

Review

# Conceptualizing Successful School Leadership in Norway: Political and Cultural Practices

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**Abstract:** Throughout the last two decades, successful school leadership has been subject to extensive research in Norway and comparisons across countries as part of the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP). This paper identifies and discusses how and why Norwegian research on the relationship between school leadership positions and governance regimes comes into play when defining terms such as “success” and “effectiveness”. A critical literature review establishes analysis and discussion as the basis for an improved understanding of the notion of success in ISSPP research in the Norwegian education policy context. The findings show that success is consistently attached to a collaborative, political, and democratic perspective, as well as trust, power, and the definition of quality in education. Furthermore, ISSPP studies of cases in the Norwegian context have contributed to the educational leadership field by positioning school leadership within a combination of local, national, and global political and cultural environments. The differences and similarities between countries that do not share a common cultural heritage or language must be considered. In particular, there is a need to discuss the relationship between national history and policy and the conceptualization of successful school leadership.

**Keywords:** successful school leadership; effective school leadership; effectiveness; ISSPP; democracy; Norway; collaboration; team effort; education policy; cultural history



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## 1. Introduction

This article contributes to the understanding and critical examination of how successful school leadership has been conceptualized through the definitions and characteristics of Norwegian research contributions over the past two decades. The main aim is to identify how and why the relationship between school leadership positions and governance regimes comes into play when defining terms such as “success” and “effectiveness”. A critical literature review is conducted to provide data for analysis and discussion as the basis for an improved understanding of International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP) research on successful school leadership in the Norwegian education policy context. The majority of the numerous contributions to successful school leadership in Norway are linked to Professor Emerita Jorunn Møller’s substantial work over 20 years. Her all-embracing commitment to educational leadership and governance and her humanistic values in education can be contextualized within the bigger picture of the influence of globalized corporate reforms, which have a substantial bearing on this article.

Among the researchers involved in the ISSPP, multiple images of key concepts have been displayed and discussed throughout the last 20 years; for example, the distinction between “success” and “effectiveness” and the definition of “educational leadership” have been heavily debated [1–8]. The literature on school effectiveness has not only considered how a school culture of high expectations is beneficial for student achievement in general but also how, to a lesser extent, it offers information about the symbolic or material resources that either generate such a culture or keep it from developing [2]. A variety of concepts related to the ideas of “successful school principal”, “successful school leaders”, and

“successful school leadership” have been applied by the ISSPP, e.g., [4,5,8–10]. While the first two concepts indicate “individual principals as the unit of analysis”, the third indicates “multiple leaders as the unit of analysis” [2] (p. 7).

The ISSPP is undeniably the widest-ranging international research project ever on school leadership. The extensive cross-national perspective functions as a nod to the ISSPP network’s tenet that theory and practice in educational leadership are emotionally, socially, and contextually dependent constructs see, for example [2,11–15]. Differences must be taken into account when the countries being compared do not have a common cultural heritage or language. The ISSPP is a multi-language project, and the challenges associated with conducting research in settings using multiple national tongues must be kept in mind when common protocols and surveys are translated, and papers are produced. While Anglo-American scholars have discussed “the practice of principals,” see, e.g., [1,3], Scandinavian scholars have discussed leadership practices as “shared and distributed” across individuals and as being executed by teams, e.g., [15–17] As part of the primary purpose of this special issue, the conceptualization of success in Norwegian contributions is related to the ways in which “success” and/or “effective leadership” have been defined, how principals have contributed to their schools’ success and/or growth in success, and what kind of factors have “caused”, “shaped”, or “influenced” principals’ contributions to their schools’ success. The literature review is guided by the following research questions:

1. How has successful school leadership been conceptualized in Norwegian case studies, and how is this conceptualization different from the conceptualization of effective school leadership?
2. What characterizes the interplay between principals’ contributions to their schools’ success over time and the national and local policy contexts?
3. How is principals’ work established in structures of power, and what characterizes the enabling and constraining factors in principals’ efforts to develop successful practices in their schools?

