



## Learning to share: a vision of leadership practice

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# Learning to share: a vision of leadership practice

JORUNN MØLLER

This article aims at providing insight into ways of constructing leadership for learning within a Norwegian context. The focus is on how a Norwegian principal talks about educational leadership and learning. The principal's story is juxtaposed with references to how her deputies and a group of teachers frame their experiences about leadership for learning at this particular school. In this instance, the sharing of leadership is considered successful because those wishing to share in the leadership of the school have learned first to share in the leader's vision of leading. A main argument is that in constructing her story about leadership for learning the principal is also negotiating who she is for others as well as for herself, and her identity construction is work in progress.

## Introduction

The article reports some of the findings from the Norwegian part of the 'Carpe Vitam: Leadership for Learning' project. In Norway the project's participants were from the University of Oslo and three public lower secondary schools. Each school was represented by the leadership team (the principal and two deputies) and a group of teachers. The project was a three year study concerned with inquiring into and supporting the development of leadership and learning practices within schools from each of the seven countries involved. In each school we asked: how is leadership understood; how is learning understood and promoted; what is the relationship between leadership and learning? The study included a number of different approaches to data collection, including semi-structured individual interviews, observations, photo-documentation, surveys and focus groups with school leaders, teachers and students.

Each school involved in this project started their project life with a portrait of their school containing quantitative and qualitative data. It aimed at ascertaining key insights into (as well as facts about) the leadership, learning and the development context of each school. As researchers and critical friends we helped the participants to document and synthesize their school portraits. The written accounts worked as a tool for reflection on practice. In addition, we were invited to observe leadership practice at the local

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school. A centrepiece of our collaboration with the schools was mutual reflection on actions. After each school visit we wrote a detailed account of what we had observed and this account was sent back to the school with a final section focusing on questions for reflection. The purpose was to keep track of the school's development, to provide feedback and to stimulate further reflection. At the same time these field notes had status as data for our analysis related to the research questions.

This article aims at providing an insight into ways of constructing leadership for learning within a Norwegian context. The analysis draws mainly upon the interview narratives of one of the Norwegian school principals. The focus is on how this principal talks about educational leadership and learning. I have chosen this interview because its form and content reflect a number of cases from the total body of data, including our observations. In addition, I will juxtapose her story with a few references to how her deputies and a group of teachers frame their experiences about leadership for learning at this particular school. A main argument is that in constructing her story about leadership for learning the principal is also negotiating who she is for others as well as for herself, and her identity construction is work in progress. Shared leadership was highlighted as one of the cornerstones in the 'Leadership for Learning' project, and this dominating discourse of leadership within the project probably influenced the story that emerged. At the same time, the principal's story is embedded in a cultural notion of the school as a hierarchical organization, and hierarchy may or may not go easily with the notion of shared leadership. Before presenting the findings I will discuss perspectives on leadership which have informed the study and explain what a narrative inquiry into leadership implies.

### **Perspectives on leadership for learning**

Many studies claim that if schools are to develop their organizational capacity both teachers and students need to be encouraged to exercise leadership (Furman and Starratt 2002, Spillane 2006). In addition, there is a growing critique of existing leadership research which has an exaggerated view of human agency and cause-effect relations. This is probably the reason why a perspective on leadership as distributed or shared is gaining ground (Gronn 2002). In the 'Leadership for Learning' project a distributed perspective was applied as a lens for thinking about leadership. It refers to 'activities tied to the core work of the organization that are designed by organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, [*sic*] or practices of other organizational members' (Spillane 2006: 11). The core work in a school is about student learning, and the project had this as a main focus. Also, leadership and learning were understood as mutually embedded; a frame which pictured both leading and learning as activities and, as such, offered an open invitation to lead and to learn as the task or the circumstance demands (MacBeath *et al.* 2005). In this way a socio-cultural perspective on learning (Wenger 1999) was closely linked to our perspective on distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership offers a powerful perspective because it requires us to consider the coordination and interdependence of actions (Spillane

