School leadership in data use practices: collegial and consensus-oriented

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Abstract

Background
Previous research has highlighted the importance of school leadership in the productive use of student performance data. However, we know less about the ways in which school leaders deal with policy expectations of taking a more hierarchical and result-oriented position.

Purpose
The article examines and discusses school leaders' orientation towards collegiality and consensus in data use practices.

Sample
Three lower secondary schools in three municipalities participated in the qualitative part of the project. Fourteen meetings over a three-year period were observed, and we interviewed five school leaders after the observations had ended.

Design and methods
Observation of 'result meetings', meetings where school leaders meets with teachers to discuss national test results, were conducted. Informal talks during observations and interviews with school leaders were also conducted. The data were analysed in three steps, using tools from discourse analytical perspectives.

Results
School leaders extensively used discursive strategies of equalising and simplifying to downplay their authority. The ways in which school leaders preserve egalitarianism and collegiality vary from emphasis on emotions to emphasis on technicalities to emphasis on accountability. Yet despite these differences, consensus is a characteristic feature of the meetings, and there are few discussions about problems and long-term solutions.

Conclusions
The findings point towards data use practices having critical epistemic challenges in addition to relational ones. These challenges are important to discuss when viewing data as a driver for school development.

Introduction

Increased accountability for student performance has sparked changes in what is expected of school leaders. In particular, expectations from educational authorities and politicians that school leaders should be result oriented and make use of test scores to improve teaching and learning imply more hierarchical relationships in the school organisation, challenging the internal working relationships and cooperative frameworks that are often characterised as egalitarian and practice oriented (Keelchtermans 2005; Little and Horn 2010). Studies on data use consistently emphasise the importance of school leaders as drivers in making student performance data productive for improving student learning outcomes (e.g. Hoogland et al. 2016; Sun, Przybylski and Johnson 2016); however, we know less about how school leaders actually use data when interacting with teachers and how accountability pressures influence the relationships and epistemic work within data use practices (Prøitz, Mausethagen, and Skedsmo 2017; Jäppinen 2017). Thus, micro-level analysis of data use, with a basis in small-scale interactions between individuals, is of critical importance for understanding how data use both constructs and instantiates institutional routines and processes (Little 2012). In education, meetings are increasingly seen as sites where organisation and strategic changes take place, but school leaders' choices of discursive strategies when planning for and enacting the use of standardised test data for school development purposes are less understood. The discursive strategies represent an important lens for studying school leaders' data use, as they reflect more or less intentional plans directed towards reaching certain goals, typically influenced by internalised dispositions (Fairclough 2003; Kwon, Clarke, and Wodak 2013).

Data use practices are usually defined as being how actors interact by using test scores, grades and other forms of assessment and data in their work (Coburn and Turner 2011). In the last two decades, numerous countries have implemented a set of governing approaches that emphasise accountability through the combined power of performance measurements and hands-on

management. By using quality indicators, goal setting and result monitoring where the results are compared across schools and municipalities for benchmarking purposes, local authorities, school leaders and teachers are expected to define and initiate concrete actions to improve student achievement (Skedsmo 2018). In many ways, data use represents the centrepiece of what is often referred to as evidence-based governing regimes, considered by many policy makers to be an ideal way to coordinate activities on different levels in a school system (Ozga 2009). However, tensions between control and development derived from these policies are often under-communicated and concealed in policy and research (Skedsmo 2011). We use *development* as a general term to express transformations of the quality of teaching in order to raise student learning (Timperley 2005), yet we also emphasise that schools' and individuals' development work is situated at the intersection between different goals that typically reside in the field of education—for example, broader aims like formation, identity development and equality. Data use could thus potentially challenge yet also crystallise ideas about development. This implies that school leaders and teachers can use student performance data to improve student achievement. Control mechanisms and accountability practices can, however, create conditions that foster quick fixes to improve test scores. Such improvements do not necessarily imply productive data use and sustainable professional practices.

Norway is an interesting case study; there have been recent tensions because assessment policies with accountability elements have been introduced, but before this, school leaders and teachers have enjoyed a relatively high degree of trust and autonomy in their work (Slagstad 1998; Helgøy and Homme 2016). As in several other countries, politicians have become concerned about student achievement and school quality ever since the first PISA results came out in 2001, which were important in legitimising new reform policies in the 2000s. A National Quality Assessment System (NQAS) was introduced in 2005, and one element was national testing. Grades 5, 8 and 9 take these national tests (Grade 9 takes the same test as Grade 8 to

measure progress over the first year in lower secondary school). However, no formal high-stakes incentives have been established. The character of the national tests, emphasising a two-fold purpose of control and development, makes Norway particularly interesting for a study of school leaders' data use, in combination with Norway's egalitarian character both in society in general and in historical relationships between school leaders and teachers (Helstad and Møller 2013).

