

Professions, Paradoxes and Management

Empirical analysis of organizational change processes in a school setting

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Introduction

Reform of the public sector has been on the agenda in Denmark, as in many other western countries, during the last two or three decades. New Public Management (NPM) has had major implications for professions and the managers who are handling the changes and creating new organizations - "the front line providers and supporters of public services", as they are described by Farrel and Morris (2003: 136). An overlooked aspect in the literature on professions is a focus on their processes in managing and impacting the changes when they are translated into practice (Sehested 1996; 2002, Ferlie et al. 2000, Farrel and Morris, 2003, Juel Jacobsen 2009). With an ethnographic approach and a concept of paradox as a lens to explore ongoing processes, this paper investigates the interaction between management of professions in a Danish upper secondary high school. The purpose of the paper is to add to our understanding of management of professions. The following research questions frame the investigation: How do the professions manage their project when they are to create organizational processes of change that involve new understandings of their work, and what are the organizational implications? How do managers and professions respond to competing tensions? And what management characteristics are effective in attending to contradictory demands? The results of the

empirical research seem to challenge basic assumptions generated by the classical professions` theory of autonomous and self-reliant professions (Larson 1977, Abbott 1988, Freidson 1986). These assumptions are repeated in newer organizational theory concerning professions (Ferlie et al 1996, Sehested 2002, Sognstrup 2003, Kragh Jespersen 2005) The empirical research of this paper, however, illustrates that the professions:

- claim a need and wish for more management in the organization
- they aspire towards collaborative and team processes with colleague
- welcome becoming employees in the organization rather than individual high school teachers, but show reluctance due to what they call the new bureaucratic overload

In May 2003, the Danish Parliament agreed to a reform of upper secondary high schools in Denmark - i.e. Stx, the general upper secondary high school; Hhx, the business high school; and Htx, the technical high school. The first students were enrolled under the new reform August 2005. According to the reform, school management needs to become visible, supervising and facilitating, work processes in general to become collaborative, and the schools to become result driven (Department of Educational Ministry 2004). This paper zooms in on the micro processes of organizational change at a local Danish Htx school.

In the following section, the theoretical and contextual setting of the study is presented. The Reform Act, theory of professions and a concept of paradox comprise the study`s wide-angle perspective. Following this is a presentation of the methodological design of the study. The third section presents analytical results of the investigation and this is followed by a concluding section summarizing the results of the investigation.

Theoretical Framework, - Reform Act, Theory of Professions and a Concept of Paradox

A detailed analysis of central documents of the reform was carried out as the starting point of the investigation. Through an analysis of the Reform Act, circulars and ministerial reports, it has been

possible to identify the trends of the changes and the more specific government demands of the schools (Juel Jacobsen 2009). Three main movements were identified, which comprise the focus of the investigation in the local school. With the Reform Act, the government wishes to initiate management of change in schools from:

- Administrative management to human resource, change-oriented and strategic management.

It is also demanded that the teachers should change from:

- Individual teachers to collaborative teachers anchored in teams and concerned with interdisciplinary teaching.

The teachers are also expected to change from seeing themselves as: Individual high school teachers to seeing themselves as employees in an organization.

Teachers and managers in the Danish upper secondary high school can be regarded as professions (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1991; Sehested 1996, 2002; Burrage, Jarauch and Siegrist 1990). First choice in creating understanding of the dynamics of the field is therefore the sociological theory of professions. Drawing on research on professions, it was possible to pinpoint more specifically how the change context can challenge the professions in the school. Especially three areas of significance can be mentioned as characterizing the traditional understanding of professions (Burrage, Jaraush and Siegrist 1990; Sehested 1996, 2002)¹

- Professions are alienated from management
- Individuality and knowledge monopoly is crucial to professions
- Aims of autonomy and freedom from control are general characteristics of professions

By relating these characteristics of the professions to the reform demands outlined above, a polarized and paradoxical change context emerges that draws attention to significant areas of tension:

- Management's alienation seen in relation to reform demands of visibility, coaching and strategic leadership.
- Individuality and knowledge monopoly in relation to reform demands of cooperative processes and multi-disciplinarity.
- Autonomy and freedom from control in relation to reform demands of organizational consciousness and documentation.