In the next section, I present the Norwegian educational leadership and policy context, followed by a description of the review method and an overview of the selected studies. Finally, I present and discuss the findings before offering concluding remarks.

## 2. The Norwegian Education Leadership and Policy Context

In the last two decades, neoliberal reforms have, to varying degrees, been gradually embraced by education policy governance in Nordic countries. For example, while Norway has stayed more hesitant and has protected the comprehensive and public organization of education, Sweden has, to a larger extent, endorsed private actors in offering education services [18]. Norway has a strong ideological tradition of highlighting the role of educational institutions in the construction of local communities. This ideological tradition has been developed based on ideas of inclusivity and democratic values. In addition to training children to become able workers, schools should equip children to play productive roles in a democratic society. School for all children, free of charge and with little monitoring and control, has been seen as fundamental for a long time [6].

During the 1990s, the New Public Management (NPM) governing structures of Norway did not directly influence the traditional values of schooling, but they affected the reorganization of schools in terms of deregulation and the horizontal specialization of administration. A central change was to lead by objectives. The introduction of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2001 hastened the transition from input-oriented education policy governance toward a more output-oriented policy mechanism [18]. However, the current educational policy context is still building on a comprehensive education system, loyalty to a strong state, and the practices of municipalities as relatively independent political institutions [19,20]. Norway still has a predominantly public school system; only 9% of primary and secondary schools are private [21]. The municipality finances the schools with economic transfers from the state and the engagements of the school principals and teachers. Municipalities play a key role in offering in-service

training for teachers and school principals. In addition, a national program for school leaders is funded by the state and offered by universities as part of a master's program.

Norwegian school principals are currently facing new and (sometimes) contradictory policy expectations. For example, the PISA results are being used to legitimize new forms of control and the monitoring of school practices and quality, and there has been a change in how trust in education is addressed. Emerging accountability and quality assessment practices have characterized the processes of change in the last decade. The public and parents continue to have trust in professionals, but attention is increasingly being directed toward trusting what can be measured by results [19]. The Norwegian case schools that participate in the ISSPP studies have so far not been selected based on academic results because students' national test results have only been made accessible to schools and local authorities. The Norwegian team selects schools that are subject to public reviews by the Ministry of Education and Research based on schools' efforts to work positively with students' learning environments. The Norwegian research team also bases its selection on schools that are recognized by the local community and public media.

### 3. The Review Method and Description of the Reported Case Studies

A critical review method was used in this study [22]. The PRISMA Checklist (<http://www.prisma-statement.org/PRISMAStatement/Checklist>, accessed on 16 July 2023) was used in the review process and in writing this paper. According to Grant and Booth (2009), a critical review aims to demonstrate that a writer has extensively researched the literature and critically evaluated its quality. In this article, the literature review includes content analysis to identify how success has been defined in Norwegian case studies and the characteristics of the ways in which "leadership", "success", or "effective leadership" have been defined. A critical review may yield a combination of existing representations in prior research and may also result in a completely new interpretation of the obtainable data. The "critical" factor of this kind of review is key to its value. It provides an opportunity to "take stock" and evaluate what is of importance from the previous body of work [22] (p. 93). Thus, in critical reviews, the emphasis is on the conceptual contributions of each article, paper, or book included in the review.

While such a review does serve to gather the literature on a topic, the explanatory components are subjective, and the resulting product is the starting point for further evaluation, not a stopping point in itself [22]. In this current review, the emphasis is on the conceptual contributions that have influenced critical examinations of how successful school principalship has been constructed over the course of 20 years in the Norwegian education leadership and policy context. The selection criteria were based on contributions offered by case studies and stated the ISSPP protocols that had been used, meaning that they utilized interview and survey data. Contributions based on comparisons between two or more countries, representatively between Norway and Sweden, as well as between Norway, the US, and China, were also included [4,18]. Two databases were used simultaneously; google scholar.no ([https://scholar.google.no/scholar?hl=no&as\\_sdt=0%2C5&q=weber+ideal+types&btnG=](https://scholar.google.no/scholar?hl=no&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=weber+ideal+types&btnG=), accessed on 17 June 2023) and Oria.no (<https://oria.no/>, accessed on 17 June 2023). The latter source requires a password for login and two-factor credentials from the University of Oslo and provides free access to all available books and articles offered by the university library to all researchers and staff of the institution. The search words were "successful", "effective", "school leadership", "educational leadership", "ISSPP", "international successful school principalship project", "school principalship", "Norway", and "Norwegian". The keywords were entered in English, and consequently, contributions in the Norwegian language were excluded, e.g., [23].