*et al.* 2001, Gronn 2002). The approach takes into account that leadership is not necessarily synonymous with a particular position; it may come from administrators, teachers or others. However, there are various understandings of distributed leadership. Some understand distributed leadership as something that is implemented, while others think of it as something that happens spontaneously; some highlight the distinction between the leader-plus and the practice aspects (Gronn 2003, MacBeath 2005, Firestone and Martinez 2007, Leithwood *et al.* 2007, Spillane *et al.* 2007). In this article I draw upon Gronn's conceptualization of leadership (Gronn 2002: 428). He defined leadership as:

a status ascribed to one individual, an aggregate of separate individuals, sets of small numbers of individuals acting in concert or larger plural-member organizational units. ... The individuals or multiperson units to whom influence is attributed include, potentially, all organization members, not just managerial role incumbents. Managers may be leaders but not necessarily by virtue of being managers, for management denotes an authority, rather than an influence, relationship. ... Finally, the duration of the attributed influence may be short or long term. (pp. 428–429)

This definition shows how the concept is closely related to a family of terms like authority, influence and power. It implies that leadership involves a careful interplay of knowledge and action and it is conscious of conditions and of change.

In this article I focus on a story told by one school principal, but it should not be considered as an antithesis of taking a distributed perspective to studying leadership (cf. Spillane *et al.* 2007). I will argue that consideration of this story may extend our understanding of leadership by applying this perspective while listening to how a person in a formally designated leadership position captures the lived organization, how she frames who is taking responsibility for leading and managing. This article is about examining the talk about distribution of leadership across people from the perspective of the school principal and simultaneously highlighting how such a story is culturally embedded.

### **Narrative inquiry into leadership for learning**

According to Clandinin and Connelly (1994: 416), narrative is both a phenomenon and method: 'It is equally as correct to say inquiry into narrative as it is to say narrative inquiry. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study'. To preserve this distinction, they call the phenomenon story and the inquiry narrative. In other words, in the project we asked people to tell stories of their practice and we, as narrative researchers, have tried to write narratives of these experiences.

Narrative inquiry into leadership aims to understand a person's experience as a form of text construction. The assumption is that people create their understanding as leaders through an autobiographical process akin to producing a story (Josselson 2006: 4). It has a focus on the individual as unique, but the challenge is to seek some understanding of the patterns that cohere among individuals and the claim must mark a process we can attend

to and learn from. The challenge is to find patterns without sacrificing context.

Through stories people try to interpret experiences and make their meanings explicit, and the stories they tell about themselves are important in terms of how they come to understand themselves and act as embodied beings in the world (Giddens 1991). In one way the stories are shaped by and reflect the perspective of the teller, but this in turn is shaped and structured within a wider socio-historical, political and economic framework (Connelly and Clandinin 1999). When Norwegian school leaders talk about how they understand school leadership they are embedded in a cultural practice with historical ballast of viewing schools as an expression of democratic political ideals (Møller 2006), but, concurrently, they are increasingly influenced by a hero paradigm (Møller 2007). Norwegian schools are also hierarchically organized and the appointed principal has a mandate from the municipality in terms of roles through which responsibility is delegated.

It is likely that school leaders and teachers are constructing a number of narratives as they are positioned in different discourses. Each story will be positioned and presented from the perspective of someone with certain intentions at a specific moment in historical time and each is situated in expectations about who could be in the audience. The story tells us something about the relationship between the individual and society, and individuals have multiple subject positions from which they make sense of the world (Eisenhart 2000).

In this article ways of constructing leadership for learning within a Norwegian context will be explored. An interview represents a form of interpersonal communication in which the interviewer and respondent negotiate an understanding of the subject matter in question. Being situated within the 'Leadership for Learning' project, it might be expected that the participants will emphasize the shared notion of leadership in their stories. That is why it is important to focus on the linguistic and communicative features of the discourses. In addition, we should pay attention to the fact that how a school principal experiences his or her job—how he/she interprets his/her position, what he/she understands about leadership for learning—are neither simply individual choices nor simply the result of belonging to the social category 'school principals'. In the course of doing the job and interacting with others these aspects are negotiated. It is also a matter of their position and the position of their communities within broader social structures. Critical exploration of the language demands that we take account of context.

