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Published online: 25 Nov 2020.

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Leadership in low- and underperforming schools—two contrasting Scandinavian cases

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate how professional cultures and situated, material and external contexts relate to dynamic low- and underperforming schools in Scandinavia, particularly how the leadership is constructed through the leader, the followers and the situation. The first school studied was a low-performing school in Norway called '*Toppen*', which has shown improved student outcomes. The other school, Seaside, is a Swedish school that is considered underperforming because student outcomes are lower than expected based on the contextual prerequisites. Our results show that Toppen can be described as a turnaround school and Seaside can be described as a cruising school. Analysis reveals that, at Toppen, the principal has been developing a culture that can be described in terms of community and motivation. At Seaside, on the other hand, the culture can be described in terms of individuality and conservatism. From this analysis, we can detect how different contexts impact two low- and underperforming schools and how they are affected by different prerequisites linked to the situated, material, external and professional contexts. However, the development of a collective professional culture with a shared sense of commitment seems to be an important tool to plan and communicate organizational improvement strategies.

Introduction

Based on findings from the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP),[1] we know that school leaders may exercise significant influence on their schools' success trajectories (Day et al., 2009; Harris et al., 2007). However, we know less about how the layering of leadership appears in different contexts, and how professional standards of good work and new demands interact to support educators' commitment to quality education for diverse student populations. In addition, although the literature on effective schools and teaching reveals that a school culture of high expectations is beneficial for student achievement in general (Reynolds et al., 2014), it reveals less about the symbolic or material resources that engender such a culture or prevent its development. School culture does not fully explain how the demands and support stemming from the educational governance system communicate expectations of potential

outcomes, either. In this study, we explore two schools: Toppen, a low-performing school in Norway; and Seaside, an underperforming school in Sweden. By focusing on leadership, followers and the schools' situations, we aim to highlight the importance of contextual factors for individuals working as principals. Further, we explore how contextual factors may act as opportunities in some cases and as boundaries in others. Our point of departure is to explore different forms of underperforming schools. First, we examine those that have positive prerequisites (high socioeconomic status, parental involvement, external measures and judgments) but are underperforming (Seaside). Second, we investigate schools with low prerequisites (low socioeconomic status, low tax base, negative external measures and judgments) that perform better than expected (Toppen), but could still be described as low-performing in relation to the majority of schools in Norway. Thus, an outside observer might be led to believe that Seaside is a better and more functional school than Toppen. However, we set out to explore these schools' situated, material and external contexts and professional cultures related to their dynamics, as Toppen has a positive trend in student outcomes and Seaside has declining results. Studying these schools contributes to the body of knowledge by recognizing different cultural and contextual factors' importance in order to highlight the need for educational leaders to understand how these factors interrelate. School leaders should pay attention to these relationships, then try to resolve and understand them to promote student learning in their own settings and contexts.

Due to their common history, Sweden and Norway are often considered as representative of what is frequently described as the Nordic or Scandinavian model of education (Aasen et al., 2006). The existing educational policies in Sweden and Norway still reflect many similarities regarding educational ideologies: for instance, a comprehensive education system, a strong state, loyalty to and acceptance of state governance, and the operation of municipalities as relatively independent political institutions (Møller, 2009; Paulsen & Høyer, 2016; Paulsen Merok et al., 2014). Relative to other countries, Norway and Sweden have large public sectors, and local municipalities play a strong role in school governance.[2] The municipality finances the schools, employs the principals and teachers, and also plays a key role in providing in-service training for teachers and principals. This paper aims to identify the enabling and constraining factors in Scandinavian schools' efforts to raise standards and quality of practice, and how these factors interact with leadership strategies at different levels. The analysis is based on findings from one Norwegian and one Swedish secondary school.

The following research questions drive the analysis:

How do situated, material and external contexts and professional cultures relate to dynamic low- and underperforming schools in a Scandinavian context?

How is leadership constructed through relations among the leader, followers and the situations of specific schools?

The paper starts by briefly describing some distinctive features of Scandinavian education policy and current challenges. The next section describes analytical perspectives and methodological approaches to studies of leadership in low- and underperforming schools. The schools' leadership, followers and situations are highlighted to analyze

the data (Spillane, 2006). Then, findings based on interviews with school leaders, teachers and students are presented. To describe the two schools as points of departure for the further analysis of relationships, the four dimensions of Ball et al. (2012) are used: the *situated contexts*, the *material contexts*, the *external contexts* and the characteristics of *professional cultures*. The presentation of findings is followed by a discussion of the enabling and constraining factors in these schools' efforts to raise standards and quality of practice; how these factors interact with leadership strategies at different levels; and the interplay between professional cultures, social context, student enrollment and relationships at the municipal level.

Background to the Scandinavian case

Sweden and Norway have similar educational systems with strong public and national steering through curriculums, laws and regulations. In the next step, municipalities have the responsibility to realize and implement them. This strong public sector is often referred to as the Scandinavian model. In this model, one can argue that there might be larger differences between different municipalities within the same country than between countries on a national level. Such differences could be attributed to the size of the municipality, budget cuts and geopolitical aspects. The Scandinavian education system is predominantly public, which means that state authorities run most schools and universities. Education is free at all levels. There is no streaming according to ability, gender, or other factors, and most students are enrolled in regular classes. Since the late 1980s, the Scandinavian education system has undergone major reforms, influenced largely by new managerial ideas. Strategies to renew the public sector were promoted as the new public management (NPM), but for some time, this did not influence work at local schools. However, this changed dramatically when the media listed Norway and Sweden among the 'lower-performing' countries when the first PISA[3] report was published in 2001. Student achievement, leadership and accountability became the dominant themes in education. The results of PISA, as well as other international achievement tests, strongly influenced the latest reforms, and such results continue to affect Scandinavian education policy (Liedman, 2011; Møller, 2009; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013).