E-mail contact with one of the main ISSPP contributors from Norway, Professor Emerita Jorunn Møller, was also initiated to check that the search had yielded the most valid and reliable results for the review. Only the results from research conducted in Norway on Norwegian leaders in Norwegian schools were included. The dataset also comprised comparative studies between two or more countries. The search resulted in nine journal articles and three book chapters. An overview of the publications, sampling and data collection methods, and main findings is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Overview of the publications, samples and data collection methods, and main findings.

	Publication	Sampling and Data Collection Method	Main Findings
1	Møller, J.; Eggen, A.B. Team leadership in upper secondary education. <i>Sch. Leadersh. Manag.</i> <b>2005</b> , <i>25</i> , 331–347.	Three upper secondary schools. Interviewing the principal, the leadership team, groups of students, groups of teachers, groups of parents, groups of other employees, union representatives and individuals with particular responsibility for development and evaluation projects in the school.	School leadership is an interactive process involving many people and players. Success is a result of a continuous team effort. Leadership analyzed within a distributed perspective can be described as an organizational quality in these schools and can be comprehended in the light of the schools' historical, cultural, political and social context. Trust and power were closely interrelated
2	Møller, J.; Eggen, A.; Fuglestad, O.L.; Langfeldt, G.; Presthus, A.M.; Skrøvset, S.; Stjernstrøm, E.; Vedøy, G. Successful school leadership: The Norwegian case. <i>J. Educ. Adm.</i> <b>2005</b> , <i>43</i> , 584–594.	Twelve schools. Two primary (grade 1–7), three lower secondary (grade 8–10) four combined (grade 1–10) and three upper secondary schools (11–13). Interviews and observation.	Leadership is almost entirely practiced through collaboration and team efforts, and a learning—centered approach is the focal point. A guiding norm of conduct is respect of the individual student and colleague in the building of professional communities of practice. School leaders that are successful in fulfilling a moral enterprise based on democratic principles and values, manage to deal with the types of dilemmas that are at the core of working with people in a school.
3	Møller, J. Democratic schooling in Norway: Implications for leadership in practice. <i>Leadersh. Policy Sch.</i> <b>2006</b> , <i>5</i> , 53–69.	Based on the sample of schools from Møller et al, (2005), one chosen school was discussed. Conceptual discussion of one sample school.	Describes democratic school leadership in practice, with particular attention to the distribution of power and leadership in the school, student voice in the decision-making process, their opportunities for open dialogues, and the conditions that must be in place for students to develop as citizens. Principals, teachers, and community members commit themselves to working together with students to shape a school culture and a critical pedagogy aimed at social justice.
4	Vedøy, G.; Møller, J. Successful school leadership for diversity? Examining two contrasting examples of working for democracy in Norway. <i>Int. Stud. Educ. Adm. (Commonw. Counc. Educ. Adm. Manag. (CCEAM))</i> <b>2007</b> , <i>35</i> , 58–66.	Two culturally diverse schools, one combined (grade 1–10) and one primary school (grade 1–7). Interviews and observation.	Explores the negotiation of meaning and manifestations of successful leadership in multiethnic schools in Norway. Learning in and for democracy and the moral purpose of education. The principal plays a pivotal role for including all stakeholders in work for democratic schooling and a caring approach through a focus on possibilities and respect, not on deficits, is crucial.
5	Johnson, L.; Møller, J.; Jacobson, S.L.; Wong, K.C. Cross-national comparisons in the international successful school principalship project (ISSPP): The USA, Norway and China. <i>Scand. J. Educ. Res.</i> <b>2008</b> , <i>52</i> , 407–422.	Interviewing a stratified random sampling of teachers as well as students, parents and school district officials. A cross-national analysis of case studies in three of the eight countries, the USA (New York State), Norway and China (Shanghai).	Illustrates cross-national differences related to the societal purposes of education, the structure and funding of different national educational systems and the influence of particular governmental educational policies on the leadership practices of individual school principals. The Norwegian team proved unique in their ability to conduct extensive two-week observations in each school.

