

# Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)



NJCIE 2018, Vol. 2(2–3), 86–102

<http://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.2802>

## Creating Cultures of Equity and High Expectations in a Low-Performing School: Interplay Between District and School Leadership

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Peer-reviewed article; received 13 June 2018; accepted 17 September 2018

### Abstract

The literature on successful schools has revealed that a school culture of high expectations is beneficial for student achievement and that leaders may exercise significant influence on their school's success trajectory. However, less information is known about how leaders at different levels interact to build such cultures in local schools or how standards of professional work and new demands interact to support teachers' commitment to quality education for a diverse student population. This study aimed to examine the interplay between district and school leadership in creating cultures of equity and high expectations for all students in a Norwegian low-performing school. Methods included interviews with the principal and the superintendent, focus group interviews with deputies, teachers and students, and a survey among all students in grade 10 at the selected school. The study demonstrated how leading teachers' effort to raise academic and social standards among students was a complex endeavour and how a productive interplay between district level leadership and school-level leadership became one of the key enabling factors. A main argument is that promoting quality education for all begins with the question of purpose and requires understanding how principals' and teachers' work is embedded in broader social structures of power.

**Keywords:** educational leadership; mutual trust; equity; high expectations

### Introduction

The present focus on student achievement in basic skills has resulted in a strong push to reduce education to measurable outcomes (Biesta, 2016), often described as an outcome-based discourse characterised by competition and privatisation (Moos, 2017). At the same time, a major reason for the differences among schools is their diverse sociocultural and socioeconomic student composition—a well-documented fact drawn from decades of research (Nordenbo et al., 2010). This outcome-based discourse is contrasted to a discourse

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focusing on the purposes of schooling and democratic participation. The tensions between these discourses are reflected in many studies on successful school leadership (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Although the literature on successful schools has demonstrated how successful principals continually work to mediate government policy and external changes to enable integration with school values and a culture of high expectations, less information is known about how school leaders at different levels interact to create a culture characterised by equity and high expectations. There is also scarce knowledge about how standards of excellent work and new demands interact to support educators' commitment to quality education for a diverse student population or how demands and support stemming from the educational governance system communicate expectations of possible outcomes. The reason is that relevant studies have focused on leadership *within* the school as an organisation, overlooking how school leaders' work is embedded in broader social structures of power.

This article examines the interplay between district and school leadership in creating cultures of equity and high expectations for all students in a low-performing school with a diverse population in the Norwegian context. While the study focuses on the work of district and school leaders, both teachers' and students' perceptions of cultures and learning environments are included in the analysis. Leadership practice occurs in interactions among people and their situations. The context determines these actions, but the context may also be influenced by actions. Accordingly, the paper addresses the following questions:

- (1) How do the superintendent, the principal and the teachers interpret and translate multiple policy demands to raise academic standards and the quality of practice?
- (2) How do school leaders (at different levels) and teachers interact to build a culture of high expectations and a commitment to equity?
- (3) How is the learning environment perceived by students?
- (4) What characterises the enabling and constraining factors in a school's efforts to develop its quality of practice?

The interplay between leadership at the municipal level and leadership in a school with a diverse population was used as a case study to find answers to these questions. The many sources of leadership in the educational system and the web of interactions created by these sources were also considered. The next section outlines analytical perspectives, followed by a brief description of some distinguished features of Norwegian educational policy, as well as current challenges. The methodological approaches applied and the contextual characteristics of the case are then explained. Finally, the findings are presented and discussed.

### **Analytical perspectives**

Analytical lenses based on the new institutionalism have served as inspirations in this

analysis. These lenses emphasise that activities, as the results of linear chains of decisions from central to local levels, cannot be observed but must be interpreted as emergent constructions among various actors who translate new demands and initiatives through established cultures in the educational system (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). This study has drawn on the perspectives of institutional work developed by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006). The concept of *institutional work* illuminates how school leaders at different levels, as well as teachers, perform as change agents or actors who focus on maintaining educational institutions. The implication is the recognition that actors' understanding and interests make them interpret the same occurrences differently. How national policy demands are translated to align with existing norms and values in a local school will likely influence the change-permitting properties of that school. The concept of institutional work also allows the discussion on findings in an era of new managerial demands, often branded by an outcome-based discourse.