In many municipalities, more evidence-based approaches to school governance have been developed, along with new national expectations related to the use of performance data to enhance educational quality. The intention is to mobilize educators' work efforts to improve student outcomes (Aas & Brandmo, 2018; Mintrop, 2004). Although local enactments differ, the key to improvement, according to current national educational policies in Norway and Sweden, lies in the use of performance data. Key actors such as local authorities, school leaders and teachers are expected to use this information to improve their practice in ways that enhance student outcomes, particularly students' national test results (Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013).

Theoretical framework

This article builds upon Spillane's (2006) distributed perspective on school leadership. The conceptual foundations are distributed cognition and activity theory, as well as recognition of how social context is an integrated component of activity and thinking

processes are situated in a context. Leadership practice is understood as a practice distributed across three elements: Leaders, followers and their situation. In this way, the situation defines school practice from the inside; it is internal to practice (Spillane, 2015). According to Spillane, leadership practice and its context must be seen as part of an integrated framework. This means that, in addition to focusing on what leaders do and how they do it, it is important to investigate why leaders think the way they do and do what they do, because a leader's practices emerge through interactions with other people and the situation. In developing the distributed framework, Spillane refers to three theoretical sources. First, Peter Gronn's (2002) work on 'holistic forms' of distributed leadership conceptualizes the way that leadership is distributed in schools by focusing on the extent to which the performance of leadership functions is consciously aligned across different sources of leadership. Second, Heck and Hallinger (1999) conceptualize distributed leadership as forms of collaboration practiced by the principal, teachers and members of the school's improvement team. In their study of distributed leadership effects on student learning, they identified three areas of significant distributed practice: collaborative decision-making about educational improvement, the extent to which school leadership emphasizes school governance that empowers staff and students, and school leaders' active participation in efforts to evaluate the school's academic development. Third, in a survey of teachers and formally designated school leaders in 120 elementary schools, Camburn et al. (2003) used a distributed framework, operationalizing leadership as a set of organizational functions. The study asked participants about leadership functions that fell into one of three categories – instruction, building management, or boundary spanning – and examined how responsibility for different leadership functions was arrayed based on people's formally designated leadership positions.

Research has shown that, irrespective of whether a country is high-achieving, there is still considerable variation among individual schools in each country (Höög & Johansson, 2011). A large portion of the differences among schools relates to the socio-cultural and economic composition of each school's students. This fact has been very well documented over decades of research (Nordenbo et al., 2010). Nevertheless, large-scale quantitative studies of leadership effects on schools suggest that the direct and indirect effects of school leadership on student learning are small but significant, and collective efficacy appears to be among the most powerful sources in fostering student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). In addition, Bryk and Schneider (2002), Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004), and Robinson (2010) have emphasized how crucial the element of trust is in developing successful relations among staff, students and parents. Leadership with trust plays a critical role in both student and teacher learning.

Leaders are not, however, always like their followers regarding views on good education, teaching, norms, values etc. Effective and successful leaders are not like ineffective and unsuccessful leaders (Hogan et al., 1994; Stogdill, 1974). There are differences between different leaders and their leadership that can be explained by personal traits to some extent, but leadership as a process is more complex. The leader and their personal prerequisites must be related to the context in which they lead. The concept of leadership as a process where the leader is related to the situation and the followers, can therefore be helpful to create a more nuanced picture of school leadership in these dynamic low- and underperforming schools. In an examination of whether the taxonomy

of two conceptual models of leadership roles for principals – instructional and transformational leadership – could be revealed empirically in a sample of Norwegian school leaders, Aas and Brandmo (2016) suggested that although the concepts of instructional and transformational leadership can be valuable for analytic reflections, they are too simplistic to represent the reality of school leaders' thoughts and actions. This means that the leader and their personal prerequisites must be related to the context in which they lead.

Low- and underperforming schools that can counteract their negative development and improve student outcomes through hard work are often referred to as 'turnaround schools.' In other words, a school that has suffered sustained performance deterioration over a period of time and not only stopped this negative trend, but can also show continuous improvement, could be described as a turnaround school (Murphy, 2008). Further, in a discussion of turnaround schools, Stoll and Fink (1996) created the term 'cruising schools' in their pursuit to discover why some schools do not live up to reasonable expectations given their student compositions. They argue that there are ineffective schools of many kinds and in many guises. They focused on schools that have good prerequisites, but are resting on their laurels and therefore ineffective for many of their students, even though the overall outcome of the school is better than that of a middle-range school. From this point of departure, the question of *why* schools underperform has spread across countries, states, municipalities and schools.

The problems of low-performing or underperforming schools have been approached internationally in various ways and on many levels. Leithwood et al. (2008) analyzed experiences in Alberta, Canada, to examine why schools and school districts underperform. He clustered causes into three areas: a) the students and their families (i.e. the socioeconomic and cultural background and situation for the students that attend a particular school); b) the school staff, their qualifications and competence (i.e. the lack of interactive instruction and a caring environment); and c) structure, culture and leadership of the school (i.e. the size, lack of possibilities for teacher collaboration and teamwork, ineffective scheduling, lack of focus, conflicts in leadership roles and discontinuity between school and home culture). In addition, educational research has repeatedly demonstrated that high expectations for students are a key contributing factor to the effectiveness of schools and teachers, and the presence of high expectations is an especially salient feature of effective schools for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Anagnostopoulos, 2006).