Within this change context of contradictory forces, a paradox lens was chosen for the continued exploration of the ongoing processes of interactions between management and teachers. Ralph Stacey defines paradoxes as "(...) *the presence together at the same time of self contradictory, essentially conflicting forces (...)*" (2003: 11). As this definition indicates, paradoxes comprise elements that are both contradictory and connected – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when they function simultaneously. To conceptualize the interaction in the organization, I also found it beneficial to include the use of concepts that deepen the understanding of the way paradoxes function and impact the organization (Lewis 2000, Lüscher and Ingram 2006). Organizational deadlocks, system contradictions, and mixed messages are also among the central concepts provided by Linda Putnam and Spencer and Dale (Spencer and Dale 1979, Putnam 1986).

Methodological Design

The data material for this study was generated from three upper secondary high schools. This article reports on detailed, ethnographically inspired studies at one of the schools.² The research includes two surveys, observations of teachers and managers' interactions, and forty in-depth interviews with managers and employees; document analysis as well as written stories produced by the respondents. The interviews lasted 1-2 hours each. They were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was generated from the preparatory reform phase in 2004 to the end of the first school year with the implementation of the reform in 2006. Over the time span of 1½ years, I followed the responsive processes of managing the professions in the school: What were the managers' strategies at the out-set? How did the teachers react? And how were the processes evaluated after a year with the reform by both managers and teachers?

Professions, Paradoxes and Organizing in Practice

In this section, examples of paradox themes related to the main movements of the reform are presented. The themes highlighted here are basic patterns, constituting the dynamics between the participating actors in the processes of change. In the first part, the focus is on management's reflections of how best to handle professions in relation to implementation of the reform. The second part presents the teachers' responsive reactions, as well as their reactions to the new collaborative processes. A third focus is on the teachers' change from seeing themselves as individual high school teachers to seeing themselves as employees in an organization.

They don't like anyone to decide very much for them ...

The head of education, Jonas Gråbøl, expresses the school's basic view of management with reference to the teachers' background as academics and professionals who want to decide for themselves:

Therefore, I don't believe that we ... that is, in the school environment where people are mostly academics, they don't like anyone to decide very much for them... We can shout and scream at them, but if they see it as management, "we" [the teachers] are insulted because "we" know very well how it all should be.

At Htx, the assumption that employees are resistant to management is expressed by the managers (e.g. in the quotation above). With this as the basic understanding of the terms of management, very little room is left to manage openly at this school; therefore, flat structures and equality are essential goals for management. A consequence of this approach to management in relation to the new ideals about visible management is that it is practiced sporadically and unfolded alongside the notion that management is something that has to be sneaked in. Regarding the process of implementing a new evaluation system, Jonas Gråbøl states:

One can say that some of the ideas we have had about these things [reforms], we sneak them in, when we talk now with people about the different things that there

should be. I mean, we haven't – I mean, we haven't forced anything that way around.

The management initiatives that have been taken are half hidden, because management is considered to be illegitimate. But since management is a necessity, it is sometimes sneaked through. Sneaky management is in sharp contrast to the reform's ideals of visible and transparent management. One employee describes the school's management using the concept of "*fluid management*"; he explains:

It is not very transparent what is happening when things are fluid (...) and it is precisely right there we have the big problem.

The paradox of exercising visible management, while not being recognized as managers by the teachers creates strong tension that must be handled by management. This leads to contradictory practices that pervade the daily life at the school and result in sneaky and fluid management practice. It can almost be said that management itself is management-alienated, continuously having to struggle primarily to create its own legitimacy in the organization.