Although this perspective does not allow an understanding of principals and teachers independent of social, cultural and historical structures, neither does it underrate human agency. On the contrary, it highlights the creative and knowledgeable work of actors who may or may not achieve its desired ends and who interact with existing social and technological structures in intended and unintended ways. This lens may illuminate how and why actors at different levels perform as change agents, as well as how the interpretation and translation of policies are closely interwoven and transform policy demands into practices (see Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012).

### **Norwegian context**

Equity has been recognised as one of the distinguishing features of the Norwegian educational system, and the role of educational institutions in creating civic society has been emphasised. There is no streaming according to ability, gender or other factors, and over 95% of the students are enrolled in regular classes in compulsory schools. This approach is based on the ideology that all children, irrespective of physical or mental disabilities or learning difficulties, should be integrated as much as possible into the ordinary school system.

Local municipalities have played a strong role in school governance. The leadership responsibility at the municipal level is shared between professional administrators and elected politicians. Through this linkage, education is connected to broader community affairs. Municipalities finance the schools and employ teachers and principals. They also perform a key role in providing in-service training and are required by the central government to establish a system for evaluating and following up on the schools' quality of education and their students' academic performance.

Since the end of the 1980s, the Norwegian educational system has undergone a major reform, influenced largely by new managerialist ideas. Strategies to renew the public sector have been promoted as new public management (Hood & Peters, 2004). Many municipalities have developed more evidence-based approaches to school governance, along

with new national expectations regarding the use of performance data to enhance educational quality. The intention is to mobilise educators' effort to improve student outcomes (Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). Nonetheless, teachers in most municipalities still enjoy considerable trust and autonomy, and the relationships between leaders and teachers are not very hierarchical in practice.

## Methodological considerations and data collection

This study was based on a larger study of multilevel actors involved in compulsory education in Norway, aiming to understand the interplay between district and school leadership in directing low-performing schools<sup>2</sup> (Møller et al., 2014). The research team assumed that if the authorities knew that their schools were selected based on low performance, they might be less willing to participate in the research endeavour. To ensure confidentiality, the team began by examining school statistics in large municipalities where at least six lower secondary schools were located. Based on these considerations, the Riverside municipality,<sup>3</sup> a diverse city with 30% of its population having an immigrant background, was selected first. Some areas in the city have a long history of poverty. Recent statistics show the increasing poverty among the families of the children living in these areas.

The superintendent provided consent; the next step was to obtain access to a low-performing school located in an environment categorised by low socioeconomic status (SES), wherein most parents lacked higher educational attainment. The research team decided to approach the principal of a school whose national test results were medium to low yet indicated small improvements over the last three years. After being informed of the project's aim and research questions, the principal gave her consent.

The selected school, Toppen,<sup>4</sup> was built in the late 1970s and currently has 300 students (grade 8–10). Over the last decade, the community's intake demographics have changed; people with higher education have moved out, and immigrants have moved in. Today, the school has a large number of ethnic-minority students (70%), but many are second-generation immigrants.

The analysis was based on individual interviews with the principal and the superintendent (both were interviewed twice) and focus-group interviews with deputies, teachers and students. The eight teachers in the two focus groups represented different subject

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<sup>2</sup> The project team differentiated between low- and high-performing schools (measured by national test and examination results) in areas characterised by poor prerequisites and low- and high-performing schools in areas with good prerequisites. A school may achieve relatively high scores on tests over several years but still perform much lower than expected, considering the local population's general achievement level and the socio-cultural structures. The project was linked to the International Successful School Principalship Project, which has developed an extensive body of research about successful principals in over 20 countries.