Although multiple persons may be concerned with leadership practices in schools, the principal, as the formal head, still holds a central position (Møller, 2012). However, rather than conceptualizing power as a top-down and linear phenomenon, we see power in a relational, situated (micropolitical) and institutional way, which means that power is manifested in relationships in the local setting. What happens inside schools in terms of professional activities is mediated by structural and cultural factors (Aas, 2017; Vennebo & Ottesen, 2014). Schools in different contexts have different capacities, potentials and limits. They have diverse histories, buildings and infrastructures, staffing profiles, leadership experiences and budgetary situations. Various actors interpret and translate new demands and initiatives through established cultures in the educational system, which means that context must be considered to understand leadership in low-performing schools.

In the first step, the description of the schools, we use four contextual dimensions. These dimensions sometimes overlap and are interconnected, and act as a heuristic device to illuminate the enabling and constraining factors in the work of raising standards across schools (Ball et al., 2012). These dimensions include:

- Situated contexts (setting, school history and intake),
- Material contexts (staffing, budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure),
- External contexts (support and demands from local educational authorities, pressures and expectations), and
- Professional culture (values, leadership, principals' and teachers' commitments).

In the second step, we analyze the illusive relationship between the leader, the followers and situation through the scope of Ball et al. (2012) four dimensions.

Selection of case schools and data collection

Although there are many similarities in national and local governance in Scandinavia, local schools differ in terms of their student intake, budgetary situations and professional culture, as well as how they engage with local educational authorities. Therefore, we have chosen to examine the contextual factors and leadership strategies in two rather different schools: The Norwegian school is located in a low socioeconomic context, serving a student population with a substantial proportion of disadvantaged and culturally diverse students; the school's achievement scores in basic subjects are low relative to the national average, but national test scores have improved over the last three years. The Swedish school demonstrates medium scores, which are below expectations given the school's location in an upper middle-class socioeconomic context.

The selection of the two schools was based on their results from national academic achievement tests and exams in mathematics and reading at the lower secondary level. The schools' relative performance on national tests (in the Swedish case, grades) for at least a three-year period under the leadership of a single principal were the criteria for selection. Further information about the sociocultural compositions of the student populations was obtained from the superintendents at the municipal level. In selecting low- and underperforming schools, getting access could be a key challenge. We assumed that if schools knew they were being characterized as *underperforming*, they might be less willing to participate in the research endeavor. We also had to pay attention to confidentiality. However, after receiving information about the project, the principals and the teachers at our selected schools were willing to participate. Table 1 shows some key characteristics of the two schools.

Table 1. Key characteristics of Toppen and Seaside schools.

Schools Selection criteria	Norway – Toppen	Sweden – Seaside
Location and students' socio-economic status (SES)	Low SES	Medium to high SES
School type/Number of students	Lower secondary/300 students	Lower secondary/275 students
Percentage of students from ethnic minority groups	70 %	5 %
Achievement trend	Low and increasing	Middle and declining

As shown in Table 1, there is a large portion of students from immigrant groups at the research site located in the southern part of Norway. The data shows that Toppen is situated in a social environment that can be characterized as challenging, and relatively lower student performance can be seen as a normal statistical expectation there. However, the school's results have been improving over the last three years. Seaside is very different. Seaside is situated in a middle-class area close to a university. The school has a good reputation, leading many teachers to want to work there. Despite its good reputation and stable environment, the school has recorded lower grades than the national average for several years. For the past three years, its results have been declining.

The research team spent three days in each school. Classroom observations were conducted in two classes at each school. Interviews with the principals (one at each school), the deputy leaders (one at each school), two groups of teachers, and two groups of students were conducted. We selected teachers for the interviews who were working together in order for them to more easily speak freely and be able to reflect together on how they perceived their own schools. Based on these considerations, we decided to hold interviews with existing teacher teams. To select students, we asked the principal at each school to select two students that they knew were talkative and that they knew to be able and interested in participating in a study. These students in turn chose three to four friends each as focus group participants. This selection procedure created prerequisites for the interviewees to speak freely in a safe and familiar setting. The interview used the ISSPP interview protocol as a point of departure (Day et al., 2011). These protocols focus on leadership at schools, as well as organizational setting characteristics such as culture and structure. We then added study questions and subthemes that shone light on the schools' situated contexts, material contexts, external contexts and professional cultures. All interviews were conducted in locations chosen by informants, lasted approximately one hour, and were audiotaped. The interviews were then transcribed, and the team of Norwegian and Swedish researchers collaborated on the analysis of the transcripts, aiming to identify emergent themes and characteristics as well as strategies and contexts for leadership and management. This procedure enabled us to combine inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis (Eisner, 1991).

Findings: descriptions of the schools

In this section, we describe the two schools using Ball's four dimensions. This description acts as a foundation that in turn ignites an analysis of the schools' leadership, importance of followers and situations. Further, the descriptions add a broad and historical picture of the different prerequisites at Toppen and Seaside.

Situated contexts

Toppen, a lower secondary school, is located in a large municipality in southern Norway. It is a diverse city, and immigrant backgrounds characterize almost 30% of the population. During the last decade, the local governance of education has been influenced by managerial elements such as explicit standards and measures of performance, greater emphasis on output controls, a shift to two administrative levels, and a stress on private-

sector styles of management practice (Hood & Peters, 2004). The city has been governed by a conservative coalition for a long time.