Table 1. Cont.

	Publication	Sampling and Data Collection Method	Main Findings
6	Møller, J.; Vedøy, G.; Presthus, A.M.; Skedsmo, G. Fostering learning and sustained improvement: The influence of principalship. <i>Eur. Educ. Res. J.</i> <b>2009</b> , <i>8</i> , 359–371.	Revisiting two combined schools (grade 1–10) five years later. One interview with the principal and one interview with a group of teachers at each school.	A focus on how the principals position themselves as leaders, and how they are involved in the construction of a public self, while responding to questions about fostering learning and sustained improvement. The study confirms that a principal may have a significant influence on a school's policy and in particular the preferred leadership strategies.
7	Møller, J.; Vedøy, G.; Presthus, A.M.; Skedsmo, G. Sustainable improvement: The significance of ethos and leadership. In <i>How School Principals Sustain Success over Time</i> ; Moos, L., Johansson, O., Day, C., Eds.; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2011; pp. 55–71.	Two combined schools (grade 1–10) and one upper secondary school (grade 11–13). Interviews with the principal and a group of teachers at each school were the major source of new data.	Revisiting three successful schools five years after the first visit: Challenged by structural and cultural changes -but still a philosophy of student-centered approach. Multiple ways of influencing staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions. School principals present themselves as persistent, resilient, and optimistic and not dictated by the shifting policy context. The significance of ethos for sustaining school improvement.
8	Møller, J.; Vedøy, G.G. Leadership for social justice: Educating students as active citizens in a democratic society. In <i>Leading Schools Successfully: Stories from the Field</i> ; Day, C., Gurr, D., Eds.; Routledge: London, UK, 2014; pp. 163–173.	A narrative of a Norwegian principal is based on data (interviews and observations) from one of the Norwegian schools that participated in the ISSPP. The school was revisited five years later.	How the principal positioned as leader and the construction of a public self, while responding to questions about fostering learning and sustained improvement. How leadership is enacted as well as the many relationships and interactions between different actors within schools. This approach differed from conceptualizing leadership as individual knowledge, skills and dispositions.
9	Møller, J. Creating cultures of equity and high expectations in a low-performing school: Interplay between district and school leadership. <i>Nord. J. Comp. Int. Educ.</i> <b>2018</b> , <i>2</i> , 86–102.	Based on a larger study of multilevel actors involved in compulsory education in Norway: low performing schools in low socio-economic areas. Individual interviews with the principal and the superintendent and focus-group interviews with deputies, teachers and students.	The pathway from a very low-performance to an improved status regarding school results is intimately linked to leadership intervention, such as improving the physical environment, supporting teacher leadership, and allowing mutual trust to develop over time. Promoting quality education for all begins with the question of purpose and requires understanding how principals' and teachers' work is embedded in broader social structures of power.
10	Vedøy, G.; Møller, J. Successful school leadership for diversity? Examining two contrasting examples of working for democracy in Norway. <i>Int. Stud. Educ. Adm. (Commonw. Counc. Educ. Adm. Manag. (CCEAM))</i> <b>2007</b> , <i>35</i> , 58–66.	The empirical data in this article are interviews and observations in two culturally diverse Norwegian schools over a period of nine months. Both schools have received recognition for their work for minority language students.	The principal plays a pivotal role for including all stakeholders in work for democratic schooling. A caring approach through a focus on possibilities and respect, not on deficits, is crucial.

Table 1. Cont.