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym

areas. For the focus groups with the students, the researchers first selected one boy and one girl from the Student Council and then asked them to choose three students each (from different classes).<sup>5</sup> The students preferred to be grouped by gender during the interviews. To capture a broader picture of how students viewed their learning environment, the researchers designed a questionnaire to map perceptions among all 90 students in grade 10. In designing the questionnaire, the researchers drew on a Swedish survey that was developed and validated as part of a study of successful schools in Sweden (Ahlström & Höög, 2009) and well aligned with the mandates in the Norwegian Education Act. The paper-based questionnaire included questions about the students' perceptions of the school climate, opportunities to have a voice, interactions with teachers, experiences of mastery and confidence (both academically and socially), self-efficacy and any experiences with bullying.

In total, the analysis was based on nine interviews with 20 informants and a survey of 85 students. Table 1 provides an overview of the informants.

*Table 1: Overview of the informants and data collection*

	<b>Informants</b>	<b>Number of interviews</b>	<b>Number of informants</b>
<b>Municipal level</b>	Superintendent	2	1
<b>School level</b>	School principal	2	1
	Focus group with 2 deputies	1	2
	Focus group A with 4 teachers	1	4
	Focus group B with 4 teachers	1	4
	Focus group C with 4 students (girls)	1	4
	Focus group D with 4 students (boys)	1	4
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>20</b>
	Survey of all students in Grade 10		<b>85</b> (55.3% girls and 44.7% boys) (Response rate = 94.4%)

Additionally, two days were spent at Toppen to observe classroom instruction and interactions during breaks, staff meetings and lunchtime. Field notes from these days helped in contextualising the collected interview data, as well as the information on the school's website, the municipality's strategic education plan and the statistics published on the national School Gate (<https://skoleporten.udir.no>).

<sup>5</sup> The school data was collected in collaboration with a colleague (Marit Aas).

Most interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes each. All interviews were transcribed; two researchers independently analysed the transcripts to identify emergent themes. Next, the analysis was guided by the perspectives on institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

## Findings

In the following subsections, the findings are organised under the following headings: (a) municipal governance, (b) the story of school leadership, (c) school cultures and staff commitment, and (d) students' framing of their learning environment. To some degree, interview excerpts are included to illustrate the ways that the informants described and justified their work. The descriptive presentation of the findings is followed by a discussion based on the analytical perspectives.

### Municipal governance

The educational sector is administered by a superintendent who has high expectations of principals and teachers regarding student outcomes, as well as a commitment to promoting equity for all students. A distinct unit, monitored by the superintendent, offers the schools in-service training and tools for development.

Over the last three years, the superintendent has collaborated with principals and politicians to develop an ambitious strategic plan aiming to improve the quality of education for all students. Although performance management stands out as a main pillar for governance in the municipality's strategic plan, the document maintains that a safe environment is a prerequisite for learning and mastery and academic and social development. It is argued that such an environment is crucial to developing creativity, innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The local school is expected to exercise agency of control in deciding *how* to achieve the goals stated in the strategic plan; moreover, mutual trust across levels and a combination of support and demands are mentioned as essential to success. The superintendent stated that he valued how local politicians engaged in school policy, and he underscored his strong collaboration with them.

To map how different levels interacted to create cultures of high expectations and a commitment to equity in this municipality, the superintendent was asked to elaborate on who the agents of control were and how the agency was exercised. He framed it as follows:

Riverside has, for many years, prioritised literacy, and when you look at the numbers at an aggregated level, [these are] pretty good. However, when you deconstruct the average scores, there is a huge variety, both within the single school and across schools. Such findings challenge established zones of autonomy. Trust in teachers' work is dependent on systematic work in every school, but I realised that this was not the case. I frame it as positive accountability because we have supported those schools [that have] not perform well.

On one hand, he valued teacher autonomy; on the other hand, autonomy must be earned.

Over the last decade, all Norwegian schools have been mandated to participate in national tests in reading, mathematics and English, with the results graphically divided into five mastery levels. Each school receives an overview of its scores and is encouraged to use these scores as guiding tools for improvement. The superintendent explained how he systematically utilised these results in his annual meeting with each school:

In my dialogue with the school leaders, we focus on the variation in each class. For instance, in some classes, there are very few on mastery level 1 and many on mastery level 3. In other classes, the opposite picture might be the case, and I try to challenge the school leaders to analyse and come up with an explanation. Though it is not my intention to scapegoat any teacher, it is necessary to find out what can be done to improve the quality.