In this article, we analyse data use meetings at three lower secondary schools over a three-year period and identify and discuss characteristics of formal school leaders' use of discursive strategies. We ask the following research questions: What characterises the discursive strategies used by school leaders in 'result meetings'? In what ways and with what variations do school leaders balance different expectations of use of data in school development? First, we review the existing research on data use practices between teachers and school leaders, showing that most studies focus on organisational issues and emphasise school leadership as crucial for data use. In contrast, there are few micro-level studies based on observation. We then describe our data and methodological approach before presenting the results. The findings illustrate a prominent use of equalising and simplification strategies and a consensus-orientation in the meetings, yet they also illustrate that the meetings mainly produce short-term solutions. We end the article by discussing the results and presenting some of their implications for further research and practice.

Research on data use and school leadership

In the literature on data use, organisational aspects such as time and opportunity for collaboration between school leaders and teachers are emphasised as crucial for development work in schools (e.g., Coburn and Turner 2011; Schildkamp et al. 2016). Furthermore, school leaders' involvement, support and assurance that work with student performance data is a joint responsibility is highlighted in several studies (Datnow 2011; Sun et al. 2016; Hoogland et al.

2016). Other studies have shown how data use can also be indifferent or even counterproductive in development processes, especially where school leaders strongly reinforce the accountability agenda and consequently challenge existing social relationships in schools (Jeffrey 2002; Valli and Buese 2007; Hallett 2010).

Between these more extreme ends of holding either a school improvement perspective or a more critical perspective, there are studies arguing that increased performance requirements can create 'productive tensions' that lead to school development processes, but this depends on the ways that school leaders frame the work and how school leaders and teachers collaborate and respond to the data provided (Stillman 2011; Park, Daly, and Guerra 2014). By illuminating the variations in teachers' responses, Stillman (2011) emphasised how contextual factors, especially those of school leadership, mediate teacher learning and agency in the context of data use: when the school leaders provided teachers with opportunities to grapple with issues they found objectionable and encouraged teachers to apply innovations to their classroom practices, teachers were motivated towards professional learning and development. Other studies underscored the importance of school leaders being 'teacher directed' when interacting with students' test results and in professional development work (Postholm and Wæge 2015; van der Scheer, Glas, and Visscher 2017). In contrast, Timperley (2005) found that leaders often act according to teachers' responses in data use meetings and that they find it hard to change their thinking and actions before they are 'ready'. The research also found that a restructuring of meetings towards a focus on data about individual students' outcomes redirected teachers' attention towards teaching and learning issues. These findings emphasise the relational and epistemic dimensions of data use, yet these dimensions are rarely explicitly analysed and addressed.

According to a systematic review study, most studies on data use highlight school leaders as crucial for the ways in which data are used and the extent to which they nurture development

work in schools (Prøitz et al. 2017). For example, school leaders have a key role in prioritising target areas, dealing with the choice of strategies and approaches, motivating and creating a culture of use of the results and ensuring follow-up on local government policy. Yet many studies have dealt with school leaders' use of results by positioning these leaders as implementers of external data, critical interpreters and knowledge producers. A relatively small portion of this research can thus be described as 'for' school leaders in terms of focussing in on their local practices. Moreover, few studies on data use have attended to the actual interactions between school leaders and teachers (see Little 2012). From studies on professional communities, we know that micro-studies obtain a clearer picture of how, for example, school leaders relate to managing the data use practices in their respective schools. Some studies have shed light on how using specific discourse strategies is important for establishing identity during changes in policy discourses on school leaders' responsibilities and for investigating the underlying leadership dynamics that operate in organisational change situations that bring about tensions (Cohen 2008; Jäppinen 2017). Furthermore, micro-process research is often fruitfully combined with ex situ accounts of practice and situated within a political and social context to enhance knowledge about how local practices construct school processes (Little 2012).

Analytical perspectives

In this article, we draw on analytical perspectives on collaboration and collegiality in schools as well as on discourse analytical perspectives, putting a particular focus on discursive strategies used in data use meetings that take place between school leaders and teachers.

