Leadership as relational work: risks and opportunities

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Although fostering trust has been given more emphasis in recent research on school leadership, less research sheds light on the tensions between power and trust and how collective interactions related to leadership evolve in school settings. This paper addresses leadership as relational work, traced in interactions between a principal and a group of teachers operating within the context of a school-improvement project in a Norwegian upper secondary school. The analysis explores how the participants position themselves and others through negotiations in meetings while the participants discuss the conditions of the project. The findings show how leadership positions and power relations are constituted, challenged and changed in interaction amongst the participants over time. Thus, this study provides insight into leadership as an interactive process and the dynamics of power and trust in developing leadership actions. The main argument is that risks and opportunities are significant parts of leadership work, and that relational work affects the ever-changing status of the division of authority.

Introduction

Although many studies focus on the need for leadership by emphasizing how leadership performances should be practised for schools to be successful (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Day & Leithwood, 2007), few studies draw attention to how leadership evolves in school settings. In addition, much leadership research focuses on principals and teachers as individuals and how their work affects students’ learning, whereas less research...
sheds light on collective and institutional issues (Little, 2003; Timperley, 2011).

To understand the emergence of leadership better, one must start from the work that takes place within the school, examine how collective interactions related to leadership evolve (Gronn, 2003), and pay attention to the dynamics by which differences in interpretation are negotiated (Coburn, 2006). This requires an empirical analysis of the interactions and collaboration processes, and that is at the heart of this paper.

This paper addresses leadership as relational work, traced in interactions amongst a principal and a group of teachers operating within the context of a school-improvement project in an upper secondary school in Norway. By exploring the interplay between the participants, the aim is to unravel how leadership actions are constructed and exercised in situated activities. The school project, initiated by teachers, ran for three years (2007–2010), with the purpose of developing the teachers’ knowledge about writing in and across school subjects.

A relational perspective views leadership as a process of social construction with a focus on participating in interaction (Edwards, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Hence, leadership exists in relation to other positions, and therefore, is interactive and culturally sensitive. Further, dialogical processes are central aspects of leadership, and these processes distribute leadership and unfold in collective interactions within the organization (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, 2006). However, while recognizing that multiple leaders concerned with leadership practices exist in schools, the principal, as the formal head, still holds a central position (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007; Harris & Spillane, 2008).

We pose the following research questions: How is leadership constituted and exercised in the interaction between a principal and a group of teachers? What is at stake in their discussions, and how do these professionals handle possible tensions emerging from their talk? To respond to these questions, we examine the dynamics of the interaction in meetings between the principal and the project group. We also draw on interviews to contextualize the moment-to-moment interactions. In our analysis, we examine how aspects of leadership emerge and become vital for the progress of the participants’ dialogue.

Although the focus is on micro-level interactions, we seek to understand them in their institutional context. Thus, we examine the talk in light of macro-level factors, such as traditions for leadership actions and the teachers’ norms and attitudes. For instance, teachers in Norwegian upper secondary schools have a strong tradition of individual autonomy, and instructional leadership has been, largely, the teachers’ responsibility and domain (Møller, 2006).

The paper begins by presenting the analytical framework, the empirical context and the research design before moving on to the findings, which we analyse and discuss in terms of trajectories of discursive interactions (Vennebo & Ottesen, 2011). Finally, we conclude with implications.
Aspects of leadership and analytical approach

We take as a departure that the division of labour in a local school creates workplace interdependencies, which require co-ordination mechanisms to integrate the activities of the various people who make up the work system, and these mechanisms specially affect the job of principal (Gronn, 2003). As the division of labour continually changes and different people, who depend on each other, complete complex tasks, executing tasks and fulfilling functions increasingly becomes a distributed process. At the same time, in a school, there is an unequal distribution of legitimate power and responsibility to make decisions within the staff, and this produces a division of authority. The position of a principal refers to the division of labour, which defines boundaries, and to the division of authority, which locates opportunities and responsibilities for regulating the boundaries (Gronn, 2003).

Thus, leadership is closely linked to a family of terms such as authority, power, and trust, where power and trust are closely interrelated. Seeing power and trust as a relationship means that relations are always two-way. It means that the actions of subordinates and superiors influence the structure of domination and the conditions for trust-building. Given the mutual dependence of members in set of roles, trust becomes critical for achieving goals that require sustained collective effort (Robinson, 2010).