The municipality holds explicitly high expectations for its schools and aims to be in charge of the very best education sector in the country. The education sector is administered by the superintendent. In addition, professional development is out-sourced to a self-governed unit that offers schools in-service training and development tools. Within this unit, a group of supervisors is responsible for supporting the schools in enacting education policy, ensuring progress, providing in-service training and facilitating a shared culture in and across schools. Toppen is very multicultural and located in a low-SES area within the city. The school was built in the late 1970s, and has 300 students and 34 teachers. The buildings need renovations, but the school has great outdoor areas and a large multipurpose gymnasium. During the last ten years, people with higher education have moved away and immigrants have moved into the community, and 70% of the student body now consists of students speaking minority languages.

Seven years ago, a new principal was appointed, and she was confronted by a chaotic situation. The former principal had been fired; there was no consistent monitoring of students, and everything was very loosely organized. There were no clear routines and no documentation practices in place. The achievement level was clearly below what should reasonably have been expected. The teachers were exhausted by all the conflicts that had been going on for a long time, and the school's reputation was very bad. The new principal had to start from scratch and was, in fact, met by staff members who were exhausted by conflicts with their former principal and clearly motivated for change. During the first years, she gave priority to promoting a better psychosocial learning environment, and three strategies were put in place: a) establishing a support structure for students in trouble, b) setting standards for student behavior and establishing values and norms that concurred with the students' right to a good psychosocial environment as stated in the Education Act (this implies zero tolerance of bullying), and c) systematic work on teacher leadership and developing leadership capacity in the organization. The school is now in rather good shape, and during the 2014–2015 school year, the deputy principal acted as principal. The good work continued during this year, showing that the school had managed to establish a sustainably improved culture and structure. However, the school continues to struggle with a poor reputation among the inhabitants of the city, although student achievement has demonstrated progress over the last three years. Ethnic Norwegians are escaping the local community as immigrants are moving in, and this trend is influencing student intake.

The Seaside school is situated in northern Sweden, in a residential area near a university. The majority of the inhabitants in the area have an upper secondary education (40%) or postsecondary education (52%). The municipality has had a social democratic majority for many years. The school is a classic 1960s brick-built edifice of two floors that, on first impression, may appear slightly uninspiring. The school is large and has its own gymnasium alongside it. There is a municipal library linked with the school. In the vicinity of the school, there are two churches, one of which is integrated into the school site. Within walking distance of the school, one can find a pizzeria and a grocery store. A few hundred meters from the public school, there is a privately-run independent school.

The school has 275 students and about 40 teachers. In addition, there are about 5 persons who work on the non-educational side. Among them are the school welfare officer, the school nurse and a school administrator. Delinquency among young people (aged 15–19 years) in the area is low.[4] The school's students can be divided into two groups: those with parents who work or study at the university or who have university degrees (i.e. those with good preconditions), and students from other residential areas who may face slightly greater challenges in coping with school, owing, for instance, to an immigrant background and their parents' educational levels. Seaside is a school with a good reputation among parents, as well as at the district level. It is known to have good teachers and a good and active principal. Everyone we spoke to outside the school was surprised to hear about the school's low grades and school results.

The principal has been at this school for three years. She is quick to solve problems and prefers to work directly with individual actors. When she arrived, the school building was messy, and she put a lot of effort into projects such as fixing solar screens and routines for school maintenance. She had experience as a principal at other schools before starting at Seaside. The principal has a more prominent role in actually being at the school and in decision-making compared with Seaside's previous principals. The teachers agreed that she sets clear goals; opinions differ, however, as to whether they have the freedom to work independently toward achieving goals or whether they must ask for permission before each decision. Certain teachers at the school feel that the principal tries to manage too much and is too strict. Other teachers perceive it as salutary that, on the one hand, they receive clear decisions on the goals to be attained and, on the other hand, they can independently come up with proposals for decisions or act independently to achieve these goals. However, the principal feels that the employees sometimes come to her with too many questions on things she cannot always influence. She works at least 10 hours more than the expected 40 hours per week, and is often the first person to arrive at school in the morning and among the last to leave. The school has a newly appointed full-time school administrator who should take some of the load off the principal. Even though the school administrator has been there for six months and assumed responsibility for many of the principal's former tasks, the principal does not feel any workload relief. She has simply begun to work on other issues as well.

Material contexts

Toppen has a clear departmental structure. The teachers are organized into teams for each grade, and they have team meetings every week, along with weekly meetings for all teachers. In addition, the teachers on each team have their own workrooms. The school also has subject leaders who have an overarching function and who work across the grade levels. All teachers are well qualified, and although the school is located in a challenging environment, it has not experienced problems with the recruitment of teachers during the past three years. The teachers' ages are a mixture. Team meetings are used to coordinate activities, share experiences and discuss problems. In addition, the teachers are connected to subject-oriented teams. Regarding the teacher teams' intra-group relationships, the main images emerging from the descriptive data cluster cohere around a psychologically grouped climate, or a 'risk-free zone,' to tackle personal challenges and

to gain support. In addition, as noted, this image coexists with a strong orientation toward the students' school results.

Toppen continues to struggle with the poor physical standards of buildings, although a new gymnasium has recently been built. The poor buildings constitute a constraining factor. In particular, some students highlighted poor ventilation and stated that they had experienced headaches as a result of this. Nevertheless, the students emphasized their relationships with their teachers as the most important factor influencing the school environment. The school's infrastructure seems stable and has been supportive of the deputy head as the principal while the appointed principal has been away on leave. This demonstrates the importance of structure during times of succession. Their systemic approach to sharing and distributing school leadership at various levels apparently forestalled some possible problems when the principal applied for and was granted a one-year leave to go abroad. The school responded to ensure succession and stability by increasing the density and internal opportunities for local leadership. Compared with other Norwegian municipalities, the school's budget situation is very challenging and constrained. In the year during which the principal was on leave, the school experienced challenges with its budget, and the recruitment of a new middle manager was delayed for half a year. This created problems with following up on the work of one of the teacher teams.