Collaboration (or cooperative actions) between school leaders and teachers is strongly connected to the idea of collegiality. However, collaboration and collegiality are not identical, and in particular, collegiality refers to the quality of relationships between members in a school collegium. The term typically connotes positive values, indicating supportive, stimulating, rewarding and democratic relationships between equals (Keelchtermans 2005). To understand

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the actual manifestations of collaboration and collegiality, collaboration must be studied at the micro-level while considering the context of the interaction (Little 2012). Although often seen as enhancing professionalism, collaboration in the context of accountability (i.e., making use of standardised test data) can be viewed as deprofessionalisation if promoting the execution of externally imposed agendas rather than productive school development processes where actors work together voluntarily and with internal educational views (Jeffrey 2002). However, collaboration in schools can also be seen to reflect personal relationships rather than professional knowledge. Therefore, individual differences and the goal diversity that exists within a collegium indicate why collaboration in schools seldom moves beyond practical problem solving (Keelchtermans 2005). Issues of professional identity and conflicting educational views is thereby often removed from collaborative situations in order to support consensus.

The construction of meaning in interactions takes place through the use of language (Gee 2011). Social interactions between school leaders and teachers at a school are examples of ongoing institutional, discursive practices where articulations are accepted, opposed and negotiated within the group. Such discursive practices at a workplace enable the creation and maintenance of professional groups that are presumably working towards common goals and building on a common knowledge base. However, workplace meetings can also challenge these discursive practices, as they are important for leaders to use to initiate organisational and strategic changes (Wodak, Kwon, and Clarke 2011). Discourses play a vital role in negotiating and legitimising institutional practices, and Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy (2004) argue that such discursive aspects of institutions often remain unexplored. Data use practices are discursive practices, that is, episodes of interaction that have social and cultural significance to a community and, not least, are related to broader social practices (Fairclough 2003; Clarke et al. 2011).

In this article, we are concerned with the discursive strategies that school leaders use in their attempts to initiate school development processes because of the available student performance data. We are inspired by a framework developed by Kwon, Clarke and Wodak (2009), who describe five discursive strategies that leaders and teams use to develop shared views around strategic issues. *Equalising* involves encouraging participation by relaxing protocols and power structures to provide the space for participants to come forward and express viewpoints. *Re/defining* involves participants developing and expressing relevant viewpoints and new information about the issue (defining) for other participants to react to, redefine and adjust (redefining) to provide a platform for sense making. *Simplifying* involves participants reducing the complexity of competing definitions by narrowing down their understanding of the issue and making it 'felt' by the participants on an emotional and visceral level. *Legitimating* involves team members establishing control by justifying underlying assumptions and building up the credibility of a view. *Reconciling* involves participants separating individuals from issue positions to encourage task-oriented conflict and enable the perspectives of different people to be aligned around a presumably shared view. Simplifying and re/defining establish boundaries for the discussion, equalising and legitimating open up and narrow down the understanding of an issue and reconciling serves to decouple participants from their positions by resolving differences and minimising interpersonal conflicts. In the analysis of the use of these strategies, it is important to not only attend to the main patterns in the use of strategies but also to the interplay between the discursive strategies in use, as this interplay is important for seeing how shared views are formed as an outcome of discursive strategies. Attention should also be directed to the responses within the team present at the meetings to better understand the collective imperatives and the construction of shared meanings (Kwon et al. 2009).

Data and methods

The data used in this article is part of a larger ongoing research project on the use of national test results in Norwegian schools and municipalities. Three lower secondary schools in three municipalities participated in the qualitative part of the project on which this article is based.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). All participants in the study received information about the study and gave their consent before the observations were performed and the interviews conducted. The participants were assured anonymity and informed that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Anonymity was given by the time of data transcription, and pseudonyms for the participants and the schools are used in the reported data in all publications based on the project.

Data and participants

The selection criteria of the three municipalities in which the three schools reside were geographical location (rural or urban areas), size (number of inhabitants) and type of quality-assessment system in place. These criteria were used to ensure variation. The latter criterion was important because we anticipated the local quality-assessment systems would affect the schools' accountability practices. Enger Lower Secondary School is in a local authority district, which over the past five years has established many routines for following up on results, including defined quality indicators and newly established control elements for reinforced accountability on the part of school leaders and teachers. Enger is a small rural school with 110 students and 15 teachers. Murer Lower Secondary School is in a local authority district that has had relatively few established routines for accountability. Murer is a semi-urban school with 480 students and 50 teachers. Anker Lower Secondary School is an urban school with 510 students and 55 teachers, is in a local authority district and has a quality system that has been developed over 15 years. A series of local tests are carried out, and the local authority has

developed systems for following up on schools' results; here, accountability for school leaders and teachers is based on performance management and risk assessment.