Increasingly, trust-building is acknowledged as a key capability for school leadership (Gronn, 2011). Bryk and Schneider (2002) provided important findings in a study of 400 Chicago schools in which the authors tested the impact of trust on school improvement. They documented robust evidence concerning the links amongst teachers’ trust of their principal, the leadership practices that build trust and their impact on teacher attitudes, school organization and student outcomes. In schools characterized by high relational trust, educators were more likely to experiment with new practices. Likewise, Tschannen-Moran’s (2009) survey of 2000 teachers in 80 US middle schools and a study of successful schools in Norway (Møller et al., 2007) provide strong support for Bryk and Schneider’s findings. Recently, Coleman (2012) concluded that trustworthy leadership is fundamentally relational in nature and is based on the leader modelling her/his values in day-to-day behaviours.

Although the centrality of fostering trust in research on school leadership has begun to deliver robust findings in terms of adding value with processes conducive to student learning, few studies aim to unravel how leadership actions were constructed and the dynamics of power and trust at play in situated activities. One notable exception is Coburn (2006) who has analysed the dynamics of negotiations during policy implementation and showed how power and authority relationships play a role in how social interactions unfold. The exchanges between teachers and principals might illustrate an inherent tension, as the teachers try to influence changes, while the principal seeks to give direction and control the processes.
As this study addresses leadership as relational work, the study draws on a dialogical perspective in which human beings are interdependent and where such interdependence is reflected in shared experiences (Linell, 2009). What the principal and the teachers say and how they say it are not just ‘in situ’ concerns; they connect to norms in professional cultures (Wertsch, 1998). Thus, how professionals act and speak might be interpreted in light of established traditions. For example, as the participants discussed their particular project, they brought aspects of the institutional context into play by referring to deep-rooted practices concerning school development projects and more general issues related to leadership.

According to Mäkitalo and Säljö (2002), analysing talk in institutional settings must include what participants invest in the activity, what they assume and what might be at stake. What might be at stake concerns the balance between accounting for stable institutional practices (how the division of labour between teachers and school leaders traditionally works, for example) and the occasioned nature of interactional accomplishments (for example, how the professionals negotiate resources for the project). In our analysis, we try to conceive the relationship between enduring institutional practices, such as the principal’s legitimate power to make decisions, and meaning making in situated activities, such as the teachers’ responses to the principal’s decisions (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003).

In interactions, each participant gives voice to distinct perspectives as an activity unfolds. Perspectives refer to individual interpretations, which build on the participants’ experiences and knowledge of the situation (Holland & Reeves, 1996). In our investigation, our analytical concepts are positioning and negotiation, power and trust. We explore how participants position themselves and others through their talk, how competing positions evolve, and how certain participants achieve authoritative positions. Negotiations become central coordinating mechanisms or forms of interaction in the workplace (Engeström, 2008). Thus, negotiations become essential to achieve some common understanding across different perspectives and positions. Analysing institutionally based negotiations enables examination of how power and trust evolve in the participants’ talk. In this sense, negotiations are significant resources for examining interlocutors’ divisions of authority (Gronn, 2003). Hence, we perceive leadership shaped through positioning, negotiations and trust-building, traced in interaction over time.

Empirical context and methodological considerations

The empirical setting for this study is Fagerbakken upper secondary school just outside Oslo with approximately 60 teachers and 600 students. At this school, a group of teachers initiated an improvement project to increase teachers’ knowledge of writing. With support from the principal, the teachers took the initiative to cooperate with two university experts who were invited to engage with the teachers, and to contribute with knowledge whenever requested. This resulted in an interdisciplinary writing team
consisting of 11 experienced teachers, who all volunteered to the project. The writing team met regularly, at least once a month, to discuss students’ texts and writing issues. The project ran for three years (2007–2010) and in close collaboration amongst the group of teachers, the experts, and the principal. The principal, who was appointed to the school when the project was established, emphasized it was a school priority.

The material analysed and the findings presented in this paper draw on a larger qualitative study in this particular school. The purpose of the larger research project was to identify teachers’ emerging knowledge of writing and their discourse strategies when negotiating their perceptions of students’ texts, and explore the ways teachers cooperated as they developed their knowledge (Helstad & Lund, 2012). In the present paper, the focus is on relational leadership and the interplay between the teachers and the principal in situated activities related to the school-improvement project.

The research design uses ethnographic fieldwork (Silverman, 2006) from 13 writing group meetings and six leadership team meetings. The data corpus, which was conducted from 2007 to 2009, consists of field notes and audio-recordings from these meetings, as well as six interviews with participants, logs written by four teachers, responses to questionnaires and document analyses (syllabi and policy documents). For this paper, we primarily draw on data from writing team meetings when the principal participated to discuss future conditions of the project. The data from the meetings and the interviews were transcribed, and the material was repeatedly examined for inductive identifications of issues related to the nature and content of interactions and our analytical concepts. Key moves in terms of negotiation and positioning over time and of leadership actions in situ were plotted, and the data from the large project helped contextualize the analysis. In addition, we draw on two individual interviews with the principal and the project coordinator.

