.

Having lamented the lack of ‘shared language for assessment’ (490), the leaders turn to talk about the notion of the good teacher. In their talk, the good teacher emerges as someone who takes responsibility for such a language and for other properties necessary to manage autonomy. The group comes to question whether teachers have the necessary conceptual knowledge to ensure that their autonomous ideas are sufficiently aligned with reform strategies. In this way, the new standards of the consistent language and the teacher who is capable of such language, expressed in the assessment finding, creates the emergence of the idea that not all forms of autonomy are beneficial.

The good teacher and the firm leader

This discussion is clearly important to the group of leaders. Using assessment findings as evidence, they discuss how a group of teachers need to manage their own improvement more professionally, rather than ‘always yearning for recognition’ (555). Here, the leaders are developing their understanding of the organization relative to the emerging standard of the good teacher. The standard of the good teacher is an idealization of the professional who works well with others using the preferred knowledge framework – in this case the ‘language for assessment’ – within the organization.

This standard opens the possibility for leaders to describe some teachers at the school as driven by emotion and the need to belong. A strong focus on opposing identities and competing emotional homes is emerging within the group, and possibly within the organization. This re-identification of teachers is to some extent driven by reference to the emerging standard of the good teacher, though possibly also on the sense of urgency created, in part, by the unfavourable ranking and the challenges posed by the school reform.

The critical thinking immanent to this sense of urgency, however, is not only directed at teachers. It extends to the leaders themselves, as they distrust...
their own capacity to enforce the quality standards that come with the reform: ‘Do we dare to draw the consequences if an employee fails to meet the quality standards?’ (490). The assessment standard lends support to the idea that the leaders need to draw a line and be firm about how things should be done. Again, the sense of urgency is evident when a leader, as if speaking to a teacher, says: ‘It is not a question of whether you like to use data or not; it is simply what we do here.’ (558). The ideal of the firm leader emerges: there is a clear way of doing things, and teachers must accept this.

The discussion of the findings does not paint an entirely negative picture of the capacities of the organization. The assessment shows that teachers have positive evaluations of the level of cooperation in the professional community and of the leadership of this issue. One leader comments this finding: ‘We should applaud ourselves! We’re very well under way on this issue.’ (520). This finding thus provides an epistemic object for positive self-validation of and for the leaders. The group extends this positive mood in the discussion of where to go from here: ‘Don’t worry, we’ll find a way to motivate… not to control the teachers’ (924).

The assessment findings also lead to the discussion of more specific practices. Leaders thus comes to question meeting practices at the school, speculating that time may be used less than optimally in the organization. Findings indicate that teachers believe there is little time to discuss student learning. The school leader responds: ‘There is time set aside for mutual learning, but we haven’t defined that the first fifteen minutes of each meeting must be used for this specific thing…’ (198). Staff, in other words, are wrong to think they need more time, and this finding does not change the way leaders think about the use of school meetings.

Discussion

In the conversations at School T, the emergence of a new standard for the evaluation of teachers has implications for the organizational identity formations of the school. Leaders emphasize how teachers crave attention and recognition, and point to the need for some measure of discipline as a way to construct an alternative teacher identity – one closer to the standard. Yet, while expressing a sense of urgency to act, leaders express awareness of the risk that too rigid controls will hurt the motivation of teachers. They see leadership, in other words, as a balancing act between estimating appropriate pressures to teachers while maintaining good internal relations.

The assessment findings provides the occasion to construct key objects, such as good leadership, including the reflexive challenge of whether leaders in fact dare to do something about teachers that fail to occupy the emotional home that emerges with the new standard of the good teacher. The challenges of re-contextualizing assessment findings and thus raise complex questions: how to create internal balance in the face of external demands? What should be the relative weight of policy and wider epistemic machines, such as new professional standards?

In the process, the group of leaders constructs an image of themselves that risk to become a closed expert community in opposition to teachers. Their access to assessment data and their privileged occasion to discuss and make sense of these new epistemic objects is a clear leadership priority, yet it brings with it the risk that leaders form their own closed group may object to the leadership prompted by such a backdrop. Clearly, the leaders are well aware of the possible difficulties coming from acting on their expert knowledge as they voice the perils of motivation, implicitly acknowledging the teachers need for positive affirmation. Alongside this awareness, the leaders still confer that important strands of their work are moving along very well in spite of the complex challenges surrounding their efforts.

It thus appears to be a central part of the knowledge work of this group of leaders to alternate between exploring the practices and motivations of teachers (as well as their own), and confirming or validating these practices. This work is ongoing and even though the leaders refrain from settling this discussion this analysis suggest that the assessment data in many ways acts as an epistemic object pushing leaders to reconsider their views on teacher autonomy and identity.