In reading, interpreting and analysing the collected data based on interviews and field notes from observations we have found it helpful to explore Lieblich *et al.*'s (1998) distinctions between form and content and between making sense of whole stories and dividing them into segments or categories. Lieblich and her colleagues emphasized that there is always interplay between the form and the content. The analysis has also been inspired by Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis. While Lieblich's focus is on the text's manifestation in linguistic form, Fairclough includes the text's reflection of larger patterns of social practice (i.e. ways of identifying, ways of thinking and ways of being in the world). He defined a discourse as 'a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world,

constituting and constructing the world in meaning' (Fairclough 1992: 64). This approach implies a three-dimensional analysis, understanding the text as a unique action, as an instance of discursive practice that specifies the nature of the text production and interpretation and as a representation of a certain ideological position. Text can refer to a speech or the spoken discourse in an interview, written documents, visual images or a combination of these. In this way, Fairclough was trying to draw together language analysis and social theory in order to combine a more social-theoretical sense of discourse with the text-and-interaction sense in more linguistically oriented discourse analysis. Before examining the interview narratives, the cultural and socio-economic context of the school will be briefly introduced.

### **The cultural and socio-economic context of the school**

The school is situated just a few miles south-east of the city centre of Oslo. It has new buildings characterized by innovative architecture, a pleasant location and is surrounded by a forested area. Table 1 provides a summary of the cultural and socio-economic context.

As demonstrated in Table 1, this is a newly established school in an area where there was no school before. Working within a formal leadership team has become an institutionalized practice in most Norwegian schools, and this is also the case for this school. The challenges faced by the school principal are related both to the history and the emerging school culture. For instance, all the teachers have applied and competed for a position at this specific school because of the opportunities offered by the innovative structure to experiment with new ideas. They had to sign up for an alternative working time agreement, requiring them to spend more time in collective meetings at the school. The characteristics of the recruited teachers reflect many of the aspects highlighted by what Sachs (2003: 12–16) labelled 'transformative professionalism', including inclusive membership, a collaborative and collegial approach, a flexible and progressive orientation and responsiveness to change. In addition, the innovative architecture requires a new mind set for thinking about how teaching can be organized. The school has recently gained recognition from the Norwegian Ministry of

**Table 1. The school context**

History	This is a new lower secondary school, opened in 2002. The principal has a strong influence on the culture, partly by means of her power in recruiting teachers and other staff members, partly by being charismatic and argumentative. She has carefully recruited every single teacher.
Staffing	There are 20 teachers who are organized in teams according to year group. Each grade is led by a team leader who is also part of the leadership team. The principal was appointed with a specific mission to create an innovative school. There have been lots of applicants for each post.
Student enrolment	160 students are enrolled—no minorities, but mixed background. In earlier days the geographical location had low status within the municipality. Now the status is changing. Families with higher education are moving into the area. A small group of parents disagree with the pedagogical design and mission of the school.

Research and Education for successfully creating conditions favourable to learning and creating structures that invite participation in rethinking boundaries and changing patterns of organization.

## **Understanding and framing leadership for learning**

### *The school principal's story*

The sample used in this article is drawn from an interview with the principal during the spring of 2005 and its form and content reflect a number of cases from the total body of data. Space does not allow undertaking a detailed textual analysis of the whole transcript, but by looking at some aspects of the text it is possible to highlight some key issues of the construction of leadership for learning within a Norwegian context.

The school had participated in the 'Leadership for Learning' project for three years and this interview aimed at learning about the principal's thinking and practice linked to the key theme of the project. The agenda and the interactional control were set by the researcher through the interview schedule. Hence, the produced text was associated with a type of discourse which was conditioned by the mutual understanding of what constitutes an interview when it comes to turn taking: the researcher asks the questions and the principal is expected to answer. Also, three years' participation in the 'Leadership for Learning' project had probably fashioned an understanding of what should be expected in a story told by the school principal. Consequently, the produced text was most likely influenced by the discourse of leadership which developed over the years within the project in which shared leadership emerged as one of the cornerstones.