Respondent validation of preliminary interpretative analyses has been used for ascertaining the relationships between the researchers’ interpretation and the respondents’ experiences of their social world (Hammersly & Atkinson, 1983). The teachers and the principal had an opportunity to read drafts of papers from the research project, but did not add anything to the analysis. In addition, the analyses have been repeatedly discussed amongst colleagues by presenting interpretations of transcripts.

In the present paper, we zoom in on moment-to-moment interaction in four selected writing team meetings around midway in the project, from February to December 2009. The excerpts were selected from the corpus data following three main justifications. First, we selected excerpts from the writing team meetings the principal attended to discuss future conditions and make decisions related to the project as time set aside for collaboration, who should participate, outcome expectations and leadership responsibilities. Second, we focused on instances where practices of leadership were visible, questioned, or challenged, and where participants negotiated or justified concerns related to leadership. Third, the selected data illuminate instances of recurring ‘scripts’ (Møller, 2004) that make visible the relationship between the micro level in the talk and larger
contexts related to the teachers’ and principal’s work. Hence, the selected excerpts reflect the participants’ various perspectives on institutional aspects and approaches to prior experiences. In our analysis, we sought to trace how such issues shape negotiations and the relationship between the principal and the teachers. Thus, we sought to illustrate the possible transformation of leadership actions over time.

To capture leadership actions in situ, we are inspired by interaction analysis (IA; Jordan & Henderson, 1995) as a methodological approach. In IA, a fundamental assumption is that organizational features such as leadership, emerge in interactions amongst members of a particular community, and how relations between talk and the use of artefacts (social, material, or conceptual) are conducive to learning and development. Also, IA offers a multi-level approach: how the individual-, social-, and institutional-level aspects of activities converge in such interrelations.

Although the excerpts from the meetings visualize negotiations and emerging leadership actions, we also sought to document the possible interpretation of stakeholders’ perception of leadership through selected excerpts from interviews. Therefore, two interviews, one with the principal (February 2009) and one with the project coordinator (March 2009), were analysed in detail. When observation and transcriptions from audio-recordings are combined with interviews, interviews can be described as contextual (Hultman, 2006) as the conversations were carried out related to what had occurred in the meetings. Hence, the interviews resembled conversations, attempting joint investigations, characterized by being ‘inter-views’, i.e. interaction between people and opinions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). These selections were made and categorized based on the principal’s and the project coordinator’s reflection and analysis of the talk from the selected meetings. In the interviews, the participants commented on what had happened in the meetings and provided reasons for the strategies chosen. Hence, the interviews shed light on the stakeholders’ perceptions of their contribution and their exercise of authority.

Together, the selected data constitute the unit of analysis, i.e. the analytic focus that captures seminal moments and the temporality of talk. These documentation types mutually constitute the object, which is to understand how the teachers and the principal interact in situated activities, and explore how leadership as an interactively achieved practice is played out in interactions. Accordingly, such data are not merely illustrations or examples of a phenomenon, but should be seen as empirical carriers of more general principles of negotiations and leadership positioning in the data corpus. These principles are not statistically generalizable, but they are arguably analytically generalizable, i.e. in the sense that ‘the findings from one study can be used as a guide to what might occur in another situation’ (Kvale, 1996, p. 233).

Findings

The paper presents the findings in the form of short narratives and excerpts from the selected meetings and the interviews. In the excerpts,
we trace the group of teachers and the school principal while they negotiate the conditions for their project. We particularly outline the ongoing interplay between the principal and the project coordinator related to decision-making processes. The findings are presented in chronological order, starting with the participants negotiating the content and structures for their work in the first two meetings (excerpts 1, 2 and 3) and ending with decisions concerning other project conditions, as leadership responsibilities, in the third meeting. Finally, we present data from a later meeting (excerpt 4) in which the participants discuss sustainability and responsibility in school development work more broadly.

**Giving voice and establishing structures**

In the first meeting, Tora, the local project coordinator, introduces the agenda: a discussion about the future conditions of the project. Hilde, the principal, starts by acknowledging the need to continue the project for another year. Then, by posing questions like ‘What should happen next year?’, she establishes a discursive scenery that calls for the teachers’ perspectives of the future (cf. Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). All the teachers respond to the principal’s introduction by building on each other’s arguments. In these turn-taking processes, the principal listens to the teachers’ ideas before summarizing the main thoughts that have emerged. By inviting all the teachers to have a voice in the discussion, the principal adopts a dialogical position while positioning herself as a central co-creator of solutions.