	Publication	Sampling and Data Collection Method	Main Findings
11	Møller, J.; Rönnberg, L. Critical perspectives in and approaches to educational leadership in two Nordic countries. In <i>Understanding Educational Leadership: Critical Perspectives and Approaches</i> ; Courtney, S.J., Gunter, H.M., Niesche, R., Trujillo, T., Eds.; Bloomsbury: London, UK, 2021; Chapter 7.	Conceptual chapter, where the authors draw on different resources, such as a Nordic history research project focusing on the 1800s and 1900s and their own and others' previous research on educational leadership and school reforms in a Scandinavian context.	Explores the comparatively divergent development of neo-liberal reform in Sweden and Norway and critically discuss implications for education as a public good in general and for educational leadership in particular. Marketization has put principals in a position in which they have to cope with demanding challenges, and to do so they need both training and different forms of support.
12	Ballangrud, B.B.; Paulsen, J.M. Leadership strategies in diverse intake environments. <i>Nord. J. Comp. Int. Educ. (NJCIE)</i> 2018, 2, 103–118.	The Norwegian research site was situated in a demographic environment of low socioeconomic status and low performing schools. Based on data from observations and interviews with school leaders, teachers, the local authorities, and students, together with a student survey.	A culture of inclusive ethos for all pupils, paired with pedagogical collaboration, and democratic and servant leadership, are important devices for mastering diversity. The leadership practices and collaborative focus were furthermore anchored in a systemic and more integrative school organization.

The schools in the studies were predominantly compulsory and upper secondary schools from a mix of urban and rural areas. The number of schools reported in the selected articles varied from one to twelve. In the early phase of the ISSPP, the Norwegian research team was funded over a period of three years. Due to this extensive financial support, two doctoral students were granted resources to add observation data, including categories from the interview protocols in the ISSPP [24]. Observations created room to consider leadership practices as the unit of analysis rather than the views of leaders, teachers, and parents based on individual interviews. The data from the observations could be a reason why the importance of the principal was not emphasized within the Norwegian case studies.

#### 4. Findings and Analysis

The following section presents the results of the critical investigation into the conceptual contributions of Norwegian ISSPP research to understanding successful school leadership. The analysis was conducted in response to the research questions. Specifically, this study aimed to determine the ways in which success and/or effective leadership have been defined, how principals have contributed to their schools' success and/or growth in success, and what kinds of factors have shaped principals' contributions to Norwegian schools' success. Three thematic areas were identified: successful school leadership as a democratic, emotional, and interactive process; school leadership as a micro-political practice in a network of people, policies, structures, and cultures; and the team effort of negotiating and promoting education as a public good.

##### 4.1. Shaping Successful School Leadership as a Democratic, Emotional, and Interactive Process

With regard to the definition and shaping of successful school leadership, the overall perception of either "effective" school leadership and/or success in the Norwegian studies showed that rather than concentrating on principalship, formal leadership is more or less entirely described as a shared team responsibility based on democratic values and

beliefs [25,26]. In the studies, trust and power are considered closely related to success, especially the ways in which school principals and leadership teams acquire trust through the reliable use of power. The understanding of successful leadership and the notion of power and established areas of control have gradually shifted, as people not directly involved with schools in the last 20 years have started to question school quality. Currently, a general belief is that successful leadership is essential to large-scale education reform and to increasing students' academic results. Models of best practices serve as a celebration of the hard work of individual school principals. In discussing the policy agenda set by the OECD, Møller (2017) argued that some education research knowledge on, for example, how to ensure effective learning strategies and increase excellence in literacy and numeracy has been highlighted by every level of government involved in designing school development programs in Norway. In contrast, research that problematizes power structures has often been marginalized [27].

Five years into the ISSPP project, the Norwegian research team examined how leadership is enacted, as well as the many interactions and relationships between actors in schools [10,24,28,29]. This approach contrasted with the conceptualization of leadership as individual skills and knowledge. Despite the new policy expectations, the study found that continuity represented practices in local schools. The first of the Norwegian ISSPP contributions had a firm focus on improving student outcomes. However, principals concentrated on doing what they thought was in the best interest of the students, e.g., [10]. The works were characterized by a blend of human, professional, and social interests, and success was reflected in the principals' capacity to promote good relationships among staff members. Equity dominated the narratives of the school leaders, teachers, and professional actors working in these schools.