A holistic reading of the interview with the principal gives an overall impression of a person who has a clear vision for the school's development and who is constantly working at building consensus among the staff about long-term as well as short-term goals. The vision is to create an enthusiastic and enjoyable approach to learning, where all students experience the joy of learning something new and teachers share and develop their knowledge of teaching and learning. Below is an excerpt from the interview that may act as a representation of her way of talking about learning and leadership. It is taken from the very start of the interview, where she in fact set the tone for the whole conversation between herself and the researcher. The interviewer did not need to say very much to encourage the principal to answer her questions because the frame for her responses was already in place. The principal was invited to play a 'game', in which she had agreed to participate, and she recognized that she should do most of the talking and that the researcher should not influence what she said (cf. Møller and Spindler 2002). The researcher's opening question was followed by a response that covered almost one page in the 10 page transcript.<sup>1</sup> For every question posed by the researcher the principal had lengthy, thorough and thoughtful reflections, and she did not seem to need prompts in order to reflect about her practice.

- Interviewer: The 'Leadership for Learning' project has now lasted for three years. In this interview I would like to hear about the way you think about leadership and learning, how learning is promoted in this school and how the learning environment has changed during the last three years. You can start by telling me about something that you would describe as successful learning in your school.
- Principal: First, I would like to emphasize that the learning processes focus both on the adults and the students at our school. If we start by talking about the staff members, I would say we have an innovative culture. We have the guts to challenge what usually is taken for granted; we are risk takers and have the courage to be proactive. Sometimes we fall short, and sometimes we wonder where do we go from here (laughing), and processes have been initiated in such a way that I have thought my job is now first and foremost to support and protect the teachers and to scaffold the processes the best I can. I am quite sure that I said in the first interview with you, three years ago, that this school should not be characterized by a culture where we have all the answers. On the contrary, the culture should be characterized by the many questions we are asking. Our core values should support a focus on powerful learning. Of course, there are differences across staff members. Not everyone is a risk taker. However, the exciting feature of this school is that there are so many proactive teachers, so many who are passionate about their job. I have experienced ... and that is quite a challenge for leadership [laughing], ... to challenge those who want to be proactive and to support those who become terrified and think their colleagues are rushing too fast. Everyone does not have to be the same. However, something must be common; we must share the same framework for learning, and we have to be very explicit about it, and our vision for school improvement should be part of our daily conversations. Within such a common framework and in collaboration with their colleagues it is possible for everyone to nurture and expand their talents. I know it is quite a top-down process. Some teams work very well [laughing]; and some do not.
- Interviewer: Could you please provide some examples of the common framework?
- Principal: It is our vision for the school. It is about creating opportunities for the joy of learning for everybody, including both the students and the adults. It is about our values; how we are passionate defenders of deep and broad learning for everyone. Then, for some time we have agreed upon methods we want to learn more about. Different teams have chosen different approaches, and that is an advantage when we meet together to share our knowledge and try to make our learning transparent to each other. We do have a collective and sharing culture, and I am so proud of the staff. Then, suddenly, something happens and the productive processes are brought to an end, blocked or interrupted, or something does not materialize the way we want, that's part of school life [laughing].
- Interviewer: What do you do then?
- Principal: Then I talk with the team leader. It is not an unpleasant talk, but we go back and look at what was the agreement, what was our goal, upon which framework did we agree. ... All our students should know that we have agreed upon some common rules, and I expect the teachers to be loyal to these agreements. However, once in a while this loyalty is put to the test. Then we have tricky and delicate conversations. (Author's translation of transcript)

In the interview the principal highlights the significance of working together towards a goal. However, later in the interview she underscores that one might learn a lot from ad hoc situations as well, if only 'we are able to give space for reflections afterwards'. When the interviewer asks her to elaborate on the tensions or the dilemmas that have arisen in the course of trying to improve learning at the school she answers with a smile, 'leadership is about managing dilemmas. It takes all the energy you have, and I love it'. Generally, the principal seems to use the interview as an opportunity to comment on and give her opinions about the role of school principals and

how she positions herself and constructs her understanding of leadership for learning. When asked about dilemmas she tends to distance herself from them by making school principals in general the subject of her comments, followed by a smile.