The principal is responsible for the current project, although she emphasizes the need for a skilled project coordinator. As a former department head and as an experienced teacher who has worked for several years in this school, Tora has gained a key position in the teacher community. She initiated the project, chaired the meetings and wrote the reports. In addition, she regularly met with the principal to discuss how and when she should attend the meetings.

Excerpt 1 shows how Tora legitimizes the principal’s summary of the teachers’ talk, while also positioning herself as an authority.

**Excerpt 1**

Tora: I agree with everything that has been said. Now, we must turn this work into a plan for the whole school. The teachers must be selected before the work with the schedule starts. This is urgent once we approach Easter. We must agree on some ...

Martin: Milestones?

Tora: Milestones, yes, absolutely.

Hilde: Yes, it means we must get all the input now. All of you must register if you want to join the project next year or recommend others. The process must start immediately.

Pointing to the schedule and plans, Tora suggests that future success relies upon getting organized. Plans represent strong institutional artefacts
in schools with the potential to stabilize and sustain development, and to shape commitment and follow-up strategies, aspects closely related to leadership.

A shared approach to decision-making is an institutional practice with long traditions in Norwegian schools (Møller, 2006). Hence, by giving everyone a voice before making any decisions, the principal behaves as institutionally expected. In the interview, Hilde makes her leadership strategies explicit: ‘I want everyone to have a voice, even though I am not sure I will support all their suggestions’. She emphasizes that she always discusses strategies with the local project coordinator. Together, the principal’s and the project coordinator’s utterances display aspects of leadership in terms of building trust by involving everyone while establishing structures for the project. Through this, the two stakeholders position themselves, each as a leader, illuminating how they distribute and legitimize power and authority.

**Power at play**

In the interview, the principal states that the project coordinator (Tora) has had a ‘firm grip on the project’ and ‘high expectations’. According to the principal, their communication is clear and characterized by mutual trust: ‘You might ask Tora whatever you want. If we disagree, it is an open disagreement’. Tora, on the other hand, problematizes her relationship with the principal. In the interview, Tora positions herself as an ‘innovative worker’: ‘I have always taken leadership responsibilities related to development work, and I have had the privilege to do whatever I have wanted’. Initially, Tora felt she was a threat to the newly appointed principal and addressed tensions concerning ownership of the project. Even though the teachers initiated the project, Tora experienced the principal starting to ‘interfere’, wanting to use the project for ‘different purposes’. Then, Tora confronted the principal: ‘Listen, you can’t do this; this is not your project. It is owned by the teachers; it is a bottom-up project. If you start to interfere like this, we won’t have a project any more’. Reflecting on the progress of their work, Tora says, ‘Something changed … The last couple of years, our relationships have been great. Things got organized, and I became wiser, as well’. Tora invited the principal to some of the project meetings. Since then, she experienced that the principal was more of a partner: ‘Then we started to collaborate’.

Although the principal states that mutual trust characterizes their relationship, Tora exposes tensions related to the principal’s ‘interference’ in their project. Thus, the utterances expose power relations at play, and illustrate an inherent tension between the principal and the project coordinator; Tora expressed the ways in which the principal interfered with the project, and, thus, with the teachers’ domain. Accordingly, the utterances reflect tensions concerning the distribution and the division of authority (Gronn, 2003).

In the closing stages of the meeting, a negotiation between Hilde and Tora concerning resources for their project illustrates their communication.
Excerpt 2 reveals how Tora’s thought-provoking talk challenges the principal’s formal position.

**Excerpt 2**

Tora: I think that all of us feel that the arrangement we have so far is satisfying. But we need more, for example, a seminar. We need more time. We should keep all the resources we have. Can we assume that we will get it? *(Looks questioningly at Hilde, the principal).*

Hilde: Do you mean … something we have already fixed, or do you mean that you need more time to work?

Tora: Yes, everything we have already received, we should keep. In addition, we want a seminar and longer sessions in order to work more systematically. Say two or maybe three more sessions each term.

Hilde: Oh, yes? *(Looks questioningly at Tora)*

(Mumbling, a little cautious laughter from the teachers)

Tora: Oh no *(laughs)*. I mean at least one more session each term. I think it could be very useful. *(More mumbling)*

What is at stake concerns the balance between the principal’s responsibility for allocating resources to the entire organization and the nature of the disputing talk in this situation. The teachers’ responses—the mumbling and laughter—reveal that the tensions in the negotiations might need to be toned down to maintain consensus and further progress. Hence, the teachers use humour as a strategy to moderate the power at play, the risk inherent in the dialogue, and therefore, the outcome of this interaction. However, Tora and Hilde’s argumentative dialogue does not necessarily convey conflicting interests. When the principal explains how she experienced this exchange, she says, ‘Why worry? We use resources on this project anyway’. Hence, the principal gives legitimacy to the project coordinator’s demands for resources on behalf of the group. The dialogue also shows how leading and following is a fluid, interactive and reciprocal process. The principal seems conscious of the relative nature of power.

