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## Chapter 12

# Understanding Municipal Education Leaders in the Tension Between Politics, Professionals and Parents



Ann-Sofie Smeds-Nylund

**Abstract** This chapter explores how non-affirmative theories, such as NAT and discursive institutionalism, can complement each other when investigating educational and pedagogical leadership. Public policies, laws, and interests are transformed into pedagogical practice at the municipal level, and the educational leadership mediates between several practices. In many countries, a more liberal education policy has given rise to demands for clearer parental influence in schools. Public decision-making processes regarding educational issues change when more actors demand their voices be heard. In which educational issues is it then beneficial to initiate an extended debate and involve citizens? In the municipal context, a communicative discourse about education is to be preferred, although a coordinative discourse would be legal and correct. Everyone with an interest in the local school should have the opportunity to use their voice. We need ongoing, enlightened conversations about education, pedagogy, and *Bildung* at the municipal and local levels in our society.

**Keywords** Discursive institutionalism · Non-affirmative education · Educational leadership

## Introduction

Within a democratic society, educational leadership in a municipal context is operationalised as shared leadership, according to which elected representatives and holders of municipal offices work together to create educational opportunities for the municipal population. The educational conditions and laws vary between countries, but to a certain extent, the experiences of municipalities are comparable across

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national borders. Educational decisions are made in close proximity to those who are affected by them—close to guardians' and children's everyday lives.

Municipalities in Nordic countries have a high degree of autonomy but operate according to national legislation and under the influence of a transnational discourse, which poses challenges for public education leadership. In the context of municipal education policy, professionals and elected representatives meet to discuss governance issues. Office holders represent their areas of responsibility through their competence and expertise. Meanwhile, the elected representatives' mandate is determined based on the trust granted to them by the municipality's residents via political and democratic municipal elections. Multifaceted knowledge about the local community enables elected representatives to contribute to the development of solutions relevant to the municipal residents' lived reality. Democratic decision-making processes that are transparent at all stages are essential to the establishment of an open society.

Municipal educational leaders operate in various areas of social practice, and technological developments have facilitated the participation of guardians and citizens in the debates surrounding school development (both nationally and municipally). In many countries, a more liberal education policy has given rise to demands for clearer parental influence in schools. Conscious guardians know what rights their children are entitled to, and personnel in the education system are increasingly expected to anchor their decisions in current legislation. Public decision-making processes regarding educational issues change when more actors demand that their voices be heard.

Guardians' participation in school governance has varied over time and between communities. Already in 1899, Dewey wrote in *The School and Society* that what the best and wisest parents desired for their children, society must also strive to achieve for all children; all other ideals for schools would be narrow-minded and loveless and would destroy our democracy if put into practice. Everything that society has achieved is made available to future citizens through the mediation of schools (Dewey, 2004, p. 58).

The mediating task of educational leadership is challenging, and there is a need to develop strategies for sufficient transparency in decision-making processes. Thus, it is important to examine which topics are included in an expanded education debate, which actors comment on what, and which issues are of particular importance to the actors. For example, in which issues is it beneficial to involve citizens? Which cases require more limited and restrictive treatment within traditional institutional frameworks?

The questions surrounding the development of more inclusive educational leadership in municipalities are complex, and the context in which municipal decision-making pertinent to educational matters occurs needs to be investigated.

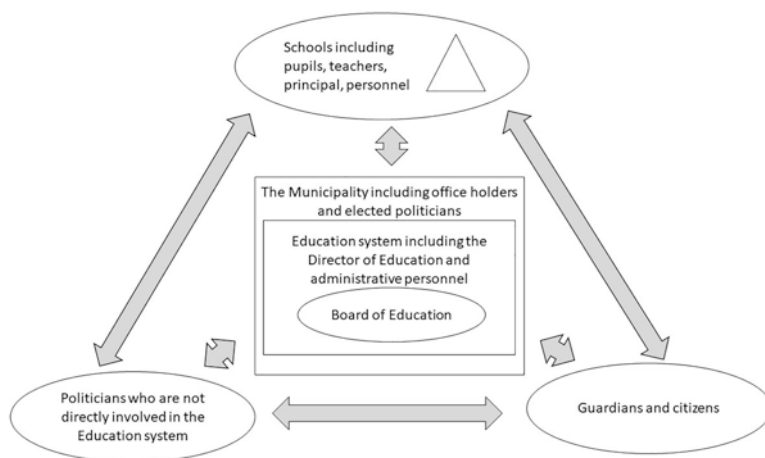
This chapter begins by describing the context of educational leadership in municipalities. *Non-affirmative theory* (NAT) is discussed in detail in this book. Thus, only the position of educational leadership as a mediator between different practices is discussed in this chapter. In this chapter, *discursive institutionalism* (DI)

is used as a framework to understand the ideas prevalent in the discourse; thus, a brief discussion about DI is included. Finally, DI is used to discuss the regulative and constitutive concepts in NAT to make sense of how municipal education leaders mediate between politics, professionals, and parents.

## The Context of Educational Leadership in a Municipality

This chapter's pedagogical and theoretical frame of reference consists of non-affirmatively inspired (Benner, 2001) interpretations of a pedagogical leadership perspective. In democratically functioning education administrations, this means that pedagogical leaders, elected representatives, teachers, and citizens are allowed and required to participate in the joint decisions that affect a country, a municipality, or a school's educational activities (Uljens & Rajakaltio, 2017). With the help of theories of non-affirmative pedagogical leadership, one can examine a municipal education system's decision-making processes using a triangle model.