When we examine her story's formal aspects, she mostly makes use of 'we' when talking about learning at the school, and also alternates between what 'we will manage' and what 'I intend to do'. Her use of the collective pronoun 'we' catches a sense of collective action by the whole staff. Three aspects are revealed in her story: it is about supporting and challenging the teachers, involving them in decisions, and being systematic and organized. She selects words like 'risky', 'loud and high-flying discussions', 'mood of development', 'a culture of inquiry' and 'guts'. Her choice of metaphors is laden with positive values when she talks about participation and collaboration. She describes the school culture as dynamic, proactive and innovative and she juxtaposes that with what they are not, as shown in the excerpt below.

Some assume we have a model of harmony at this school, because almost all the teachers have competed to get a position here, so they knew in advance what would be expected and what kind of school this is. However, that is not the case [laughing]. We have 'high-flying' discussions; we disagree a lot before we reach a consensus about setting the direction. (Author's translation of transcript)

Through such statements she reveals the kind of school leader she is and how she would like the school culture to be. In this way, ontological narratives are embedded in time and spatial relationships (Somers and Gibson 1994).

A specific leadership challenge for her is to guide, support and confront both those teachers with enthusiasm, daring and guts and those who think that school improvement is going too fast. Important tools in this process are student portfolios, teachers' portfolios and dialogues between the individual student and the teacher every second week about what kind of learning is going on, as well as analysing learning styles and strategies, the weekly 'pedagogical forum' and extensive devolution of power and responsibilities. She seems to be aware of how controversial it is, within the academic community, to apply a tool like a learning style inventory when she comments:

We want to be best on personalized education. We want everyone to be special, and learning is enhanced when differences in learning preferences are accommodated. It is like a flexible mosaic. Everyone searches for different sources. I am convinced that our students understand that we are not treating everyone in the same way, but that we are providing what each of them needs. We have chosen to use the learning style inventory as a first step towards identifying the conditions under which each person is most likely to focus. It assesses individual preferences amongst the students. However, *we do not cultivate it; it is not the only tool we are using*. First and foremost, we need to talk a lot with every student about how they learn best, what kind of preferences they have, how they are likely to achieve well and most effectively, in order to develop an individual profile. Going through a process like this makes them conscious about their own learning process. They understand that they can be different from their mates, and that they need to contribute energetically to their own learning process. (Author's translation of transcript) (Original emphasis)

The fact that the narrative was constructed within a research interview that was part of a specific project and was conducted by a specific researcher

created a set of expectations and conventions which the principal could not ignore. Even though she had the opportunity as well as the capacity to shape her interaction with the researcher, the way she was positioned within the interview and the moves that the researcher made also had an impact on the constructed narrative. The social positioning within society of both the school principal and the university academic probably influenced what was said. Also, she was asked to reflect on her participation in the ‘Leadership for Learning’ project, which she emphasized as crucial for her own consciousness:

Interviewer: To what extent would you say the school’s involvement in the project has contributed to a shift in your thinking about learning and leadership?

Principal: I was aware early on how important it is to create a culture for learning amongst the adults in the school. I did not have a formal education in leadership and organizational theory when I started as a principal. That’s probably why the project was the first place where I started to reflect on my own role as a leader for learning. To focus on how the culture can nurture the learning for everyone; how I, as a leader, can promote, support and enable learning to take place; the importance of reflecting on factors which inhibit and promote learning. (Author’s translation of transcript)

As demonstrated above, her text supports a particular kind of discursive hegemony within the ‘Leadership for Learning’ project, that of the key principles for practice which were developed part way through the process.<sup>2</sup> Principles like ‘there must be a focus on learning’, ‘conditions favourable to learning must be created’ and ‘leadership must be shared’ had become a focus for discussion and reflection among the school participants and researchers in the project. As the principles developed we also began to use them as a framework in our collaboration with the schools (cf. MacBeath *et al.* 2005, Dempster and Johnson 2006).