Also, Seaside has a high qualification level amongst the teachers, 95.5% of whom are qualified. The personnel group is relatively stable, and the vast majority have worked at Seaside for a long period. The teaching teams have been reorganized from five to three in number due to the declining number of students, which they describe as deterioration. This deterioration is due to the emergence of new staff configurations that are not accustomed to working together. On the other hand, the subject teams are described as being more effective, perhaps due to the fact that they have remained unchanged for longer periods, and perhaps because the aforementioned restructuring has not affected them.

The school's buildings are now undergoing a refurbishment program, yet the general impression of the school is that it is clean and orderly. The students have the majority of their lessons in the home classrooms found in each team's respective module. The art room, the gymnasium, the newly renovated staff room, the school caretaker's office and the school administration office are all located on the entrance floor. The school also accommodates a youth recreation center with a student coffee bar, labs with the necessary equipment in a corridor, and a home economics (domestic science) kitchen, as well as modules with the classrooms and study rooms that the teams use. An additional factor is that the students at the school lack their own school computers – equipment that many other schools in the municipality have. For each team, a class set of wireless computers is available for borrowing, which individual teachers must book for use.

Seaside's infrastructure is informal. No leadership group exists; rather, a group of persons function as the leadership support for the principal: a pedagogical specialist, a teacher who is responsible for the student council, and a teacher who is a leadership resource and an advanced teacher. However, neither they nor their colleagues consider them to be part of the school management (leadership). The reason for this, according to the principal, is an inheritance from the previous principal. Instead, the principal meets all staff every week to talk about current issues. The subject teams and all personnel meet

regularly on a rotating schedule. Teaching teams and subject groups have no explicit leader, but informal leaders who drive the work forward. The district has informally and over many years allowed the schools to spend more money than they received on yearly bases. This has led to constant cutbacks. The principal at Seaside is the only principal that adheres to the budget that has been set.

External contexts

The municipality in the Norwegian example has expressed high expectations for all of its schools. As mentioned earlier, a new school structure that includes mid-level leaders with increased responsibility for instructional leadership, as well as a strong developmental unit, has been established. This unit acts as a driving force in professional development by offering the schools an opportunity to participate in various courses and projects. Toppen actively capitalizes on these offers and appreciates that the unit is especially engaged in pedagogical standards. However, the principal expresses that sometimes conflicting agendas exist between the school and the developmental unit in terms of prioritizing development issues. School leaders and teachers receive support with in-service training. The principal appreciates the established network among the principals in lower secondary schools. The network plays an important role in sharing knowledge and helping others when confronting troublesome situations. In contrast to the professional support received at the municipal level, the municipality uses less money per student relative to other comparable municipalities. Teachers and the principal have expressed their concerns about the difficult budget situation, which they think stands in stark contrast to the symbolic vision of being the best.

In the Swedish case, the local education authority has a typical structure for this size of municipality. A strong political organization and a well-developed central school office exist. The two top players are the chairperson of the school board and the superintendent. The school board members have high ambitions for their district, and their schools have climbed as a municipality in the league tables. However, some schools, such as Seaside, still may be characterized as underperforming given the contextual prerequisites. This political goal is, of course, a challenge for the superintendent and the central office. However, the superintendent has created a support organization to accomplish this goal. The district level is increasing in terms of its number of people and positions and has recently employed deputy superintendents, who will work closely with the schools and the principals in various school areas. The rationale for this is that every school should help every other school within the municipality to improve. The problem is that the schools simultaneously compete for students, as Sweden has a policy of free choice in which school a student attends.

The teachers perceive that the central office staff do not listen to them and that natural contact is lacking; the principal also shares this perception. She described that, since she took up the post of principal, she has had only a single performance review, during which the deputy superintendent did not speak about the future or about shared goals and visions but instead focused on how the principal leads her school. According to teachers, the school board and the central office do not properly understand how the school works, as they demand higher merit ratings than the current case merits. As this school has relatively low merit ratings, the teachers have been negatively affected in the most recent

pay reviews. Despite the good intentions that exist at the school board and central office levels, the principal does not always feel support from above.

Professional cultures

It was possible to observe a strong value commitment at Toppen school. The teachers say that they like the challenges that come with working in a multicultural school, and they regard themselves as stable and confident when it comes to solving everyday challenges together. They have a strong desire to do a good job for their students, expressed through a sense of a mission to make a difference. A huge challenge, however, consists of how people outside of the local community perceive and characterize their school. The staff have worked and are still fighting against a bad reputation, which they do not think they deserve. They regard this as unfair; still, it unites them as colleagues and as a school. The reputation is based on a years-old situation. However, although the school has developed enriched learning conditions and improved students' results over the past five years, the perception of a school as having major difficulties and low status seems to be alive in the community. The students argue that this is due to ethnic Norwegians moving out of the community and because ten years ago, many conflicts existed among students, and the school was characterized as very low performing. The parents of the school's students now fully support the school, and the students express pride in their school.