To include the members related to the project, the principal invites the teachers to send her e-mails, acknowledging that views, unexpressed for various reasons, might exist amongst the group. Responding, Tora suggests an open invitation to all the teachers. Hence, Tora conveys that she seeks visible processes, with no hidden communication. In doing so, she challenges the principal’s authority in the situation. Later, one of the teachers, Liv, asks if there is an opportunity for former members to join the group. The principal ignores the question and turns to Tora: ‘We will talk about this’. By using the pronoun ‘we’, the principal shows that decisions are not made by single individuals, but that the principal and the project coordinator have the legitimate power to conclude. Consequently, the principal positions herself and Tora as a team of leaders. Even so, the negotiations have exposed leadership challenges and conflicting viewpoints on leadership strategies. The issue of group membership and questions related to the structure and the outcome of the project are postponed. Thus, the analysis reveals temporary stages in the trajectory processes concerning leadership decisions.
Interfering in teachers’ practice

In the next meeting four weeks later, the principal joins the group to convey her decisions. The group has got what Tora required, and resources have been prioritized for a seminar. Moreover, the principal announces that she wants a smaller group who can deal with ‘some other tasks and more specific work’, as she labels it. She calls for questions, an opportunity one of the teachers, Ragnhild, uses to clarify the principal’s statements, asking whether the principal’s expectations are ‘secret’. Excerpt 3 reveals how Ragnhild’s question triggers the principal to be more explicit in her talk.

**Excerpt 3**

Ragnhild: I am a bit curious, then, when you say *some other tasks and more specific work*. Is it a secret what this is about?

Hilde: It’s probably a little secret for me as well (laughs). No, I think that the work now is very focused on the work in the subject departments, and you are supposed to make plans, right? The work will be done at the seminar. Then the group will be responsible for following up the plans.

Ragnhild: Do you mean a development plan about writing in the subjects?

Hilde: Yes, a development plan. We have also talked about seeing the work of writing in connection with reading, right? The group must be involved in this: How to connect reading and writing? How do we make sure that writing and reading issues are part of the work in the subject departments? So this is not a secret, but it is up to you as well. But there will be expectations concerning your work. We still have another year on this. That’s the answer I can give so far (…) Any more questions?

[long silence …]

Responding with laughter to moderate her emerging answer, the principal makes clear what she expects. With her answer, she demonstrates her right to interfere in teachers’ work, expecting them to broaden their scope from writing to include reading issues and to make plans and follow-up strategies for their work. The principal positions the teachers as responsible: ‘It is up to you as well’. Simultaneously, she positions herself as the formal leader with the right to raise demands. One might interpret the silence following the principal’s talk as a reaction to the principal’s expectations, resembling *this is something we have to consider*, or even *this is too much to expect*. In the interview, Tora confirms that so far, connecting writing with reading has not been on the agenda. The group will continue concentrating their efforts on writing concerns, which was the rationale for their project from the very start. By responding in this way, the teachers reject the principal’s expectations, question her authority and tone down her expectations.

In this excerpt, the principal is positioning herself with the power to expect a change in direction in the teachers’ core work. After presenting her decisions about the conditions for their project, her comments might be interpreted as expectations of payback for what she has ‘given’ the community in terms of resources. However, what is at stake relates to the tradition of teachers’ individual autonomy. The principal’s stake is high; the tradition of non-interference in teachers’ professional work in
secondary schools is strong. Her utterances signal a risk for counteractions or exit strategies by the teachers. Interfering in teachers’ core activities might be risky and unpredictable in light of the teaching tradition. The long silence that follows indicates that a principal should never take authority and legitimacy for granted. Legitimacy must be negotiated over and over again.

In the next meeting, the principal asks if Tora will continue as the project coordinator, and Tora confirms, ‘Our school will become known as “the writing school” in our district. I look forward to accomplishing that’. Hence, Tora accepts responsibility for leading the group to achieve their project goals for another year. In the interview, Tora verifies that she wants to keep her leadership position, justifying her position by grounding it in her teaching expertise and her subject background: ‘I believe in dedicated subject oriented enthusiasts keeping projects alive’. Thus, the utterances show that Tora positions herself as an individual expert and as an institutional representative by thinking of the school’s reputation.