### *The teachers’ stories*

Our interviews with both the deputies and a group of teachers supported the principal’s story about the leadership team and the teachers being energized and committed to their job, and this was also supported by our observations. They told of how they loved their jobs and how, at this school, they felt they had all kinds of opportunities for and leeway in experimenting with new ideas, as the following quote from a teacher shows:

My experience at this school is so different compared to my earlier practice. Before, we did the same every year, and there was no incentive to change the pattern. If our teaching strategies had been successful for 20 years, there was no reason to change. But at this school there is a continuous discussion about learning, learning styles and learning strategies and approaches to teaching and learning. We receive new inputs about learning styles and different forms of intelligence, and although it is difficult to measure what we are doing, it makes you reflect on what you are doing all the time. We talk and discuss a lot, and we are always being challenged. (Author’s translation of transcript)

In the interviews the teachers expressed dreams and vision about how to create a better school for their students and they were buying into the

school's vision when they said 'the school's vision is my vision'. They underscored the extensive devolution of power and responsibilities and distributed leadership was described as an organizational quality of the school. One of the deputies argued that this was one of the reasons why they were successful in an innovative pedagogy. Additionally, both the deputies and the teachers were explicit about the ideological role their principal was playing. They had collaborated in developing the vision, but the principal was the one who was setting the direction, as shown in the following quote from an interview with one of the deputies:

Successful leadership practice at this school is characterized by—and this is a superb trait and quality of the principal—the devolution of responsibility. This has resulted in a school culture of teachers who are always willing to go that extra mile. At least this is how I see it. They do not meet new challenges with 'No, we can't do that; this is not within the framework of our work-time agreement; this is too much'. Of course, they [referring to the teachers] do make it a case if it is too much, but this is not the first argument. I am often surprised how willing they are to participate in collaborative projects, turn around when needed, and I am sure this has to do with feeling ownership of the school. I am sure this has to do with the principal's leadership. She has managed the art of devolution. It is, of course, also a great advantage for her, because she can focus on other tasks. But she has succeeded in doing this. Teacher leaders at each grade level are as responsible and accountable as if they were part of a formal leadership team. They feel responsibility for what is happening in the school, and they are in charge. Sometimes this can lead to a minor change in direction, but we have to risk it. (Author's translation of transcript)

According to the deputy the staff members feel encouraged to exercise initiative, they take responsibility and they never feel left alone. They work very hard, they know it and they wish there was more time for reflecting on actions. The teachers admit that once in a while they think there is too much time devoted to the overall purpose of schooling and too little time for sharing experiences on a daily basis.

### **Emerging themes**

In applying the categorical content approach to understanding the story of the principal the following themes could be identified: setting the direction and building consensus, a focus on distributed leadership for learning and the dilemma of top-down steering versus self-government and devolution of responsibility.

#### *Setting the direction and building consensus*

The school principal talks a lot about setting direction and the need for building consensus among the staff. Also, she talks about challenge and support in order to stimulate staff members' development. As such, she reflects Leithwood and Riehl's (2005) emphasis on the core leadership practices which are necessary, but insufficient, conditions for school success regardless of context.<sup>3</sup> The talk about leadership as setting direction is also part of the dominant discourse of leadership at the national level in Norway, which increasingly is influenced by a hero paradigm of leadership (cf. Møller

2007). As such, the principal's story is also shaped within a wider political framework.