The analysis of the data shows a common commitment when it comes to the moral purpose of education – namely, to improve students' lives and futures. The principal and teachers at Toppen have seen that they can make a difference in their students' lives. The principal is specifically concerned about the fact that many students do not succeed in upper secondary school, knowing that they need education to face their futures. Therefore, the leadership team has placed a strong focus on improving students' outcomes and this expectation is confirmed in the interviews held with teachers and students, as well with the superintendent. The school provides an image of a mutually trusting relationship among teachers, the leadership team and the principal. The principal enjoys a high degree of legitimacy and is described as a supportive person who provides a good social environment for teachers. The leadership team also prioritizes a culture of feedback, and the principal tries to act as a model for others by providing feedback as soon as a situation arises. However, time is often a constraining factor. On the one hand, the school seems to be a collective culture when it comes to social relations, as well as a collective focus on student learning. On the other hand, although good relations exist among the teachers, and although they find it easy to ask for help and to share experiences with one another, individual teachers feel responsible for their own classes first and foremost. Collaboration mainly relates to planning and coordination. The leadership team emphasizes the expectations of common reflections, but according to the teachers, this happens to a lesser extent in practice. According to the students, some of the teachers collaborate, but they also provide stories where more collaboration is needed. For example, they complain about having to give too many tests on various subjects within a single week.

All of the students express that good relations exist among the students at Toppen and that very little bullying occurs. The school is perceived as being safe and functioning as a good learning environment, except for its physical condition. For the most part, the

students have good relationships; it is easy to make friends and to feel included. In addition, the interviews with students highlighted that they feel supported by their parents. Although their parents sometimes cannot help them with their schoolwork, they know that education is valued at home. This is particularly emphasized among students with immigrant parents.

At the Seaside school, it is possible to detect a number of cultures. One is that the principal's values are very student oriented. The teachers, on the other hand, focus mainly on the subjects they teach. Based on the interviews, it seems that their own subjects are a paramount objective, rather than working together and perceiving the school as a whole – as an organization. An interesting and noteworthy result is that in response to a direct question to the students concerning who controls the school, in most cases, the answer was the students themselves. In other words, they described an organization where, to a great extent, they exercise influence. Moreover, they stated that if they have an issue to raise or something they wish to change, they turn to the principal, who in most cases listens to and supports them. This has created a school in which the communication may be described as a type of 'bypass' operation.

The principal exercises her pedagogical leadership by stepping in for teachers who are sick or absent and thereby obtaining insight into existing activities and challenges. She does not always manage to visit everyone's classroom, but she tries to prioritize the teachers who ask for her to visit. The principal acknowledges that it would probably be better to make her visits to classrooms more structured and planned. Another clear element of the principal's leadership is that she often questions the teachers' ways of framing difficult situations. Instead of coming forward with solutions, the principal defers to the teachers' own professionalism and to the need for them to find solutions themselves. According to the teachers, the strongest influence of the principal's leadership in relation to the school culture is that things actually get done nowadays, whereas before, most solutions were postponed.

As mentioned earlier, the principal expressed the view that the formal leadership structure is inherited from previous principals. Parallel with the formal structure is an informal structure, which may be assumed to be strong (possibly stronger than the formal one), as it has endured over a longer period and has become an element of the school's culture. The principal stated that the structure must be changed, and she has ideas about how to devise and implement a new leadership structure. However, she has chosen an incremental approach to introducing a major change to convince the staff of the need for a new structure. She assumes that the staff is pleased with the established structure, and therefore, resistance to change may be expected. In other words, the formal structure is a fundamental part of the more informal culture, which makes it hard to change.

In the interviews with the principal, teachers and students, it became clear that if problems exist in the teacher group, then it is the principal who must solve them. The teachers direct the students to contact the principal if they have viewpoints or comments about a colleague's teaching. The teachers reported that they do not feel comfortable offering their criticism or viewpoints to a colleague on behalf of the students. This may be seen as an expression of a culture at the school where each teacher looks after their own affairs rather than being part of a collegial community. This affects how the principal

leads the school and how she works with the teacher group; instead of having a whole-staff meeting, she prefers meetings with smaller groups of teachers.

To sum up across the two schools

By using Ball's (2015) four contextual factors to describe the two schools, we identified significant differences between them as shown in Table 2. The main picture is that Toppen is located in a low socioeconomic context, serving a culturally diverse student population. In addition, the school's achievement scores in basic subjects are low compared with national average scores, but they have improved over the past three years. Seaside demonstrates medium scores, which are below what may be expected given the school's location in a medium/high socioeconomic context. Due to its troubling history, Toppen has a bad reputation, whereas Seaside has a good reputation. According to Ball, these contextual differences affect the performance of school leadership, which we discuss in the next section.

Analysis: the leader, followers and situation

On the basis of the descriptions of the two schools, we analyze the relationships among the context, the leader and the followers (Spillane, 2006). From the data, we have identified what and how the principals do what they do, as well as why the principals think and do what they do (Spillane & OECD, 2013). In the analysis, we pay special attention to how various forms of distributed leadership practices play out in the two schools. Inspired by Hallinger and Heck (1999), who identified three important forms of distributed practice (collaborative decision-making, school governance that empowered the staff and students, and school leaders' active participation in evaluating academic development), we organize our analysis into three forms of distributed practice: a collaborative versus an individual professional culture; a formal versus an informal governance structure; and assessment results and reputations.

Table 2. Context factors in the Toppen and Seaside schools.