School R: Objectivity, private practice and the use of sense

Before assessment

When the leaders at School R meet for the pre-assessment interviews, they talk about the Danish school reform of 2014 as a ‘paradigm shift’ (17). They think of the reform as a move towards increased professional learning and team-based collective practice. The group of leaders describe how they encounter new knowledge objects in the ideas and concepts for improved practice that are part of the reform.

One leader observes how the paradigm shift is associated with the ‘sudden’ (138) availability of concepts, such as visible learning and other approaches to student assessment. Such epistemic objects have emerged with the reform and become commonplace in the professional organization. This new, shared epistemic construct ensures that, according to the one of the leaders, ‘everybody knows what we’re talking about’ (138). What ‘everybody knows’ is a conflation of theoretical concepts from educational research, focusing on efficiency and change, and key
concepts from the Danish school reform. The particular ways of thinking school leadership at School R, in other words, draw from the wider epistemological machine, encompassing Danish policy and global knowledge trends.

The drive towards new, shared epistemic objects, is an important feature of the leaders’ ambition to get rid of what they label ‘private teacher practice’ (39). This notion of an illegitimate ‘private practice’ also applies to leadership: ‘The days have gone’, says one leader, ‘when the school leader sat back in his office like some kind of oracle…. [and] the privately practicing leader is also a thing of the past’ (417).

Yet, facing what they describe as an overwhelming amount of information and new ideas following the school reform, the group of leaders are preoccupied with how to make professional judgment. Here, the notion of local ‘meaningfulness’ emerges as a key aspect of their conversation. Changes and ideas, coming from the outside, must ‘make sense’ within the professional community at the school (384). The notion of sense is contrasted to formal rules and regulations implemented from above. It becomes shorthand for what can be understood and put to good use by teachers and leaders.

‘Meaning’ thus emerges as a local standard of acceptability: only that which ‘makes sense’ can be accepted in the professional community. In the face of an increasing rate of change, the leaders insist that it ‘has to make sense to those, who work with it every day’ (182).

It is an explicit ambition that such forms of sense-making are shared in the professional communities at the school. It must be a shared epistemic practice, because only when shared does it construct a sense of normative continuity in the professional communities of the school. The leaders refer to these communities as ‘teams’. They consider team-based professional practice and forms of knowledge as key to combat ‘private practice’. On the level of the team, leaders believe it is possible to introduce a higher level of ‘objectivity’ (500). This firmer knowledge base may be developed if teacher teams become adept at analyzing their own practice. This applies to leaders, too: ‘it makes us more conscious of the importance of data-based leadership’ (553).

**After assessment**

Upon the presentation of findings from the assessment data, the group discusses how this new knowledge may bring their work forward. The leaders believe that data and the picture they draw of their organization has the potential to contribute new ‘insight into what works and under what circumstances it works’ (43). Leaders thus re-contextualize notions of efficiency as solutions transferred from the outside – in this case, as assessment feedback – and implemented into local practice.

Yet, the leaders quickly turn from this broad idea of efficiency to the importance of a particular finding: ‘we’re very happy about the finding that shows that the staff knows which way we’re headed.’ (61) The assessment finding carries with it the possibility to confirm that the leaders’ work has had an impact in the organization. It confirms that the leaders are doing good work. There is a certain plausibility to this in the group because, after all, it is a shared experience to be working on this.

Similarly to School T, narratives on the identity of the professional community (e.g. teacher groups) are circulated in the feedback conversation. A finding in the School R assessment report indicates that almost half of the teachers do not use assessments of student learning in the planning and design of teaching (Report R, p. 8). Leaders take this as an indication that ‘teachers have been used to the idea that talking about student welfare [as opposed to learning] is more important’ (p. 4). This tendency, leaders believe, has created severe problems for some teachers: ‘We’re dealing with a sort of self-tort helplessness’ (637). Put in simple terms, leaders believe that some teachers do more knowledge work on the social aspects of schooling than on student progress and learning. Leaders construct this belief as a turn away from the standard of improved student learning, which they argue undermines the possibility of positive change.

This collision is a clear example of how an epistemic object, such as a standard for learning centered leadership and teaching impacts local practice. The leaders refer to the standard of student learning as the master goal of schooling. This ideal lies at the basis of not only the CALL assessment, but also the professional development programme hosted by the municipal administration. It thus appears to be a clear and obvious epistemic object for the leadership group.

The critical remarks on the teacher community are contrasted, however, by the leaders’ acknowledgement of the ‘enormous professional pride’ of teachers (351). There is thus a paradoxical mechanism of identity in place at School R: On the one hand, leaders are openly critical of the teachers. However, at the same time, leaders acknowledge teachers’ professionalism and are critical of their own abilities to bring new standards to bear within the organization.