Although the positioning and much of the dialogue in the group concern leadership, the project itself motivates Tora. She maintains her engagement, but denies leadership aspirations: ‘I do not want to be a leader for my colleagues’, she says. ‘There is so much effort keeping up their motivation, and I am fed up with it’. As a former department head, she knows what it takes. Consequently, Tora expresses ambiguity in the matter of leading teachers’ work. As a project coordinator, she deals with conflicting interests concerning leadership positions; on the one hand, she wants to have leadership responsibilities, but on the other hand, she is ambiguous about the relational part of leading her colleagues. As Tora perceives it, the latter is a task for the principal and the department heads.

After three months, the future conditions for the project are established. The negotiations have resulted in conditions similar to those in the past, but they have been renegotiated. Time is set aside for collaboration; leadership responsibility and follow-up strategies for organizing work are established. However, the analysis has conveyed tensions between the principal and the teachers related to positions and responsibilities, and ambiguity concerning what leadership entails. The interactions between the principal and the workforce, represented by the project coordinator, have displayed challenges concerning the division of labour and authority (Gronn, 2003). In the last excerpt, issues related to leadership responsibilities deepen.

### Sustaining new practices—leadership responsibilities

In the December 2009 meeting, the group discusses a presentation of their project at the university, where they have been asked to share their experiences with teachers from other schools. One of the teachers, Cecilie, needs support for her contribution regarding ‘learning from their collaborative work’, a topic they are expected to address. What is the school’s
Ben sets the scene by questioning what the teachers have experienced concerning collaborative and interdisciplinary work, particularly in the case of the writing project in which they participated. After some discussion, Martin introduces what he perceives to be the breakdown of another interdisciplinary project amongst teachers at the school. ‘We had that project for several years’ he bursts out. ‘Then some teachers just walked away from it, and the project does not exist anymore’! In excerpt 4, Tora tries to close the emerging discussion, and by doing so, she tries to reject Martin’s agenda, but does not succeed. Emerging questions concern sustainability in development work and leadership responsibilities when projects break down and teachers lose enthusiasm.

**Excerpt 4**

Tora: *(Turns to Martin)* I do not want to comment on this issue now.

Martin: But it is important that the principal knows! There is a lot of energy and effort in these projects, all wasted if we just shut them down.

Hilde: Could the breakdown be related to the lack of plans? You included the project in plans for the subjects, didn’t you?

Martin: Yes, we did, but now it is gone, all the good work we have strived for!

Tora: But it all depends on the teachers...

Martin: But this is important for the principal to know; that’s why I want to talk about it!

Tora: I do not know if we can continue this; we have other topics on the agenda as well. But, Edith, you wanted to say something? *(turns to Edith who signals)*.

Edith: Yes, I want to add something. My experience is somewhat different. I think the project was a success in our classes.

Ben: Yes, we did well in my classes, too.

Tora: But this is always the case. We have teachers in our school who do not put any effort into these projects, but then some of them change and are back on track again. And there are teachers who never join anything, this is just the way things are...

Martin: But how are we going to improve these processes? Who has the responsibility when these things happen? That’s what is interesting!

Tora: I suggest this is a case for the leadership team; they have to cope with these matters.

Martin: But it is so sad when things like that happens!

Tora: I know. However, what’s new? Consider all the projects we have had in this school. Sometimes people just get fed up with it. Collaboration amongst teachers demands resources, time, and efforts, even though we achieve something. But we should keep on anyhow, we must keep our projects on track. *(Addressing Martin)* Just try to push it forward!

By pointing to the principal as the head, with the right to make decisions, Martin seems to make the principal (Hilde) responsible for the breakdown of the project to which he refers. Simultaneously, he positions himself as an authority, powered to define the situation. Yet, responding with a rhetorical ‘You included the project in plans for the subjects, didn’t you?’, the principal kicks back, positioning the teacher as responsible for the situation as well. Using plans as follow-up strategies is an explicit component of the principal’s instructional policy. In the interview, she underlines the importance of such tools: ‘We know what is required;
planning and follow-up strategies’. Responding, Martin confirms that they had plans, but even so, the project failed. With this, Martin refers to the gap between plans and practices, a common dilemma in schools, revealing the discrepancies between plans and subsequent outcomes. Consequently, plans might serve as necessary, but not sufficient, tools for leadership.

Contributing with their nuanced experiences, Martins’ colleagues, Edith and Ben, shed new light on the situation. Martin’s concern is questioned; there are other stories to tell. Although Martin is still asking who is responsible when ‘these things’ happen, neither the teachers nor the principal nor the project coordinator responds. In light of the others’ contributions, one might interpret the silence following Martin’s question as a reflection of their moderating effect on Martin’s utterances. Thus, Martin’s concern is diminished, and his voice is given less authority as the activity unfolds. Another interpretation might be that there are no obvious answers to his question.