In her story the principal frames herself as a strong leader with a focus on both students' and staff members' learning. She creates an image of herself as an innovative, collaborative and progressive school leader. This underscores the fact that school leadership is not produced as a lone heroic effort, but rather as something created by school leaders and staff members in interaction. Her framing sustains the dominant discourse within the project. At the same time the teachers at this school provide, to some degree, a heroic picture of their principal. Her vision of the school has become their vision. They see her as a charismatic leader. Part of this can possibly be related to their feeling of being selected by the principal for this school. As shown in Table 1, when the school started in 2002 there were many applicants to each post and the principal had carefully recruited every teacher. They were the chosen ones and it feels exciting to be part of a team with every opportunity to build a new culture. Concurrently, our collaboration with the school from 2002 to 2005 demonstrated the building of a professional culture with distributed and shared responsibility that was taken as well as given (Hargreaves and Fink 2006). A key question which it is impossible to answer at this stage is whether innovation in this school is sustainable over time and, if so, how. Will we see a replication of the old story in education where experimental schools evolve into 'real schools', a charismatic leader gives way to bureaucratic leadership and progressive pedagogy turns out to be a phase in the school's history rather than a permanent state (cf. Labaree 2006)? It is too early to tell.

### *Understanding leadership as distributed*

Examining the principal's understanding of leadership, it is to a degree in harmony with some notions of distributed leadership, as used within the 'Leadership for Learning' project. At the same time, the stories also maintain the doctrine of exceptionalism (Gronn 2003). It seems like both conceptualizations are available to the principal in the rhetoric of her everyday work routines. The way the principal and the teachers frame their understanding exposes a dissonance between a construction of heroic leadership and the division of labour in practice. Moreover, the practitioners' talk about leadership includes various understandings of distributed leadership: for instance, a designation of roles and a strategic distribution, which tend to imply a process of delegation from the top, as well as the possibility that all members may be leaders at some stage, collaborative modes of engagement and leadership as distributed practice (cf. MacBeath 2005).

There are also contradictions connected with the way school leadership is being conceptualized at the national level (Møller 2007). The doctrine of exceptionalism seems to continue as the dominant conception of leadership among policy-makers. Norwegian policy documents indicate that strong and visible leadership is needed in order to transform schools into learning organizations. The assumption is that leadership is the monopoly of individual role holders or a few actors who are strategically positioned in organizations.

For instance, in a White Paper entitled *Culture for Learning*, which is the basis for national curriculum reform (entitled 'Knowledge promotion') and a National Quality Assessment System a heroic notion of school leadership can be discerned. On the other hand, it is stated in the report that we should trust teachers because they are the experts in teaching.

Norway's development as a nation has provided a particular way of understanding democracy in the workplace. It has been and continues to be important for everyone to have a sense of control over their working conditions. Resilient unions are important elements in our way of framing legitimate leadership and management. The unions have contributed to robust negotiations in the workplace and a form of institutionalized trust relations (Sejersted 1997). In this way, school leadership can be understood as a network of relationships among people, structures and cultures, not just as a role-based function assigned to one person. However, leadership is also about power, and the school principal's job is defined by an employment contract. Principals are vested with formal powers that include a range of means for compulsion and reward, including economic and structural sanctions. Although this is not in the forefront of the principal's story, it is implicit in her comment about what she does when some teachers do not live up to her standards: 'then we have tricky conversations'.

### *The dilemma of top-down control versus self-governance*

Tensions and dilemmas capture the immediacy of the continuing conflicts faced by principals (Cuban 1996, Møller 1996). This school principal tells stories about the dilemmas she faces regarding top-down control versus self-governance. For instance, implementing the central principles stated in the national curriculum is not a straightforward task, because the principal knows she cannot satisfy all of her staff members all of the time and her actions are responded to and interpreted differently by different members of staff. The curricular changes demand both creativity and personal initiative, but it is difficult knowing which strategy is best suited as a response. The principal acknowledges that disagreement and conflict have their benefits; at the same time, she thinks it is important to work hard toward a consensus. 'I follow up and have a talk with those who disagree with the school policy' she says with a smile when asked about her way of dealing with conflicts. She is trying 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 the story of principalship in the Norwegian context, or what Connelly and Clandinin (1999) would label a cover story. The principal does not want to go into details about how she deals with conflicts and punctuates this part of the interview by giving the interviewer a disarming smile.