The superintendent stated that he welcomed the value-added model recently launched by the national authorities as a valuable tool in his annual meeting with each school's leadership team. However, he emphasised that it should be applied with caution.

He would have preferred being more hands-on with the schools' activities, but his schedule did not allow it. In the municipality, the educational unit staff had developed an annual cycle in which all the meeting points were inserted; hence, the principals knew in advance when certain issues would be on the agenda. The dialogue with each school was not only about scores on national tests and exams but also included sick leaves and absences, turnover and competency, and students' learning environment and well-being. Leadership strategies and collaboration within the school were likewise on the agenda. He explained that in his meetings with principals and deputies, he tried to stimulate reflections. He argued that while a superintendent must have confidence in the local school's outcomes and express trust in the teachers' work, one must also follow up on the results.

In summary, despite multiple managerial devices' entry into Riverside's educational policy, emphasising the control of outputs, and the superintendent's application of these tools in his interactions with the schools to bridge achievement gaps, the narrative of a common public school for all was also present in his story. A strong sense of moral purpose and a commitment to promoting equity for all students went hand in hand with a focus on the students' high achievement on national tests.

### **The story of school leadership**

The current principal was appointed almost 10 years ago. In the interview, she described the chaotic situation she encountered in her new job. The former principal had been terminated, no student monitoring system or clear routines were in place, and the school's core activities were loosely organised. The achievement level was clearly below expectations. The teachers were exhausted by the ongoing conflicts for a long time, and the

school's reputation was poor.<sup>6</sup> As a new principal, she started by immediately improving the school's physical environment to create more supportive conditions for teaching and learning. During the first years, she put three strategies in place: (a) establishing a supportive structure for at-risk students, (b) setting standards for student behaviour and establishing values and norms that concurred with the students' right to a good psychosocial environment, as stated in the Education Act, and (c) engaging in systematic work on teacher leadership and developing leadership capacity in the school. The superintendent fully supported her work the entire time. She also appreciated the established network among the principals in lower secondary schools. In this network, they shared knowledge and helped one another in troublesome situations.

The principal described how the school changed course towards a positive direction during her first years in the position. A project on developing basic skills in literacy and numeracy was developed in close collaboration with the teachers. The principal framed the project as follows:

The teachers soon became positive about the project because it met their needs for improving teaching. This is also what characterises how we work. We try to draw upon what we identify as needs among the teachers and start a process with the teachers.

She acknowledged being keenly aware of the importance of creating a professional culture among the school teachers: "I have focused on how the culture can nurture learning for everyone, how we can improve the work with students and how I, as a leader, can promote, support and enable learning to take place." The leadership team likewise prioritised building a culture of feedback, and the principal attempted to serve as a role model in providing feedback immediately after a situation arose. She believed in a bottom-up strategy but also attempted to build a bridge as a mediator between the municipality's expectations and her local school's needs. She sometimes acted as a buffer against the municipality's demands, requiring her to justify her decisions in her dialogue with the superintendent. Six years after her arrival, she went abroad on a one-year study leave, during which her deputy served as the acting principal. The productive work continued, demonstrating that the school had managed to establish a sustainable improvement culture and structure.

A main challenge was the school's poor reputation among the city's residents, despite the progress in student achievement in recent years. Ethnic Norwegians were leaving the community, while immigrants were moving in, in turn influencing the student intake. However, as the school leaders and teachers were working more closely with the parents, the parents' perception of the school was changing. The principal stated:

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<sup>6</sup> In the Norwegian context, it is difficult to terminate teachers (or principals) unless they have committed a criminal act. The municipality is in charge of hiring teachers, but typically, principals have a voice in the hiring process although they highly depend on effective collaboration with their superiors at the municipal level.



I have used a lot of time informing the parents about how our school has improved the results and how students are responding in a positive way on the annual national student survey about well-being and [the] learning environment. The parents understand such data; they recognise what we are doing and help us in promoting good news about the school, both in the local community and in the city as a whole. The parents are also alarmed by the school's lack of resources and try to influence the local politicians, which is good because, as a principal, I am not allowed to complain to the politicians.