Fluid management, collaboration and responsive processes

The new collaborative processes demanded by the reform live up to teachers' positive expectations, but they also prove to be full of unexpected challenges. Among teachers at Htx, the approach to the cooperation prescribed by the reform is characterized by the view that both interdisciplinary and team cooperation are desirable. This view is repeated after the first year with the reform. Cecilie Lundquist says:

It is really good to make such collaborative projects. We are forced into connections that we would probably not have chosen by ourselves. It is very motivating and you can feel that the students are motivated as well.

Fluid management, however, also implies that management might not react when leadership is sought by employees in connection

with the difficulties arising in the new cooperative processes. The employees make demands for leadership with increasing intensity in the change processes.

In relation to a concrete conflict involving cooperation between teachers in two disciplines at Htx, the ball was thrown back to management when the employees requested intervention. The chairman of one of the disciplines submitted a written complaint to management on the group's behalf about the way the new basic student courses were developed. He wrote that it caused dissatisfaction in relation to other disciplines that technology is the only discipline that is delegated responsibility for the coordinating dimension of the new course. This led to a technology course where the other disciplines just trail along, because the technology teachers will not cooperate. The reform's obligating demand for interaction makes the need for leadership apparent, but it is not fulfilled. According to the chairman of the social science group, difficult management decisions are pushed downward, and the leadership vacuum leads to formation of unofficial and very unpleasant power constellations between colleagues:

(...) It can't be right that we have to sit and quarrel with colleagues and correct one another. (...) Then we get these unofficial power constellations – strong teachers, weak teachers. Who is good at keeping the others down?

In this way, a paradox becomes apparent at Htx in connection with tackling the difficult and conflict-provoking cooperative processes – a paradox that is related to the basic management paradigms at Htx: Leadership is demanded by the employees, but in relation to management's strategy of realizing the greatest possible autonomy, this is realized by managing from an employee position; active management becomes an illegitimate phenomenon. This results in deadlocks, where teachers do not feel that they shall regulate, because that is the job of management; and management will not intervene and actively frame the employee processes, because legitimate management ought to be carried out from an employee position.

Ad hoc team leadership and “the gigantic registration of everything”

The reform’s obligatory demand that teachers must change from seeing themselves as individual high school teachers to seeing themselves as employees in an organization is a mixed experience for teachers at Htx. As illustrated in the former section, the collaborative processes have in important ways lived up to positive expectations; however, there have also been great concerns connected with the team work. Extensive administrative responsibilities have been assigned to the team structure as new aspects of the teacher’s work. During the first year of the reform, this has been experienced as taking a great deal of time and causing trouble on a daily basis. The team functions include scheduling for colleagues and defining the division of labor, and all this has to be followed up, although there is no appointed team leader. A teacher describes being forced into uncomfortable control situations in relation to colleagues: *“This is the worst thing for a teacher”*, she says, and she wishes this were not a collegial responsibility: *“Such responsibilities cannot be given to colleagues.”* Another teacher, Ulrik Hildebrandt, supports this point of view, but on the other hand, he finds that without leadership, cooperation is a problem. For Ulrik Hildebrandt, it would help if someone were officially appointed *“chieftain”* for the team. From an interview with the head of the education concerning challenges of team work, it turns out that the strategy for daily practice in the organization is that it should be as flat as possible, as he expresses it, and accordingly, team functions and distribution of responsibilities are not described. Questions of leadership, frames for the team work and fluid responsibility are continually debated in the team and tie up many resources.

In addition to the new organizational responsibilities, new kinds of reports are introduced. These are required of the individual teacher but are meant to create cohesion in the organization. A central document is the study plan. Each teacher should write his/her own plan, which is then open to colleagues. Teaching goals are formulated; the plan should be adjusted regularly and after some time evaluated. For some teachers, this is just too much, and it causes much anger and frustration. Especially two aspects are in focus: the sense of being controlled; and the growing bureaucrati-

zation. A teacher, Samuel Borre, relates how he manages the control and bureaucracy:

“We put a little in so they have something to look at in the ministry. It’s sort of pro forma, you know.” (...) So I write some fine words (...) and then we say that’s that, and then we go up and teach.”

Samuel Borre sets his priorities:

“What’s most important is to meet the students and get the new to function there.