We observed result meetings in the three schools over a three-year period (2014–2017), including conversations with teachers and school leaders before and after the observations. The observed meetings focussed on discussing the results from national tests and how to use these results for development purposes. These meetings represent strategic arenas for examining teachers' data use practices because they not only entail teacher-to-teacher interactions but also have become a routine means for organising these interactions (Little 2012). In other words, the result meetings represent concrete events of data use where it is possible to observe the processes between actors and levels through the analysis of discursive strategies in use and the dynamics between them. The data material constitutes all data from 14 meetings: six at Anker and four each at Enger and Murer. The principals in the three schools mainly led the meetings, although the principals sometimes led the meetings in collaboration with assistant school leaders at Murer and Anker. The main focus of this analysis is on the principals. In total, we observed about 30 hours of meetings, including conversations with the school leaders before and after the meetings. The meetings took place either between teachers and school leaders within a specific school or between teachers and school leaders at neighbouring schools. During the meetings and subsequent interviews, two researchers wrote field notes to record what was said. In addition, we used an observation scheme to obtain notes on categories such as the context and particular moments in the meetings (e.g., examples on engagement and tensions that occurred). We interviewed five school leaders: three principals and two middle leaders. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2017 after observations had concluded. In the analysis of the interviews, we focused on the leaders' descriptions of how they experienced the data use practices as they took place in their schools and possible challenges that they encountered.

Analysis

The analysis focussed on linking contextual knowledge with the analysis of interactions to understand more about institutional routines and processes (Clarke et al. 2011). The context relates to several levels: the actual meeting, the school and the municipality/district. This made it possible to substantiate our interpretations and reconcile results from the micro-level analysis of the discursive strategies using broader contextual understandings derived from site visits and interviews (Wodak et al. 2011; Clarke et al. 2011; Little 2012). Thus, our main focus was not primarily on the linguistic characteristics of the language used in the interactions but on the patterns of discursive strategies in the meetings as they occurred in combination with other actions and the school leaders' meaning making on data use in their schools.

Three steps were followed to analyse and code the data, combine the analysis into broader themes and make comparisons across the data (Creswell 2007). First, we analysed the field transcripts line by line for how the different discursive strategies were used by school leaders in the meetings and how the chosen strategy seemingly influenced the meaning making in the meetings (Kwon et al. 2009). Second, the patterns in how the discursive strategies were used were summarised and analysed in terms of the extent of similarities and differences, first within the schools and then between the schools. Important to note is that interactions can simultaneously represent different discursive strategies and that we used this analytic approach to identify *characteristics* and *patterns* in the meetings. In this step of analysis, we also used the observation schemes from the meetings. Third, we analysed the data from interviews with the school leaders to better understand their choice of strategies.

The analysis and interpretations were discussed with other researchers, school leaders and teachers, strengthening the communicative validity of the study. Furthermore, the findings can be generalisable through what can be described as researcher-based analytical generalisations (providing transparency throughout the different phases of the research) and through a reader-

based analytical generalisation (judgments of how the findings can be used to guide other situations in similar contexts) (Kvale and Brinkman 2009).

Results

The presentation of the results is organised around the characteristics of the data use of school leaders in the three lower secondary schools and what we find to be the main characteristics of the data use practices. We first present the analysis of the meetings, thereafter viewing the results of this analysis together with interviews with the school leaders. Overall, we find that all school leaders strongly emphasised collegiality and consensus while negotiating how to handle the hierarchical and result-oriented expectations towards their work in order to initiate school development. This is seen in their extensive use of discursive strategies such as equalising and simplifying. We describe this use of strategy as underscoring egalitarianism and collegiality between leaders and teachers. However, the school leaders at the three schools differed in terms of other strategies used, emphasising emotions, technicalities and accountability in their interactions with the teachers and in the interviews.