The principal expressed concern about many students' lack of success in upper secondary school, knowing that they needed further education to face their future. Therefore, the leadership team focused on improving student results, as confirmed in the interviews with teachers and students, as well as with the superintendent. Both school leaders and teachers mentioned their appreciation for the in-service training offered by the municipality, but the principal admitted that occasionally, the agendas conflicted regarding which developmental issues to prioritise.

### **School culture and staff commitment**

Organised into teams for each grade, the teachers held team meetings and meetings for all teachers every week. Team meetings were utilised to coordinate activities, as well as share experiences and discuss problems. Regarding intra-group relationships in the teacher teams, the main images cohered around a psychological group climate—a *risk-free zone* for taking on personal challenges and gaining support. This image co-existed with a strong orientation towards the students' school results.

A strong commitment to equity among both teachers and team leaders was identified. The teachers explained that they liked the challenges of working in a multicultural school and regarded themselves as confident in solving everyday challenges together. They expressed a strong desire to do a good job for their students, seeing themselves on a mission to make a difference. A teacher in focus group A summed up her colleagues' reflections:

Many of our students have few references to the way the Norwegian society is organised, and often, their parents are working long days, or they are less familiar with the Norwegian language. Therefore, the relationship with us as teachers becomes crucial. We are considered significant grown-up persons for these students. They approach us for advice; they need a hug; they need someone who is willing to listen.

A teacher from focus group B echoed this theme:

The students express so much appreciation for what we are doing, and they are eager to learn. A multicultural student group is also fascinating and provides many positive experiences. I mean it is never boring to be a teacher at this school.

All the teachers were well qualified, and despite the school's location in a challenging environment, they had not experienced problems in recruiting new teachers recently. A newly appointed teacher stated, "It was an easy start for me; the school culture is so inclusive, and I felt warmly welcomed. This is not the case everywhere." However, the

teachers underscored the huge challenge regarding how parents outside the local community perceived and characterised their school. The teachers had continued to work on erasing the school's poor reputation, which they considered unfair; still, it had served to unite them as colleagues and as a whole school. The school's unfavourable image was based on the situation many years ago, including violence among some students, the school's poor results and much conflict among teachers and leaders. This negative reputation persisted despite improvements in both the school and the students' test results.

The focus-group interviews reflected trusting relationships among the teachers, the leadership team and the principal, as well as between teachers and students. The teachers exercised autonomy in the teaching domain and felt trusted by their principal, whom they described as a supportive person who provided a good social environment for teachers. A teacher in focus group A framed it this way: "It is a culture of trial and failure; we support and help each other to develop as teachers, and our principal is willing to listen to us." Another teacher stated,

*All students in this school are considered our students, no matter if you are a class teacher for them or not. We have the responsibility for everyone. If you observe unacceptable behaviour or a student who needs help, you will intervene.*

While they complied with the municipal priority of raising standards and improving test scores, their stories highlighted the need to develop an understanding of democracy among the students, emphasising the ability to critically analyse the dynamics of political processes and practices. At the same time, focusing on basic skills, such as reading and numeracy, would be important for students' development as democratic citizens. However, the teachers expressed strong concerns about how to realise the purposes of education due to economic constraints; in such a situation, the municipality's high expectations for student achievements would end up as empty words. A teacher put it this way:

*I feel, and this complaint is against the municipal level, not against our leadership team, [that] they require more for less. The economy in this municipality is poor. Every year, there are fewer teachers to do the same job. So far, we have managed to continue our effort to improve students' results on national tests, but there is a *pain limit*. How far is it possible to increase the pressure on teachers?*

To sum up, the school seemed to have a collective culture of social relations, as well as a collective focus on student learning, facilitating asking for help and sharing experiences. Nevertheless, their collaboration was mainly about planning and coordination. The leadership team emphasised expectations about common reflections, but according to the teachers, this occurred to a lesser extent in practice.

### **Students' framing of their learning environment**

In the two focus groups, the students demonstrated positive feelings about their time in school. They expressed pride in their school and perceived its poor reputation as unfair and belonging to its past. A female student stated it this way:

My father suggested and argued that I should apply [in] another school because this school was not good. However, I became enrolled in this school,<sup>7</sup> and then we discovered this was a very good school, so there was no need for applying for a change.