The analysis of the research further showed that principals in the Norwegian case studies contributed to schools' success by showing resiliency, a sensitive responsibility to their profession, and plenty of flexibility when shaping their leadership practices [27]. Successful school leadership in Norway seems to offer the opportunity for the minor consideration of managerial and results-based accountability. The ways in which Norwegian school leaders pay attention to results-based accountability indicate a political environment characterized by low stakes, even though principals, in collaboration with leadership teams and teachers, work hard to improve school results and develop schools. In Norway, power is distributed among stakeholders who have a sensitive commitment to the profession and the school organization.

#### *4.2. The Micro-Political Factor in Successful School Leadership Practices in a Network of People, Policies, Structures, and Cultures*

In the Norwegian research contributions, the prevalence of the term "team leadership" instead of "principalship" represents a noticeable finding regarding teamwork and collaboration, even though it is the principal who takes final responsibility for any decisions. Aside from a team's organization, which is dictated by teachers, the principal and the middle-level leaders collaborate closely to address both current and future visions.

In addition to the agreed-upon theoretical framework within the ISSPP, the analytical approach used by the Norwegian team incorporated a variety of micro-political factors and a distributed perspective on leadership that focused on the school as the unit of study rather than the individual principal [27]. Although it was recognized that principals supposedly have a strong impact on schools' success, in Norway and in other Scandinavian countries, there was a hesitancy to embrace individual leadership behaviors as the most important factor for school development. Leadership in Norway was rather understood as a network of relationships, cultures, and structures, e.g., [11]. Successful leadership from a distributed perspective has exclusively been characterized by collaboration and team efforts and what the Norwegian research team characterized as having the "team on top" [4] (p. 416). This contrasts with the US model of having the principal on top, possibly with the help of a team. Møller (2017) argued that while models of distributed leadership have increasingly

been used, such models rarely take into account the political and normative dimensions surrounding social structures of power.

#### *4.3. Contributions to Success through Team Efforts and Promoting Education as a Public Good*

In their comparison of Norwegian versus Swedish development of education policy, Møller and Rönnerberg (2021) used the distinction between education as a public good versus a private good and argued that this analytical distinction is a fruitful way to stimulate debate on the main purpose and value of education in relation to its political context. Consequently, the contribution also allows for the examination and discussion of how the practices of school principals and their agency are being repositioned. The authors claimed that this is an urgent discussion in times of marketization and privatization and in the context of the transformations that have taken place in the “social democratic welfare states” [18] (p. 11).

Norwegian contributions have illustrated how governing expectations of school leadership have, to some degree, been altered as a reaction to privatization, market mechanisms, and global trends. Studies have also discussed the ways in which the talk and language surrounding public education and school leadership have been affected by these changes. The marked change in orientation has put principals in a position in which they have to cope with demanding challenges, but principals can still critically reflect upon their own agency and what space there is for action, in terms of, for instance, defending social justice and democratic values in times when they are being challenged [18] (p. 14). The Norwegian contributions highlight the importance of finding room for changing practices in relation to protecting education as a public and not as a private good [14].

After the first studies of the ISSPP schools from 2002 to 2007, the authors emphasized a learning-centered approach as the most important point of a school’s philosophy. Additionally, team efforts and a robust emotional working obligation among principals and teachers, as well as the realization of a democratic mission, were considered to be significant features [10,25]. The identified learning-centered approach was sustained for five years, and the leadership focus was restricted to the numerous ways leadership shapes staff motivation, commitment, and working environments. The stability of success was reflected in the principals’ ability to encourage decent interactions among staff members, and the moral imperative of developing the whole child remained in the foreground in the case of schools.

The early Norwegian ISSPP research featured mixtures of both “power over” and “power with” models of leadership in which leading is an interactive and reciprocal process. The finding of leadership as interactive and mutual stands in contrast to the authorities’ former call for strong and powerful leadership in schools at the time of the rollout of the 2006 curriculum reforms. The school leaders recognized that they had power in their formal position but were simultaneously also aware of the relative nature of power [7,17,18]. A “successful” principal may have a substantial impact on a school’s policy, specifically the preferred strategies for collaboration and team efforts. Despite the numerous new societal and policy expectations for control and results that are levied against schools, there is still stability in leadership practices and collaboration in local schools.