Enger: egalitarianism and emotions

A prominent characteristic of the discursive practices employed was school leaders using equalising strategies, which was the most used strategy in Enger. In particular, these strategies took the form of broad problem framing, extensive use of praise and use of colloquial language. By applying these strategies, the school leader at Enger downplayed her authority by, for example, asking open questions and emphasising how it is the teachers who know best what they should be doing in the classroom. There was a great concern that the test results were not good enough and thus needed to be addressed and improved. This broad problem framing was coupled with justifications that to a limited extent were directly related to teachers' instructions but more so to the characteristics of the student body, such as their socio-economic backgrounds and various disciplinary problems and challenges that individual students grappled with. In

addition to the problem formulation being broad, the justifications were also safe (the opposite could, for example, be a problem formulation focussing on teachers' teaching practices), thus creating a framing important for motivating teachers to act. For example, the school leader at Enger said at the beginning of a result meeting, 'There are several challenges, and the students need much follow-up, but they are a great group'. Such broad problem formulations are also examples of the discursive strategy of simplifying, contributing to a reduction in the complexity of the national test results and narrowing down teachers' understanding of the issue. Yet another interpretation of such ways of broadening and simplifying the problem could also be that the problems were externally defined through the test results themselves, thus directing the meetings more towards creating shared views around the solutions.

The formulation of questions directed towards the teachers was characterised as being open. Examples include 'What do you yourself see as significant, if you would speak about the results in a general way?' and 'What do you think would help in the future? What is important to do?' Asking open questions is important as an equalising strategy because it can provide the space for teachers to come forward and express their viewpoints. Yet while simplifying the problem, the school leader also followed up by emphasising the importance of addressing the national test results on an innate and emotional level in the sense that the teachers and schools have the important task of providing learning and development opportunities for all students. For example, the school leader of Enger said, 'We have many success stories in terms of our social mandate with respect to what the students gain in their life'. Through broad problem formulation and limited confrontation with teachers' existing instructional practice, the discursive strategies that the leaders used could motivate teachers' involvement in school development work.

The school leader at Enger quite extensively used praise and humour in interactions with teachers, these being examples of equalising and simplifying. The school leader also told stories

about students who had done well as a result of teachers' hard work and spoke of how this probably also will happen in the future. When the school leader told these narratives in the meetings, the teachers became engaged and told stories about their own students and their academic and social developments. However, the school leader rarely followed up with questions that contributed to challenging existing practices and initiating the use of new knowledge. The meetings were characterised as being consensus oriented regarding the formulation of solutions to the weak test results, solutions that were mainly quite short-term in character.

The choice of using equalising strategies was a deliberate one for the school leader. She described in interviews the fear of coming across as too harsh and critical towards the teachers. She reflected on ways to best facilitate development processes around data use in the routines that she had established and explained that she was positive about teachers' development work. Confronting teachers directly, on the other hand, was communicated as important to avoid: 'I do not need to talk in ways that make the teachers go home to cry'. She also commented on how she felt that she could not be too confrontational and honest with the teachers:

> It is touchy to discuss results, as I have noticed many times, but we do it when we get results from national tests and when we get the results from the exams. We have these results meetings, and then we discuss it, of course, but if I should have an honest conversation, I need to talk to my school leader colleagues.

This statement implies that she did not think that she could have honest discussions with the teachers and that her use of strategies was quite deliberate. Furthermore, she said that working with test data was 'touchy' and difficult, pointing towards the emotional aspects of data use.

Murer: egalitarianism and technicalities

The school leaders at Murer Lower Secondary School also used discursive strategies of equalisation. The principal was present at the meetings, while the main responsibility for the meetings was distributed to one or two assistant school leaders. The problem framing in the data use meetings was broad and somewhat characteristic of the discussions between teachers and school leaders in the meetings at Murer, with emphasis on the test scores of the individual students. Discussions about specific students, mainly those underperforming, took much of the time in the meetings where the results were discussed. The discussions were quite technical, focussing on numbers, levels and graphs, and in the conversations about specific students, aspects of teachers' instructional practices were sometimes addressed. An example of the somewhat more technical language was the strong focus on the exact numbers and the students' scores. Another example is the use of visualising tools, a typical feature of the meetings in all schools, to show how the students scored. Tools such as graphs and schemes were used to focus attention on the national tests results, which were sometimes combined with results from other tests that the students took to provide a status on what the problems were and what solutions should be initiated because of the results.