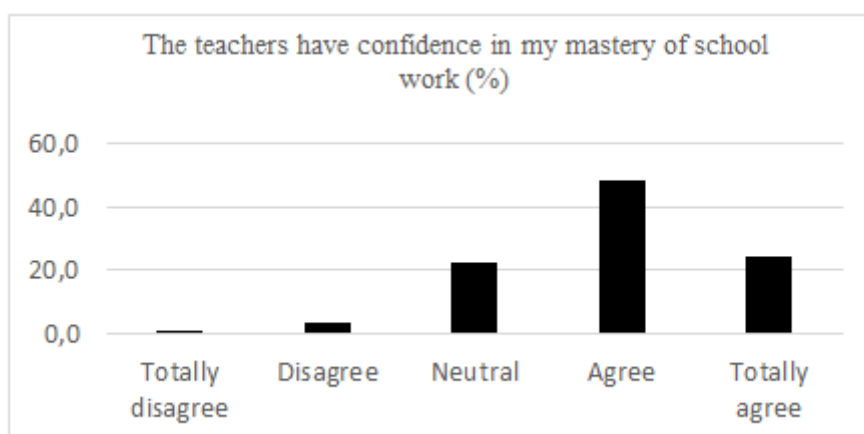
A male student framed it this way:

I think it has to do with the multicultural environment in which the school is located. Before we came to this school, we heard a lot of bad things. However, it wasn't true, but maybe it was bad in the past. Many people have negative prejudices.

Except for the physical conditions, the learning environment was favourable. Both student groups emphasised positive relations among students and between students and teachers. They reported feeling safe and confident and finding it easy to make friends. Although they felt that some teachers should be better prepared, they were mainly satisfied with their teachers. The following quote was typical: "It varies across teachers. Some gain respect immediately, while others struggle to have control. It relates to how well they are prepared. The good teachers express expectations and encourage you to do your best." These students were well aware of their parents' expectations regarding their success in school. Although their parents sometimes could not help them with their school work, they knew that education was valued at home. Students with immigrant parents emphasised this point, for example: "My mother did not get an education due to the war. My parents expect me to get a good education."

The survey results confirmed the analyses of student interviews. Some of the findings are highlighted in the following paragraphs. For instance, a majority of the students (74.1%) believed that their teachers had confidence in their mastery of school work. Only four students disagreed (Table 2).

*Table 2: The teachers' confidence in the students' mastery*



<sup>7</sup> Normally, students are enrolled in their neighbourhood school at the compulsory level. However, some municipalities make it possible to apply for enrolment in another school.

Additionally, 82.1% answered that the teachers had high expectations that the students would contribute to a good learning environment; 79.7% stated that their teachers had high expectations regarding their academic achievements.

Most students (75%) felt that they could cope with the tasks that the school expected them to complete; only two students disagreed. Almost everyone agreed on the importance of working hard to succeed in school (96.4%).

Student democracy is an important element of the national curriculum, implying that each student should have a voice in developing the local curriculum. The survey showed a little more variety regarding this issue (Table 3).

*Table 3: Student voice in curriculum planning*

The students have a voice in planning what to do in the subjects		
	<i>n</i>	%
Totally disagree	9	10.6
Disagree	4	4.7
Neutral	25	29.4
Agree	40	47.1
Totally agree	16	18.8

In the focus groups, the students pointed out the varying degrees of the teachers' preparedness but did not complain about having no voice in curriculum planning. One reason for the varying degrees of giving students a voice in lesson planning might be that teachers must cope with much greater uncertainty when they invite students to present their ideas. They have to deal with increased vulnerability to students' complaints or criticisms than if they teach in a more traditional manner.

In summary, the survey showed the students' positive attitudes towards the school and their teachers. They believed that they had opportunities to learn, while most had experienced mastery. They felt secure in having teachers who would handle any problem.