Contextual variations and diversity are described as assets of the local and historical contexts in which schools experience different challenges [30]. The many faces of leadership can best be understood in light of their historical, cultural, political, and social contexts. The variations in context are connected to the size of the school, the local community, the location of the school (district, rural, or urban), the composition of the staff at the school, and/or the experience of the school’s formal leadership roles. The structural and cultural differences relate to how the idea of democracy needs to be extended to the many formal adult roles in schools, and it entails the formation of specific structures that support educational leadership as a critical practice that can be combined with the local cultural, political, and historical context [7,18,25].

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article aimed to identify how and why the relationship between school leadership positions and governance regimes comes into play when defining terms such as “success” and “effectiveness”. The following research questions guided the analysis: How has successful school leadership been conceptualized in Norwegian case studies, and how is this conceptualization different from the conceptualization of effective school leadership? What characterizes the interplay between principals’ contributions to their schools’ success over time and the national and local policy contexts? How are principals’ work embedded in broader social structures of power, and what characterizes the enabling and constraining factors in principals’ efforts to develop successful practices in their schools?

The analysis showed that the conceptualization of success has, in the Norwegian case studies, been attached to the influence of team efforts that foster sustained improvement in the local school. Success has been defined as persistent leadership practices understood as the ways in which principals position themselves as leaders within a distributed perspective when responding to external and internal expectations. This definition has been applied to highlight the complicated and dynamic nature of school life and the need to provide accounts of the subtle daily negotiations that occur in connection with global and national policy expectations [26]. Conceptualization of successful school leadership differs from the one of “effective” school leadership, as formal leadership is more or less entirely described as a team effort based on democratic values [26,31].

The interplay between principals’ contributions to their schools’ success over time and national and local policy expectations can be characterized as a micro-political practice in a network of people, policies, structures, and cultures. People not directly involved with schools are increasingly demanding “quick fixes” and development in schools, and Norwegian school leaders are not paying abundant attention to results-based accountability. A lot has happened since the first PISA results in Norway. The significant attention PISA received in Norway in the early years of the 2000s owes much to the emerging focus on performance measurement and accountability. Accountability policy tools, rationales, and procedures to evaluate schools’ results and, indirectly, teachers’ work is constantly being developed along with more or less demanding mechanisms for accountability [32,33]. A constraining factor might be that parents and the public have argued for more external regulation of teachers’ work, which in turn might affect the micro-political practices [34] of educational leadership. However, despite the increasingly dominant test-based accountability discourse, which puts pressure on local school actors, the Norwegian approach to test-based accountability seeks to orient the behaviors of local actors by combining external devices that pressure actors with internal measures designed to mobilize internal feelings of responsibility [32,35,36].

The constraining and enabling factors of success are attached to the collaborative and democratic perspectives, embedded in trust and power inside and outside of schools, and linked to the definition of quality in education. Success has been conceptualized and defined by a strong and continuous “whole school and community” collaboration to ensure lasting change that differs largely from the notion of effective school leadership, which emphasizes, to a greater extent, short-term efforts to improve school quality by elevating the standardized data on student test scores. Constraining factors also relate to how the idea of democracy needs to be extended to the diverse range of formal adult roles in schools. Furthermore, the creation of specific structures that support educational leadership as a critical practice that can be combined with the local cultural, political, and historical context is required [27,31]. Moreover, the policy intention of partnerships is also a dimension considered by school development, democracy, and school leadership in the Norwegian education policy context [3].

Future ISSPP studies should include the mapping of multiple conceptualizations of leadership in the education system and of the web of interactions created by different forms of successful school leadership. Future ISSPP studies would benefit from combining

policy scholarship and educational leadership when examining leadership as political and cultural practices related to history, knowledge, ideology, economy, and technology.

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