### **Conclusion**

What do we get from the story reported in this article that gives us some insights into the practice of leadership for learning within the Norwegian

context? What is it a story of? Did we only get the cover story?—in other words the public way of talking about leadership which is stripped of negative feelings (Connelly and Clandinin 1999) A main argument is that in constructing her story about leadership for learning the principal is also negotiating who she is for others as well as for herself, and her identity construction is a work in progress. I have also highlighted how her story is embedded in a cultural notion of the school as a hierarchical organization and, simultaneously, connected to the dominating discourse of distributed leadership within the ‘Leadership for Learning’ project.

First, the story reveals a close connection between the school culture, an understanding of leadership, the personal context of the individual and the scope for action for both principals and teachers. Her understanding of a distributed perspective on leadership seems to include both the leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect (Spillane 2006) and an understanding of distributed leadership as a developing process (MacBeath 2005). She recognizes that leading a school requires multiple leaders, but, at the same time, individuals in formal leadership positions are important. We get the story of ‘us’ and ‘me’. Also, leadership is a status ascribed to the principal by her staff members. They reinforce the formal leader as a symbolic figure.

Second, the sharing of leadership at this school is considered successful because those wishing to share in the leadership of the school have first learned to share in the leader’s vision of leading. This can be related to the fact that it is a new school, the principal was appointed first and she recruited every teacher. Her story confirms findings reported by Leithwood *et al.* (2007), who concluded that if the vision was in place, the informal leaders participated in setting the direction. In one way, this principal’s approach to leadership is top-down, but, at the same time, she is fostering the acceptance of group goals through providing support, commitment and enthusiasm. As such, a single story has the potential of revealing some important elements of school leadership.

Third, the principal’s perspectives are embedded in the discourse about leadership and learning which developed during the project. During our three years’ collaboration with the school observation of leadership practice had taken place. Hence, the principal most likely assumed that the researcher already had an image of the practice talked about in this interview. This probably influenced the story that emerged. In other contexts and with other audiences the school principal would perhaps tell her story differently.

Lastly, looking back at the research process, our methodological approach provided an insight into leadership practice to only a certain degree. The analysis of how school principals construct their understanding of their working day can provide an informative window through which to view leadership, and we did move beyond the principal’s leadership role. However, even though the project included some observations of practice, we did not sufficiently record practice as a product of the joint interactions of school leaders, teachers, students and aspects of their situations, such as tools and routines (Spillane 2006). An understanding of how different cultural resources mediate reflection and actions and how knowledge building is part of a negotiation process would require more comprehensive

recorded observations of practice. Also, we need to look more closely at the evolving division of labour in the workplace, how the work is organized and why (cf. Gronn 2002). Further investigation of ongoing negotiation processes at the school level would greatly enrich the current research base in leadership for learning.

## Notes

1. All the transcripts used in this article were translated by the author from Norwegian into English. In the process important nuances might have been lost in translation. However, the author listened carefully to the taped conversations, to the rhythm and pitch of the story, before translation and has tried to catch the meaning as carefully as possible.
2. Key principles for the 'Leadership for Learning' project involve maintaining a focus on learning as activity, creating conditions favourable to Learning as an activity, creating a dialogue about leadership for learning, the sharing of leadership and fostering a shared sense of accountability. The principles were developed as the project progressed through data collection and analysis across the international research sites (cf. Dempster and Johnson 2006: 32–37).
3. These core practices include setting the direction (i.e. helping develop a set of shared goals that encourage a sense of common purpose), developing people (i.e. influencing behaviour for the achievement of shared goals through the provision of intellectual stimulation and individual and collective support) and redesigning the organization (i.e. facilitating the work of the school community in achieving shared goals that may require a leader to reshape a school's culture and structure) (Leithwood and Riehl 2005: 20–22).

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