At the same time, leaders talk about how the school community as a whole shares the ‘feeling of loss’ (629) associated with the reform. This emerges as a salient example of knowledge work aimed at constructing mutual emotional homes, combining a shared sense of loss with the shared joy that leaders and staff are aligned when it comes to strategic direction. The leaders at School R work to provide an emotional home for staff and leaders, even if it is fraught with challenges.
Discussion

The conversation of School R leaders prior to assessment shows how leaders refer to concepts of ‘meaning’ and ‘sense’ as local standards for what they believe should matter in the organization. The notion that new practices or ideas make sense takes a kind of gatekeeper function: the meaningful reform initiatives, concepts and ideas are allowed to become recontextualized at the school, while the meaning-less are discarded as irrelevant.

There is an appeal to this ‘sense of sense’, as we might call it, as a property shared by leaders and teachers: everybody knows and agrees about what makes sense. The leaders conceptualize a professional community in alignment with respect to this abstract standard.

Yet, this community-based notion of a shared common sense is pushed in the background after the assessment. Here, leaders turn quite harsh in their characterization of the teacher group. They no longer circulate the thoughts on the importance of common ground in the conversation. Instead, the adaptation of standards of the good teacher (as he/she who has student learning at heart, all the time) leads them to express open critique of teachers. This mechanism of judging teachers by new knowledge standards, similar to the situation at school T, creates a paradoxical form of change management. There are clearly opposing ‘emotional homes’ within the organization, yet at the same time the leaders emphasize the importance of values that are shared by both leaders and teachers.

School K: Room for leadership and the centrality of pedagogy

Before assessment

The school K leaders have, according to themselves, prepared well for the Danish school reform of 2014. Considering how to implement the reform they have come to believe, as on leader jokingly states, that ‘we could have designed this reform’ (103). They believe that a light-hearted approach works well with teachers, who tend to be quite pessimistic in their approach to the school reform. The leaders express belief that the reform provides them the occasion to create changes that they, as leaders, have dreamt about for a long time. This looks like a kind of self-validation, yet the stakes are high and leaders ‘feel the pressure’ to perform from both staff and the municipality (547).

The most pressing issue for the leadership group is the organization. The preparation for the reform has made it evident that School K is fragmented in many small communities. The school is ‘the host of a wide range of groups and small units’ (342). The conversation leaves the impression that this is fairly complicated, and that cooperation across this social complexity can be a challenge. Leaders confide that unity and clarity of direction may be less than evident. The group talks about this problem in terms of the absence of clear narratives.

As part of this reflection on lacking narratives, the leadership team refers to an experience they had a year earlier on a study-visit to Canada, where they saw examples of strong narratives being communicated about schooling and the effects thereof. The comparison to wider epistemic machines, in this case the example of Canadian practice, provides the group with evidence that ‘if we don’t have our narratives in place about where we are coming from and where we are going, we just can’t get moving’ (674). On this issue, the group has come to share expert knowledge, which they mobilize and enter into the conversation. They agree that change only happens if the leaders can communicative clearly and circulate their ideas in the school organization. The group recommend each other to use ‘narratives’ as a way to decrease the friction of organizational complexity and provide more of the kind of mutual understanding with staff emphasized above.

The leaders at School K are inclined to believe that there is a need to apply a firm hand in order to provide this clarity. They talk about the ambition to develop more systematic mechanisms of quality assessment in schools and one leader expresses the ‘wish for the municipal administration to go ahead and say what is best practice...’ (469). The group hopes that the formal aspects of the school reform – the mechanics of the municipal quality system – may provide a tool for leadership because it makes it legitimate to force a dialogue with teacher teams.

These reflections leave the impression that the negotiation with teachers is an important part of leadership practice. Leaders refer to their opportunity to frame the cooperation with teachers as their ‘leadership space of dominion’ (455). The leaders describe how some teachers are less than supportive of what the leadership does (399), and therefore they seek to operationalize the reform’s ideas and initiatives, hoping to strengthen their influence with staff.

After assessment

The feedback conversation at School K revolved around revisiting key issues of focus, and the challenges of a somewhat fragmented organization. Leaders see the assessment provided by data as support of the need to ‘focus’. The use of assessment and performance data thus provides an opportunity to bring clarity to professional conversations. It makes it possible to say, as one leaders does, ‘OK, this data is what we’re talking about now’ (1118). One leader sees the assessment findings as proof of the need to ‘take
control’ of the school (825) – an idea that seems to align with the need for clarity expressed in the initial interview.

Yet, even carrying the promise of clarity, the leaders find it difficult to make good use of data. Finding data is not the problem; the challenge lies in translating data into action and improvement. As one leader says: ‘It is easy to test the students, but how on earth do we go from that to find a structured way of improving teaching?’ (1195). A logic of exploration is emerging here as the assessment data leads the group to consider the challenges of linking abstract knowledge objects to local practices.