The aspect of the reform that concerns him most is “the gigantic registration of everything”, especially study plans – intended and realized:

“That’s really what everyone is talking about. And everyone hates, and almost no one can see the point of... everyone only sees it as a huge control system.”

It is a paradox that the descriptive work introduced to ensure cohesion in the organization, and finally better teaching through cooperation, is experienced by the teachers as detracting attention from the teaching moment. As described by Samuel Borre:

“... All ideas about seizing the moment in teaching – that will just about disappear if I have to strictly follow my own previously fixed intentions and descriptions.”

Also the team’s administrative management functions, which are supposed to expand the teachers’ influence on their own work, seem to undermine their influence with administrative overload and unguided self-management processes.

Conclusion

The outcome of the organizational exploration presented above questions earlier approaches to understanding the reactions of professions, and it emphasizes the importance of more and detailed

organizational studies on the work processes of professions that can do justice to ambiguity and paradoxical processes in organizing. The paradox perspective has proved helpful in providing fine-grained knowledge of organizational change as it is constructed between managers and professions in the school setting.

Here, the responsive reactions of the actors are summarized and related to the description of the traditional role of professions introduced earlier. The processes described in the analyses differ surprisingly from reactions to be expected on the basis of the theoretical characteristics of the traditional professions. The description of the professions as alienated from management is not recognizable in this study. The employees' very clear formulations of the need for more leadership make it pertinent to question whether the employees are really so alienated from management after all. It seems more appropriate to describe management as alienated from managing. Likewise, in contrast to earlier descriptions of professions, in this change process at this school, the professions are not insisting on individuality or monopoly of knowledge. Instead, they exhibit enthusiasm in relation to establishing collaborative processes of multidisciplinary and teamwork. The two surveys mentioned in the outline of the study method help to verify this picture; however, this does not mean that the processes are easily undergone. On the contrary, they give rise to uneasiness concerning their framing and regulation. Who is responsible for asserting the limits when team achievement does not live up to expectations? How are conflicting views and interests to be handled and when does this involve the formal management? The data material confirms that although these kinds of questions remain unanswered, the new interactions with colleagues are regarded as a positive development after the first school year. The aims of autonomy and freedom from control are challenged, however, by the reform's assignment of administrative management functions to the teams. Collegial leadership is regarded as causing very uncomfortable control situations in the unguided self-management processes in the teams. Control is also connected with the new practice of continuous documentation of the daily work by each individual teacher; however, it is difficult to determine from the data material whether the opposition to this aspect of the reform reflects the wish for freedom from control mentioned in the literature as a dominant trait characterizing profes-

sions. It might as well be seen as an indication that the bureaucratic overload is unwelcome.

Summarized briefly, the following paradoxes can be seen to cause tensions in the organizing process and sometimes even causing organizational deadlocks as an outcome of the competing values in the change process:

- Management refrains from managing, based on the assumption that teachers' autonomy should be protected, while the employees ask for management.
- Management should be equal and invisible and must therefore be "sneaked in", while the reform points towards visible management.
- Demands are made for leadership, which is experienced to be absent in conflict situations, but since priority is given to the greatest possible employee autonomy, this demand cannot be met.
- Regulation of collaborative processes is placed in a vacuum between adjustment by colleagues and adjustment by management.
- Administrative work in teams, which is supposed to expand teachers' influence on their own situation, seems to undermine influence with administrative overload and unguided self-management processes.

Although this case study claims only intrinsic validity, the investigation of the processes of change gives a significantly different picture than the dynamics of the traditional professions described earlier. The result of the empirical research thus challenges basic assumptions generated by the classical theory of autonomous and self-reliant professions, and opens an agenda for further research on how professions handle paradoxical processes.

Notes

- 1 Burrage, Jaraush and Siegrist (1990) describe professions in general, whereas Sehested (1996, 2002) describes teachers specifically.
- 2 This article reports on detailed studies at one of the schools, whereas my Ph.d. thesis compares the processes of change across the three schools (Juel Jacobsen 2009).

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