Broadening the scope from the particular to more general concerns, Tora moderates the tenseness in the situation, addressing how she has perceived teachers’ attitudes towards development work in the school: ‘We have teachers who never join anything […] this is just the way things are’. With this, Tora points to the ebb and flow of implementing and sustaining new practices in schools. At the same time, Tora accuses her colleagues of not participating in development work, a perspective seen from an innovative worker’s view. Accordingly, she positions and categorizes some of her colleagues as not being development-oriented.

Reaching the end of the negotiations, Tora chooses another strategy, transferring the unfolding issue to the leadership team. By this, she moves away from their complex inquiries, postpones the difficulties in coping with these questions and positions the principal to handle this complex matter. Simultaneously, Tora positions herself as a part of the teacher community, making it transparent that, as a project coordinator, she is not responsible for other teachers’ various practices. By this, she illustrates how it is possible to ‘play the game’, travelling between different roles and positions as the activity unfolds.

While Martin still seems frustrated, Tora closes the episode, referring to experiences with other collaborative projects and the effects on teachers’ motivation: ‘Sometimes people just get fed up with it’. This utterance links to her prior utterances, addressing her ambiguous feelings towards leading her colleagues. However, by closing this sequence with an optimistic ‘Try to push it (the project) forward’, Tora reaches out to Martin, recognizing his frustration, but encouraging him to move on in their common endeavour to develop and sustain new practices.

Put together, the selected data from the meetings and the interviews reveal a mixed picture of how conflicting aspects are part of leadership as relational work, and how power is at play in the ongoing interactions. Excerpt 1 conveys how power and trust are distributed between the principal and the project coordinator while they involve the group in a multi-voiced talk to set directions for their work. Excerpt 2 shows how the principal’s position is challenged by the project coordinator’s demands, whereas excerpt 3 documents that interfering in teachers’ core
activities might have unpredictable results, taking into account teachers’ long-established traditions for individual autonomy. Finally, excerpt 4 shows that motivation and enthusiasm are important features in school development, and that questions related to responsibility and sustainability are challenging. In sum, the analysis conveys that risks and opportunities are significant aspects of leadership work, and that relational work is at the core of leadership actions.

Discussion

Leading teachers’ substantial work in upper secondary schools is a complex endeavour that requires the knowledge and skills of school leaders (Møller, 2006). The present study documents that mutual trust and respect are at the core of relational work; trust creates the conditions for, and mobilizes people toward, action and collaboration (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Analysing the dynamics of power in this study has revealed strategies such as silence (excerpt 3) and humour (excerpt 2) as well as confrontation or coping tactics in response to situational tension (excerpt 3 and 4). Likewise, aspects of relational trust have been traced in analysing the principal’s and the teachers’ involvement, and the ability to take another perspective (excerpt 1), change a strategy (excerpt 3), or settle into new practices (excerpt 4).

Leadership entails mixed emotions. Across the data corpus, a recurring pattern was that Tora acted with authority. However, as shown in our analysis of the interview, the project coordinator expresses ambiguity towards leading her colleagues. The project itself motivates her leadership practices, not the relational dynamics. However, distinguishing the project from the people seems difficult to accomplish. The teachers’ work relates closely to their relations in the community. Thus, coping with relational issues is part of the project coordinator’s work as well. As documented, the project coordinator establishes her leadership capabilities based on subject expertise and pedagogical content knowledge, but there is always the risk of being ‘cut back’ by the principal who has the formal responsibility for regulating the work. As a former teacher of mathematics, the principal is quite unfamiliar with topics such as writing in the subjects; this is the group’s concern. Still, the principal is accountable for the teachers’ instructional practices grounded in the curriculum. The principal has to balance her strategies, as shown in excerpt 4, when she wonders if the possible breakdown of the project Martin refers is related to a lack of planning. Thus, the analysis reveals how institutional structures, such as plans, might function both as stabilizing elements and as unstable tools for leadership.

Although the principal is aware of the risks and opportunities connected to her chosen strategies, she knows that her success as a principal depends on her relationship with the teachers. The strategies the principal chooses relate to traditions, and the local context, but she has to be sensitive about what is happening. As a former teacher, she knows what is at stake. As shown in excerpt 3, the teachers rejected the
principal’s expectations, and it took time for the principal and the project coordinator to find a productive collaboration method. Thus, the analysis has revealed the legitimization of authority, and the distribution of power and trust in interactions. Consequently, the legitimate use of authority has to be negotiated repeatedly; it is a mixture of ‘power over’ and ‘power with’ models of leadership in which leading and following are a fluid, interactive and reciprocal process (Møller, 2009).