One assessment finding indicates that ‘there is no systematic practice for working with student progress or well-being’ at various team meetings amongst the teachers (Report K). Leaders understand this as an indication that meetings may not be as efficient as they had hoped. They want to know more about what is really going on at the wide range of meetings held across the school and why teachers spend time discussing the wrong issues. Discussing, for example, student behaviour as opposed to student learning.

The finding on a lack of systematic practice in meetings hits home with the leaders. It seems to confirm the idea that the school organization is in some respects in disarray. ‘We’re caught in a swamp here’, says one leader (612). The leaders talk about a dysfunctional teacher culture – a concept which seems to fuel the construction of opposing emotional homes: us (the leadership group) versus them (the teachers). The group perceives this as a threat to school development. It means that leaders and teachers ‘…have to un-learn all the stuff we mustn’t spend time talking about’ (617). Un-learning is an interesting form of epistemic work: it introduces the effort of turning back the constructions of the past.

The assessment presented in the report seems to challenge the pride of the organization shared by the leaders. They move away from thinking of their school as a well-run organization, and begin to talk about what they see as the relative disarray when compared to the standards available in the survey producing the assessment and overwhelming these with abstract challenges where the conversation focuses on abstract challenges and offer little detail on the state of the professional community.

With the assessment findings, the conversations of the leaders at school K take a marked turn. The apparent lack of systematic practice is a source of concern, which leaders see as an indication that the culture as dysfunctional. The remedy, as it were, is not to learn but to un-learn. The challenges appear to be so great that they are quite pessimistic about building on existing knowledge. Rather, the organization needs to start over; to un-learn its past.

The group focuses on the practices of small and isolated groups of teachers. As in the case of school R, the leaders if school K directly criticize the shortcomings of teachers for falling short of the assessment standards. The leaders believe they need to know more about what is happening; what is ‘really going on’. They share critical perspectives on the small, isolated communities of teachers, and focus on the need to be firm. After assessment, the earlier idea of finding inspiration in Canada or other wider epistemic machines does not emerge. Rather, the assessment seems to raise the need for more assessment, more investigation into school practices.

**Conclusions. Main findings and research perspectives**

The assessment feedback provides an occasion for leaders at all three school to reflect on issues different from what they saw as their main challenges prior to assessment. The leaders use the feedback conversations to discuss what should count as quality standards to assess their work on issues, such as defining and promoting the characteristics of the good teacher, making good use of meetings and communicating where the school is going. The standards or idealized images of practice that emerge from the assessment feedback sessions serve as a point of reference for how leaders work to take responsibility for implementing the school reform. This way, the conversations of the leadership groups become a form of ongoing accountability practice.

While some results serve as confirmation for the leaders that they are on the right and clear path (schools R and T), others make them think that they may have overlooked or misjudged vital aspects of school life. Meetings is an example of a specific practice, which emerges as a problem leaders are looking to solve at two schools. As a more general issue, the focus on student learning emerges as a standard that is re-contextualized by the assessment findings, as well as the policy and theory of student-centered leadership. When discussing issues such as the need to know more about practice at the school and the need for a clear, shared focus, leaders at
school K emphasize the need to explore new ways to strengthen the professional community.

Alongside and to some extent in counter to the ideas of exploration, the conversations at all three schools revolve around potential issues with identities or emotional homes of leaders and staff. The most dominant opposition across the case schools emerged from the standards of the good teacher. When standards of the good teacher emerge in conversation, leaders characterize the local culture, values and motivations of teachers as somewhat wanting relative to the aspirations of the leaders. Though emerging in the conversation, these characterizations may be well-established, self-evident truths that circulated in the organization before the assessment. More than the exploration of new possibilities, they take the form of a confirmation of established identities of the teacher and leader groups. The example of the focus on student learning (see above) may, similarly, emerge because leaders were involved in knowledge work based on student-centered leadership theory before the assessment.

If the ideas about the teacher group and the importance of student learning were in fact in place before the assessment (and before the first interviews), the feedback process seem to have worked as an occasion to mobilize them as part of a plausible professional conversation. The emerging standards, in other words, are not necessarily new, but the product of ongoing professional conversations.

Yet, that does not mean that conversations are merely a repetition of established ideas. They provide an occasion to use the emerging standards to create change. At two schools, the leaders thus offer concepts or ideals that may help to overcome divides and established more unity between teachers and leaders. At School R, leaders consider a shared sense of loss and change. At two schools, the leaders thus offer concepts merely a repetition of established ideas. They provide in other words, are not necessarily new, but the product of ongoing professional conversations.

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Notes

1. An introduction to the survey can be found at the CALL website: www.callofleadership.org
2. Visible learning is a concept for goal-setting, assessment and data use based on the research of John Hattie. The concept has become popular among Danish school professionals in recent years.

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