Context factors	Toppen School	Seaside School
Situated	Low socio-economic Low achievement scores (improved the last years) Bad reputation Multicultural school	Medium/High socio-economic Medium achievement scores (below expected) Good reputation
Material	Formal structures Leadership group Highly qualified teachers Poor Physical standard Tight budget	Informal structure No leadership group Highly qualified teachers Adequate budget
External	High expectations from municipality Professional external support	High expectations from municipality No professional external support
Professional culture	A professional community Common commitment Collective Teacher culture Mutual trust	Student-oriented principal Subject-oriented teachers Fragmented school culture Individual teacher culture

Collaborative versus individual professional culture

Both the principal and the teachers at Toppen expressed that working in a multicultural school is an important ethical commitment that can make a difference in students' lives. The principal focuses on developing a professional culture characterized by mutual trust within the school to improve student achievements. A high level of trust occurs in organizations and among individuals when the individual believes that a coworker has nothing to gain from untrustworthy behavior. The individual perceives that they can exercise a form of power and control over the coworker's outcome, and this leads to a certain level of confidence in the altruism of coworkers (Frost et al., 1978). Scholars have highlighted the significance of trust in schools, and these studies suggest that teachers' trust in their principals and coworkers is important when it comes to studying school improvement, success and effectiveness (Hoy & Tarter, 1992; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1997). As Toppen has improved student outcomes within a challenging setting, organizational trust seems to be an important promotional factor. Furthermore, this developmental work calls for high expectations (e.g. Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Hattie, 2008) not only for student engagement and performance, but also for the principal and teachers to create prerequisites for learning among all students and as agents for school improvement. A culture of low expectations is one of the most important things to address in low-performing schools (Stein, 2012). However, a tight school budget is a constant constraining factor. At Toppen, a unified and collective understanding of what is possible to do with the available resources exists. The principal sees the students' learning as a collective responsibility. Therefore, his primary focus has been to establish a common understanding of learning and of how to improve education in the classroom. Although his teachers are qualified to a great extent, he expresses that this work is a common enterprise more than an individual task. As the culture at Toppen focuses on collective efforts and on a common collegial goal – to make a difference in each student's life – it is reasonable to believe that this culture affects the teachers' efficacy. The interviews showed that the perceived collective ability to organize, structure and execute the actions needed to reach the organization's expected goals given the setting, situation and context is high (e.g. Bandura, 1997).

At Seaside, the professional culture is quite different; the teachers' focus is mainly on their own subject areas and in teaching in their own classrooms. Based on the interviews, it seems that their own subjects are a paramount objective, rather than their working together and perceiving the school as a whole – as a common arena. Furthermore, no common commitment can be detected at Seaside; the professional culture can therefore be characterized as fragmented and individualist, where each teacher looks after their own affairs rather than working together. In other words, they actively distance themselves from certain and collective tasks (e.g. Kanfer, 1990). The teachers at Seaside do not have a collective identity (as at Toppen), but instead engage in guarding their own and the subject teams' interests. Miller (1996) expressed that cooperation in a group is dependent on the trust that each member has in others who adhere to the group. No real structure leads the teacher teams, and the subject teams are hence relatively strong. Furthermore, this fragmented culture creates various professional cultures within the school, which leads to different, smaller schools within the Seaside school building. The teachers are also reluctant to change and expressed that they believe that the structure

and the culture of the school is good. Facing these challenges, the principal expressed that she intends to work toward a more collective professional culture.

Formal versus informal governance structure

The fact that both principals started to improve their schools' physical environments when they arrived in their positions underlines the importance of the physical context for students' and teachers' wellbeing and motivation for learning. The clear departmental structure in Toppen – with teachers organized into teams for each grade, coupled with the presence of a leadership group – is a supporting structure for realizing a collective professional culture among the teachers (e.g. Liljenberg, 2016). At Toppen, the organizational structure and culture are aligned and act as a dialectic support. The same goes for Seaside, but the output is quite different. The more informal infrastructure at Seaside, where no formal teacher team or leadership group exists, can explain why an individual professional culture still exists at Seaside, and vice versa. At both schools, the data show quite a high level of efficacy. However, at Toppen, the high level of efficacy can be described as collective. The collective belief in their own abilities to organize and execute education for all students is evident in the data (e.g. Bandura, 1997). At Seaside, on the other hand, self-efficacy, rather than collective efficacy (or more fragmented than it), is visible. A high sense of self-efficacy reflects the belief in one's own capacity to execute certain tasks. In the Seaside case, it is important to emphasize that it is common for individuals and groups to under- or overestimate their actual capabilities. The estimations act as a guide for the participants when it comes to the courses of action and strategies used to strive for organizational goals (Goddard et al., 2004). If the efficacy within the organization is too high and does not reflect the actual outcome at the school, hope for improvement is poor.

According to the principal at Seaside, the formal leadership structure was inherited from previous principals. Parallel with the formal structure, an informal structure may be assumed to be strong (possibly stronger than the formal one), as it has endured over a longer period and has become an element of the school's culture. The principal assumes that the staff is pleased with the established structure, and therefore, resistance to change may be expected. In other words, the formal structure is a fundamental part of the more informal culture, which makes it hard to change. Even if changes in socially complex systems tend to create tension (Engeström, 2007) for schools that consciously underperform, change is crucial for students to attain the education to which they are entitled by the curriculum and the law.

Assessment results and reputation

Given the situation in which the Toppen school suffers from a bad reputation and is situated within a high-need area, the engagement of the leader and followers is crucial. The nature of the followers' motivation in relation to their own work plays an important part in understanding organizational development. Employees that share the leader's goals and values, as well as the greater goal of the organization, feel intrinsic satisfaction and a sense of reward by performing well at their jobs. Working in a multicultural school seems to have created a common commitment to improving the lives and futures of the

students. This commitment requires trustworthy relations in which the followers trust their principal and coworkers. These are important factors that scholars have highlighted in relation to school effectiveness and school improvement (Hoy & Tarter, 1992; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1997) This moral and ethical commitment seems to be stronger than the fact that the local community clearly expresses that it expects better achievement results in a situation with a decreased budget. The principal has worked with the parents to change the school's bad reputation, which teachers, students and parents regard as unfair.