As mentioned in the introduction, the tradition of principals directly influencing teachers’ work in upper secondary school is weak, and there is tacit agreement that school leaders should not involve themselves too much in what teachers are doing—and vice versa (Berg, 2011). Historically, these features affect relationships between principals and teachers. This is particularly reflected in the example concerning the principal’s interference in the project initiated by the teachers. The study indicates that teachers may use opportunities to ‘manage’ their principal, by ‘cooling out’ initiatives, for instance, as demonstrated when the principal challenges the teachers to include reading in their work. As the principal moves from a managerial point of view, dealing with resources for their project, into an instructional position, focusing on their core activities of writing and reading in the subjects, the teachers might feel that these issues are within their areas of decision-making. The principal’s attempt was ignored, and the study reveals that instructional policy still seems to be the teachers’ domain (Berg, 2011).

In the context of the school as an institution, professionals exist in a network of jointly dependent relationships (Linell, 2009; Kelchtermans & Piot, 2012). Studying how leadership is constructed and exercised conveys how micro-political activities are distributed and played out in interactions over time. In particular, the study shows how the teachers influence the principal in their efforts to establish future conditions for their project. By virtue of the principal’s formal position, she has the power to make formal decisions, but the teachers seem to use every opportunity to control those decisions. Even though the principal seems aware of the relative nature of power, she and the teachers know that they depend on each other to make progress. The study, therefore, exposes the ‘give-and-take’ in leadership as relational work.

The study reveals how trust is developed through trustworthy use of power, where the talk and the actions ‘do’ the work. The principal makes it clear that, as a former teacher, she recognizes the teachers’ needs. In this way, she builds trust by taking on the teachers’ perspective. Likewise, the project coordinator, an experienced teacher with authority, seems to know how to ‘play the game’, moving between different positions: an expert on teaching, a project coordinator and a school leader.

However, as recent studies point out, it seems that principals play a critical role by contributing to a context in which trusting relationships and collaborative work can flourish (Coleman, 2012). Even if the division of labour between the principal and the teachers is defined in formal roles and functions, this study has shown that their daily work is strongly interrelated and that this interrelatedness affects the ever-changing status of the division of authority (Gronn, 2003).
Conclusion

In our research questions, we asked how leadership is constituted and exercised in the interactions between a principal and a group of teachers operating within an improvement project. We sought to explore what is at stake for the participants, and how they handle possible tensions emerging from their talk. The study revealed the dynamic relations surrounding the division of labour and authority in schools, and the various coping strategies of professionals as they handle emerging tensions related to leadership. Questions concerning power and trust, knowledge and skills and responsibility and sustainability in development work emerged from our analysis. Moreover, the study documented ambiguous feelings and uncertainty related to leadership and its ramifications.

Although leadership is distributed in the organization, this study revealed that power and authority do not disappear in the distribution processes. The principal and the teachers retained their respective positions throughout the decision-making processes for the conditions of the project. Furthermore, the analysis conveyed that not only the principal, as the formal leader, addresses leadership initiatives; the teachers also exercise leadership.

In sum, leadership in this school represents a network of relationships, structures and cultures. In this view, the principal and the project coordinator’s negotiations might be interpreted as ‘scripts’ (Møller, 2004) in which their negotiations represent an institutionalized way of exercising leadership, framed by historical and cultural school traditions. In addition, the study revealed tensions emanating from interference in teachers’ core work, but also how essential mutual trust exists in the ongoing interactions amongst professionals.

Possible implications for school leadership relate to awareness of the various traditions and ‘scripts’ that exist in school settings, the divisions of authority and the ways in which they occur, and the potential opportunities and risks in challenging those divisions. Relational agency which implies a capacity to align one’s thoughts and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations (Edwards, 2005) seems to be a key capability for school leaders. Even though principals have the formal right to interfere in the teachers’ work, and principals are vested with power that includes means of compulsion and reward, this study indicates that indirect strategies, such as building trust over time, and searching for productive ways to collaborate, may turn out to be more effective to achieve goals in the long run.

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Notes

1. In the Norwegian national curriculum document, key competencies are framed as five basic skills: writing, reading, expressing oneself orally, using digital tools, and calculating. These competencies all correspond with how the OECD programme ‘Definition and Selection of Competencies’ (DeSeCo) has developed a response to educational challenges.

2. In the excerpts, we meet the school principal, Hilde, the project coordinator, Tora and six of the teachers in the writing group, represented by the voices of Martin, Liv, Ragnhild, Cecilie, Edith and Ben. All the names are pseudonyms.

References