The established routines around the use of data represent new practices at Murer. The test results were being presented to all the teachers by the school leaders, who had also done the analysis and made the presentations for the teachers. The meetings did change over time, but the teachers generally showed low levels of engagement in these meetings. They tended to find explanations of the test results in factors outside their own practices, such as students' socio-economic backgrounds and the work of the primary schools, although the school leaders used strategies of re/defining to direct teachers' attention towards adjusting their opinions and initiating a discussion. However, instead of challenging teachers' legitimation strategies, the leaders accepted them. This could be related to the setting of the meetings as well, where all teachers gathered to discuss the results rather than dividing up by grade. Short-term solutions in terms

of more testing and student grouping were sought and agreed upon in collaboration, while limited attention was given to discussing and reflecting on existing instructional practices at the school.

Summarised, the two school leaders at Murer emphasised students, not teachers, in the meetings. Furthermore, the reasons for the achieved test results were often externalised. This was also commented on by one of the school leaders at Murer in an interview: 'The national tests are all about the students'. The student orientation was described by the school leader as follows:

> It is expected that the students will have a better score in grade 9 than in grade 8, and then we look at the scores and go in to look at the single student and whether we have managed to raise their score as we should.

This also points to the more technical ways in which the results are prepared, presented and discussed in the meetings. At Murer, the meetings were characterised by shared views and consensus and a near absence of critical discussion on the problems and solutions that may challenge the established consensus, as well as discussions over teaching practices; at the same time, the general involvement of the teachers in the meetings was low, and there were only a few teachers actively involved in the discussions.

Anker: egalitarianism and accountability

The school leaders at Anker used the discursive strategies of legitimation and reconciling and were often quite direct in their questions to the teachers in terms of challenging teachers' existing practices. Yet the discursive strategy they used the most was equalising.

A typical feature of the discursive practices in the data use meetings was that they centred on the solutions or what should be done to address the needs of the students after receiving the

national test results. The school leaders often quickly directed the attention in the meetings towards what should be done to support the students and raise the test results. In a result meeting at Anker, the school leader said,

> Welcome. This is an important meeting for us where we will evaluate what we have done, what we want to do and what actions we are going to take. We want to have as much progress as possible for the students in the coming year. […] We want good solutions. There is a lot of good teaching going on, but we can also improve.

The main part of the meetings was used to discuss solutions to be implemented and should also be seen in relation to how the school leader framed the meetings. The school leaders at Anker quite often used re/defining to involve the teachers in developing and expressing relevant viewpoints and new information about the test results to provide a platform for sense making, in particular when it came to re/defining the solutions that had been attempted. However, re/defining is not only a discursive strategy. For example, subject-specific teachers were given the task of preparing presentations of the results, and challenges that the students faced were given attention while concrete changes in instructional practices were also proposed before the meeting.

The discursive strategies that the school leaders at Anker employed in terms of solutions, however, were more direct than that of the school leaders at the two other schools. For example, one leader was more direct about the specific methods: 'Do you know about "guided reading?"' By using reconciling as a discursive strategy, he involved the teachers in task-oriented issues and enabled the perspectives of different speakers to be aligned around a shared view—in this case, how to use specific teaching methods such as 'guided reading' and 'writing frames' in the classroom. Although the school leaders were partly confronting the teachers' instructional methods, they were also concerned with how the teachers were the experts in their work, as

communicated by one of the school leaders: 'We now are going more into the classroom, and at this point, I must let go. Now it is the teacher who is the expert—otherwise it becomes too governed'. This is also an example of an equalising strategy used in terms of how the meetings were planned. The school leaders at Anker more often used legitimation as a discursive strategy, and they more clearly showed their hierarchical power. One of the school leaders also made accountability an explicit concern: 'It is you that I hold accountable for the results'. Yet the initiatives from the school leader at Anker created few tensions within the meetings, which were also characterised by consensus and shared meaning making.

The school leaders at Anker were very concerned about motivating the teachers, and the principal also commented on this in a conversation before a data use meeting: 'I feel that what I do most is motivate the teachers'. The leader also commented on this:

> When there is a development in the results from grade 8 to 9, we try to show the good examples in the meetings and highlight where the changes have been the greatest, and often we see that it is not a coincidence. It is the same teachers who lift the students' grades. So, I think that the teachers who do well think about this and that the teachers who do not succeed and are asked to reflect on this perhaps use the time to explain it away.