In the interviews, the students emphasised that they had not witnessed bullying among them but that some students might have problems with establishing friendships. They admitted hearing racial remarks from some students but would not call such comments bullying. While the principal and the teachers emphasised zero tolerance for bullying in school, 7.1% (6) of the students reported being bullied the previous year, and 56.4% claimed that they would tell their teachers if they saw a classmate being mistreated.

## Discussion

This study supports the notion that leadership intervention can help schools transform their internal context, shifting it to a more favourable direction (Day & Gurr, 2014; Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, & Copland, 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). It seems that the pathway from a very low-performance to an improved status regarding school results is intimately linked to leadership intervention. For example, the principal starts by improving the physical environment; next, she focuses on supporting teacher leadership, allowing mutual trust to develop over time. The new school structure, established and supported by the superintendent, includes team leaders with increased responsibility for instructional leadership. Soon after, the teachers' leadership in interacting with the students becomes as important as the principal's leadership. Their systemic approach to sharing leadership at different levels seems to have counteracted potential problems during the principal's one-year leave. The school manages succession and stability by increasing the opportunities for local leadership. The analysis suggests that this holistic design of the school's structure works as an enabling condition.

Another enabling condition is the development of a culture of reciprocal trust among leaders, teachers and students, as well as a strong commitment to equity (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Decision making at the classroom level seems autonomous, but the teachers should comply with the standards for improving national test scores, which could be identified as a constraining condition because superintendents and principals are vested with formal powers, with a range of means for coercion and reward, including economic and structural sanctions. Although not at the forefront of the superintendent's story, it is implicit in his comment about what must be done when some schools fail to meet the standards. Furthermore, the principal is aware of the requirement of accountability to the municipality. The superintendent argues that he must ensure equal access to quality education for all students within his jurisdiction and that all schools must comply with the curricular principles and assessment practices set by the government. While these requirements might substantially constrain teachers, they are also designed to encourage the teachers' creativity. The teachers' stories indicate having managed to maintain a balance. Far more constraining is the challenging financial issues that they have to deal with, creating ethical dilemmas.

The superintendent seems to exercise his agency of control quite subtly. In the interviews, he emphasises how the municipality may support the schools. His leadership strategies involve gentle persuasion as opposed to blunt coercion, and his approach fosters autonomy of principals and teachers as long as they demonstrate improved results over time. If such outcomes do not occur, then he can reduce the school's autonomy. Teachers may exercise their autonomy in pedagogy but must comply with the national curriculum and assessment mandates. As such, control over the school is constantly negotiated and renegotiated in daily interactions (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007). Although the increasing orientation towards performance accountability is demanding for teachers, the study shows

that in their ways of exercising their agency of control at the classroom level, the teachers believe they can make a difference in students' future lives.

The municipal governance of schools is influenced by managerialist ideas, with strong confidence in assessment tools that provide data. Both the principal and the superintendent view data production and use as legitimate ways to address problems in schools. Nonetheless, the narrative of a common public school for all is dominant in all the collected stories. There is no indication that the learner is regarded as a *consumer*, the teacher as a *provider* and education as a *commodity* to be delivered (Møller, 2007). On the contrary, their stories involve working hard to enable students' mastery of their lives as persons and citizens. The welfare legacy (education for the public good) remains strong in Riverside, mediating the interpretation and shaping of international trends. So far, only moderate incentives and sanctions linked to the outcomes achieved have been employed.

Undoubtedly, policymakers increasingly add unnecessary pressures to the roles of school principals and teachers (Thomson, 2009). This study likewise demonstrates how the principal and the teachers continually mediate government policy and external changes to enable integration with the school's values. The principal's success as a school leader largely depends on her relationship with the teachers, parents and superintendents. Similarly, the teachers' success depends on their relationship with students. Mutual trust is essential for healthy learning environments (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Both the principal's and the superintendent's discussions about leadership strategies include various understandings of distributed leadership, for instance, a strategic distribution (Harris, 2008) indicating a process of delegation from the top, as well as leadership as a distributed practice (Spillane, 2006). Both express their attempts to balance top-down management with self-governance and devolution of responsibility. Such a story is probably part of what fits within the acceptable range of being a school leader in the Norwegian context. The stories about turning around a low-performing school also maintain the doctrine of exceptionalism (Gronn, 2003). It seems that both conceptualisations are available to the principal and the superintendent in the rhetoric of their work routines.