Looking at Seaside's situation, the school board has high ambitions for the school district; the schools have climbed as a municipality in the league tables, but some schools, such as Seaside, may still be characterized as underperforming given the contextual prerequisites. This political goal is, of course, a challenge to the superintendent and to the central office. So far, Seaside has enjoyed a good reputation based on earlier achievement results. According to the teachers, the school board and the central office do not properly understand how the school works, as they demand higher merit ratings than the ones they have today. As this school has relatively low merit ratings, they were negatively affected in the most recent pay reviews. Despite the good intentions at the school board and central office levels, the principal does not always feel support from above.[5] In relation to the external context, the principal expresses that a lack of understanding of the school's specific needs exists at the municipal level, and insufficient external professional support is also an issue. The district has informally and over many years allowed the schools to spend more money than they have received annually. This has led to constant cutbacks. The principal has a steady budget to work with, and she is the only principal in the municipality to keep her budget every year.

Conclusions and implications

In this paper, we have investigated how situated material and external contexts and professional cultures relate to dynamic low- and underperforming schools within the Scandinavian context. We have particularly investigated how leadership is constructed through relations among the leader, the followers and the situations of the specific schools. Based on our analysis, we suggest that Toppen can be described as a turnaround school, whereas Seaside can be described as a cruising school (e.g. Stoll & Fink, 1996). Seaside is a school that does not live up to what can be expected of it given the prerequisites as well as the students' and caretakers' backgrounds. Seaside has continuously underperformed over a period of time without the municipality, the teachers or the principal addressing the decline. One explanation may be that Seaside is performing well enough to avoid scrutiny, as it still performs over the national and municipal averages in terms of student outcomes. Given these results and the lack of developmental efforts, Seaside may be considered to be an invisible underperforming school. As such, being perceived as 'good enough' may lead to a culture of comfort. This is a culture where teachers and principals do not feel the need or urgency for change and improvement. Even if someone were to address Seaside's shortcomings, it is likely that a process of change would meet resistance. To challenge an individual, informal and rooted culture requires challenging power and privileges within the faculty. At Toppen, on the other hand, the culture can be described in terms of collectivity, community and

motivation. The teachers perceive that their responsibility is to provide a good education for all students, not only as a short-term objective but also from the perspective that it is a prerequisite for being good citizens and reaching lifetime goals. Furthermore, a turnaround school can promote the issues of equity and academic development through a culture that features dedicated adults who communicate high expectations. This school creates an atmosphere that promotes learning and excellence (Hines et al., 2017)

Understanding leadership practice from a distributed perspective requires that special attention be paid to three elements: the leaders, the followers and their situations (Spillane, 2015). In Norway and Sweden, teachers in schools are expected to work in teacher teams. The main idea behind structuring the work in such a manner is that teachers can collectively develop and improve the teaching at their own schools. If a teacher team works as it should, teachers can learn from each other's experiences and collectively reflect upon their successes and mishaps in their teaching. This may involve new ways of starting a lesson or trying out new teaching methods, for example. As an organizational structure, teacher tems can promote and develop an organizational culture characterized by creativity, egalitarianism and democratic values among the teachers. This culture would be aligned with the curriculum and promote organizational development (e.g. Hargreaves, 1998). The fragmented and individual culture that characterizes Seaside can, on the other hand, create pockets within the organization where discussions on teaching and learning are few, non-existent or within closed rooms to which only a select group has access. In such an organizational structure and culture, it is challenging to act as a principal. It takes courage and resilience to challenge and change the informal and formal ways of working at the school to promote a more collective teacher practice.

For a leader, it is important to communicate a sense of importance and urgency when students lack the organizational prerequisites they need to reach their full potential. At an invisible underperforming school, declining results must be visualized and addressed. From this study, we have seen two approaches to working with underperforming schools. At Toppen, this work has started, and it is evident that the school as a whole is starting to move toward a situation in which teachers express a high degree of work satisfaction, with common commitments made among the staff. In addition, student outcomes are improving. At Seaside, on the other hand, this commitment is lacking. The development approach may identify a poorly conducted systematic effort at quality assurance work by the municipality as well as by the principal. Through well-functioning quality work, the decreasing student results and the fragmented structures and cultures may be identified and can, in the next step, be addressed.

From this study, we have seen how different situated, material, external and professional contexts affect two low- and underperforming schools (Ball, 2012). This again can be explained by the sociocultural and economic student compositions of each school (Nordenbo et al., 2010). From earlier research, we know that the direct and indirect effects of school leadership on student learning are small but significant (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). However, developing a collective professional culture with a shared commitment among key players (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2014) seems to be a powerful organizational improvement strategy for schools with bad assessment results and reputations. A clear departmental structure where teachers are

organized into teams for each grade, and where a leadership group exists, can be a supporting structure for realizing a collective professional culture among teachers.

Notes

1. https://www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/
2. The 429 municipalities in Norway and 290 in Sweden are responsible for compulsory education at the primary and lower secondary school levels. The municipalities vary in size, as well as in level of welfare.
3. Programme for International Student Assessment.
4. SVT pejl: Number of young people with convictions http://www.svt.se/nyheter/sverige/antal-domda-unga-omrade-for-omrade

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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