When asked about whether he found this to be difficult work, he said, 'No, not at all', directing attention to how the teachers were accustomed to being challenged after student test results and the fact that they knew that they would be held accountable for them. Moreover, the municipality where Anker is situated has developed scripts about how to facilitate the data use meetings in terms of asking for interpretations and solutions. The use of such municipal scripts became visible in the meetings observed and were also commented on by the school leader:

As my leader [the local administrator], says, 'use the group to change the group'. I use it intentionally, and then I try to govern the groups, right, that when I am together with them, we in a way agree on how we should do it [.…] And then they will work towards the other teachers because they have in a way a mandate to make changes, and then we evaluate, right, how this takes place in the classroom.These municipal scripts of modelling became visible in all meetings observed at Anker.

Variations across the schools

Despite the somewhat remarkably similar use of equalization strategies, including the broad problem framing and use of praise and thus the attention given to solutions and creating consensus, some variations across schools were identified. While the similar patterns across the schools can be interpreted as reflecting ways of working together and quite stable patterns of relations within schools, variations, to a greater extent, seem to reflect the quality assessment systems in the three municipalities. First, the reference to the municipal scripts on how to conduct data use meetings that was observed at Anker was not observed at Enger and Murer. Second, although all leaders talked about the need to motivate the teachers, the leader at Anker related this to teachers' instructional practices and their justifications for their choices, both individually and collectively, and gave praise when such changes took place. This focus was also a part of the municipal script. At Enger, motivation was mainly related to giving general praise and placing emphasis on trust and teachers' classroom autonomy. Third, compared to Murer and Enger, the school leaders at Anker more extensively used the discursive strategies of legitimation and reconciling and were more direct in their questions to the teachers in terms of challenging existing instructional practices. When looking at teachers' involvement in the meeting discussions, however, it did not seem that the engagement and interest was less at Anker. On the contrary, involvement of the teachers prior to and during the meetings seemed more important for their engagement. This type of involvement was identified at Enger and

Anker but not at Murer. To summarise, three aspects important for understanding the variations in school leaders' data use practices were seen in this study: municipal scripts, the orientation towards teaching practices, and the involvement of teachers. While involvement exceeded municipal quality assessment systems (Enger and Anker), task orientation was a characteristic of Anker. The findings also showed that only distributing responsibility to other leaders at the school, which was the case at Murer and which involved teachers to a limited extent, did not strengthen engagement. Despite these differences, orientation towards short-term solutions remained, pointing to challenges with data use practices that extend beyond local leadership variations.

Discussion

In this article, we asked the following research questions: what characterises the discursive strategies used by the school leaders in 'result meetings'? In what ways and with what variations do the school leaders balance expectations to use data in their work? Meetings are increasingly seen as sites where organisational and strategic changes take place, but the role of specific discursive strategies when planning for and enacting discursive strategies for organisational change is less understood. Although the school leaders made clear attempts to initiate changes in their schools, they did this mainly by using discursive strategies such as equalising and simplifying. However, the ways in which the interactions preserved and built consensus varied from emphasis on emotions to emphasis on technicalities to emphasis on accountability. These three emphasises are also the key drivers for development for the school leaders, influencing the leaders' use of discursive strategies. Despite the differences and the common characteristic of consensus in the meetings at the three schools, there was limited discussion about problems and long-term solutions. This finding points to how data use practices possess central epistemic challenges in addition to relational challenges.

By performing a micro-level analysis of meeting interactions in combination with a macro-oriented analysis that considers the context as well as school leaders' perceptions and justifications of their strategies and actions taken, we provide an alternative for viewing data use practices from the current one, which is mainly of a critical or consensus perspective (Prøitz et al. 2017). The school leaders' use of strategies points to how data use and accountability are highly relational and emotional, meaning that school leaders and teachers must engage in processes of interpretation and meaning making that take a range of factors and values into account. Despite the idea of these result meetings having a hierarchical and strategic character that would strengthen hierarchies and result orientation, we found that they were highly characterised by egalitarianism and consensus building rather than hierarchy. This finding spanned across the three schools and points to how difficult it is to be a leader in a field so characterised by the ideal of being equal, where balance must be found between respecting the autonomy of the teachers in the classroom and challenging their instructional practices.