There is broad consensus among researchers that the external intake context plays a moderating role in students' academic achievements. When the students' SES factors have low levels, a consistently lower level of student achievement can be expected and vice versa (Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003). At Toppen, the scores on the national assessment in literacy and mathematics are related to the sociocultural and socioeconomic student composition of each school, but the scores are improving. However, the average score hides a huge variety across student groups. The scores of the minorities struggling with the Norwegian language and culture are significantly lower than those of native students.

The findings also show how a school's history and student intake play a role in establishing its reputation in the local municipality. For almost 10 years, Toppen has worked to erase its poor image, and improvements have been made. Nonetheless, in the city as a

whole, nothing seems changed. The students argue that this is mainly because ethnic Norwegians are moving out of the local community, and severe conflicts occurred among students over a decade ago. Undoubtedly, this case provides a testimony about how difficult it is to shake off a negative reputation long after it is no longer warranted. A strategy of close collaboration with parents on this issue will likely help change this image over time.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the interplay between district and school leadership in creating cultures of equity and high expectations for all students in a Norwegian low-performing school with a diverse population. Based on the collected data, it is possible to identify some enabling and constraining factors in schools' efforts to develop their quality of practice, as well as to investigate how these factors interact with leadership strategies at both school and district levels.

First, the study indicates that the hard and systematic work of the teachers and the school leaders at Toppen has made a vital difference for student learning. A collective and development-oriented culture of teaching and leadership tied with high expectations about student achievement counts as an enabling factor.

Second, a strong value commitment among teachers and school leaders is visible. They express a desire to make a difference, and trusting relationships between teachers and the principal, as well as between teachers and students, have been developed and sustained.

Third, Toppen's history demonstrates how poor leadership results in a chaotic situation, an achievement level clearly below expectations, staff conflicts and exhausted teachers. However, Toppen's case also shows that such conditions may change with the presence of a competent principal, whom the teachers quickly learn to trust. At the same time, the principal depends on her superintendent's and the teachers' support to succeed. Accordingly, the productive interplay between district-level and school-level leadership ultimately becomes one of the key enabling factors in this study. The municipality's poor economy serves as the main constraining condition, resulting in fewer opportunities to connect the students to their community and allocate more resources to instruction and civic preparation.

This study has not been designed to generalise or confirm how school leaders' experiences depend on specific policies or political structures. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to argue that the political context has distinct consequences for students' daily lives, the school culture and the leadership orientation. The findings indicate that providing education for all children is demanding work at both school and municipal levels.

Although the school has to cope with the superintendent's and the local politicians' compliance with the national government's mandate on testing and the use of value-added models, the conversation among Toppen's teachers focuses on promoting equity and developing democratic citizens and inclusion; at the same time, improving student learning is emphasised. Taking a position for social justice as a purpose of education does not

mean taking a stance against academic achievement. Undoubtedly, the public has a right to know how well Norwegian schools are educating young citizens. For this reason, collecting data about school improvement is important. It seems that the Riverside municipality has so far managed to create a responsible accountability system. However, focusing on outcome measures of academic achievement can easily push schools back into more conservative patterns rather than liberating them. The concentration can be on raising test scores instead of serious concerns about how to promote excellent education for all children. This study's main argument is that no necessary dichotomy exists between discourses on democratic citizenship and high academic achievement of students—whether measured by performance on standardised tests or defined by students' enjoyment of school, sense of belonging and acquisition of democratic skills. However, the talk about equity should not be rearticulated to performance indicators on national and international tests. Rather, promoting quality education for all begins with the question of purpose and requires understanding how principals' and teachers' work is embedded in broader social structures of power.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author thanks her colleagues involved in the research group, Curriculum Studies, Educational Leadership and Governance, University of Oslo, for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article, as well as colleagues who participated in the Norwegian component of the International Successful School Principalship Project.

### **Declaration of conflicting interest**

The author declares no potential conflicts with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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