We find a strong consensus orientation in the data use practices. The relatively few tensions could be a result of the discursive strategies that the school leaders employed, i.e., how the use of open questions and explicit praise helped to relax the leaders' use of power and provided the teachers with opportunities to speak (Wodak et al. 2011). The choice of the school leaders to mainly accept teachers talking underscores the shared meaning making and consensus building. Given how result meetings can be seen as an important and visible site of organisational power, this can contribute to the removal of tensions. However, because tensions can work productively in terms of dredging up more fundamental questions on existing practices (Stillman 2011), re/defining as a discursive strategy could be utilised more in such meetings to involve teachers more actively in problem solving, redefinitions and adjustments of existing viewpoints. This also depends on teachers being encouraged to ask critical questions within the framework of the meetings. Thus, the meetings should also provide an arena where conflicting

views can be expressed and where school leaders ask more direct questions to challenge the teachers and vice versa. This, in turn, can provoke productive tensions. This does not necessarily have to start with test results; rather, it could also be directed towards justifying arguments and promoting processes of externalising experience-based and tacit knowledge. Such processes can be important in learning and have, in other studies, been found to be just as important as the more direct and often forced use of result documentation (Hartley and Allison 2002). In contrast, externalising the reference point for the meetings to the student data is encouraged by Timperley (2005), because an orientation towards achievement directed towards individual students directs attention away from blaming the problems on issues from outside the classroom accordingly. It therefore makes solutions more manageable. Such a task orientation, together with the involvement of other teachers upfront and in the meetings, seemed to be important for more focussed discussions that engaged the teachers. Yet there are also challenges attached to the strong orientation towards solutions.

The problems discussed were mainly related to the students and only sometimes to their instruction, and both the school leaders and the teachers almost immediately started to discuss solutions to the national test results. Generally, problems can be harder and more uncomfortable and touchy to get into, while solutions better communicate effectivity and productivity, perhaps also creating good and productive feelings. However, the solution orientation may be related to teachers' knowledge base more broadly in terms of the practical character of their work (Shulman 1987; Grimen 2008). The framing of the result meetings in themselves could strengthen such processes towards (short-term) solutions, as well as how the problems are defined in the test results already. In this case, we could say that the opportunities to define the problem were partly taken away from the school leaders and the teachers because the problems were partly defined by the data—the national test results—already. This may also have then influenced the strategies used by the school leaders in their attention to the solutions, because

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in most cases, these seem to still be left to the professionals to decide on. Although an orientation towards involving teachers and using the test data to challenge existing teaching practices seems likely to be more effective in terms promoting data use in schools, the findings also suggest that these are not sufficient strategies if using such data ought to also result in creative and critical thinking about school development. Such processes arguably need a deeper analysis of the cause of the problems and an orientation towards more long-term solutions.

Data use has to do with discursive processes that are both subtle and intricate, where shared views are synthesised through open discussions (Keelchtermans 2005; Kwon et al. 2013). However, shared views—or consensuses—can be found by narrowing down issues or opening them up for critical discussions. We find that consensus is mainly built from the use of discursive strategies that narrow down and close critical discussions. The established routines, with their hierarchical and strategic characteristics, also seem to set some limitations on the interactions in these meetings, not only because the teachers do not become involved but also because the setup of the meetings seems to emphasise short-term solutions to pre-defined problems. Thus, critical, open discussions should be encouraged as an important part of data use to find a productive balance between control, development and collegiality. Empirically, this would reflect a dilemmatic situation for school leaders: on one hand, national testing is a mandated practice where teachers are held accountable for the results, and on the other, their strategies need to fit a specific tradition of leadership, legitimation and outcomes. To understand data use practices, we therefore need to direct our attention to the epistemic dimensions in addition to the relational ones. The findings in the current study point towards how the combination of external data for control and development purposes and the orientation towards collegiality and consensus can provide little room for development work other than identifying more short-term solutions. This also has implications for research on data use. In addition to more awareness about the relational and emotional aspects of data use, there is a need for greater

attention to the epistemic work in research on data use in education, because the epistemic work seems to be remarkably similar across schools and school leaders.

Conclusion

In this article, we have addressed the question of what characterises school leaders' use of discursive strategies in three Norwegian lower secondary schools. In the meetings, the national test results were the starting point for the school leaders' attempts to motivate the teachers to become involved in development work. The discursive strategies used and how the school leaders emphasised collegiality and consensus show how data produced externally must be made relevant for daily work. This points to how all school leaders are concerned with what strategies are the most useful regarding increasing teacher involvement. However, both the characteristics of the meetings in terms of collegiality and consensus, and the managerial set-up of the meetings, can make them less productive for critical internal outlooks. Here, turning attention towards the epistemic in addition to the relational dimensions of data use becomes important.

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