In the triangular illustration presented in Fig. 12.1, the municipality's active politicians, elected representatives, and officeholders are placed at the centre of the model because their influence on educational matters in a municipality is important and regulated by national laws and municipal steering documents. The education system, which includes the director of education, operates within these laws and steering documents and is led by the education committee within the framework specified by the municipal council. The object of decision-making is the school, including pupils, teachers, principals, and personnel, and their pedagogical activities are represented by the didactic triangle. Guardians and other citizens are placed



**Fig. 12.1** Educational leadership in a municipal context. (Smeds-Nylund, 2019)

in one corner. Meanwhile, active politicians who participate in a public debate but are not directly involved in the education system are placed in another corner. Between all these actors are two-way arrows that show the process through which they communicate and exert influence on one another. Within the local context, there are many personal relationships, and communication between people can be lively. Thus, the communicative context is rich and can be explored.

## Non-affirmative Theory

Because public, non-affirmative pedagogical leadership is exercised in open institutions that are influenced by other institutions within the broader society, this chapter was written for the field of a pedagogical science and is based on a kind of practical philosophical thinking. It places itself in a fourfold field of pedagogy, politics, law, and ethics, with pedagogical leadership in the middle, mediating between all the other praxis.

The praxeological perspective understands a democratic society as characterised by a view in which all forms of practice are in a dynamic and non-hierarchical relationship with each other. A nation's constitution describes how political power in that country is exercised, but politics has power over the constitution. The state, the economy, morality, and religion can place demands on the younger generations, but they are still free to make their own choices about the future. Modern pedagogy does not know of any universal hierarchy of values in modern society (Benner, 2001, 2005). Pedagogy cannot be completely subordinated to political, cultural, or religious ideas, and it is not more important than politics; similarly, politics is not more important than pedagogy, even if both are value-bound engagements (Uljens, 2014).

Pedagogical leadership is exercised in discursive fields of tension between different forms of societal practice. Public service holders execute political decisions, but through their activities, they also influence political decision-making. In relation to other forms of practice, the pedagogical leader is in a mediating position, and it is their mission as pedagogues to remind, for example, politicians of pedagogical theory and practice, as well as the law's limitations in both debate and decision-making processes.

Through the basic concepts of *recognition* and *Bildsamkeit* (i.e., summons to self-activity) as tools (Uljens in this book), we can understand pedagogical leadership as an activity that, through summons to self-activity based on mutual recognition, strives to influence others' understanding of themselves, the world, and the relationships between them. By recognising the other as principally autonomous, the end result of a pedagogical leadership intervention is always (to some extent) open. One consequence of people thinking of and understanding the world in new ways is that they may act in new and unexpected ways (Elo, 2021).

## Discursive Institutionalism (DI)

Pedagogical leadership is exercised in an institutional context, and to understand the ideas, processes, and discourses that make up pedagogical leadership, DI (Schmidt, 2002) is used here. NAT offers a language—a theory—about education and educational leadership, and DI provides a framework for understanding how educational and political (leadership) ideas are transformed in discourse.

### *Ideas and Discourses*

DI places ideas and discourses in an institutional context. Schmidt (2020) sees *ideas*—the substantial content of discourses—as structures that are constantly changing and malleable and that are constantly reconstructed by conscious actors, who can also unconsciously change them while they are used. Within DI, ideas are regarded as part of the actor's manifestation of their ideational background ability; however, the actor can simultaneously consciously criticise the ideas while they are used as part of their discursive foreground ability (Schmidt, 2020).

Mehta (2011) stated that political researchers' use of ideas tends to occur at three different levels of generalisability:

1. Ideas can, in a limited sense, be *political solutions*, such as decisions to reduce the size of teaching groups. The implication, then, is that the problem occurs if the learning outcomes are weak and the goal is established in response to improving the learning outcomes. Furthermore, the ideas offer an opportunity to solve the problem and achieve the goals.
2. To understand political processes, one also needs an understanding of the role ideas to play in *defining problems*. A problem definition is a way of understanding a complex reality. How a problem is defined is an important factor in determining which political solutions are desirable. Many political discussions are about the level at which a problem should be defined and solved.
3. Furthermore, according to Mehta (2011), ideas can function as *general philosophies* or *zeitgeists*—broad ideas that go through different areas of society—and if they reach a level of assumptions that cannot be questioned, they will have a major impact on politics and society during the time in which they exist (Mehta, 2011).

According to Schmidt (2008), there are two kinds of ideas: *cognitive ideas* about 'what is and what should be done' and *normative ideas* that state 'what is good or bad about what is' and 'what should be done' (Schmidt, 2008, pp. 307–308). Cognitive ideas offer solutions to the problems that exist, define the problems to be solved, and identify methods for solving them. Cognitive ideas also consider how ideas are included in the deeper principle frameworks and norms within relevant

sciences or technical practices. By referring to the suitability of ideas, normative ideas bind values to political action and legitimise work. Normative ideas represent the public's aspirations and ideals and how they relate to principles and norms in public life. Furthermore, normative ideas can apply to values and norms that have recently emerged in a society or to long-term values that are part of a society's culture (Schmidt, 2002, 2008).

To find out how ideas are transformed from thought to action and how actors express them, Schmidt turned to the concept of *discourse*. For Schmidt, discourse includes not only what is said but also to whom and how an idea is said, as well as why and where it is said (Schmidt, 2008). Discourse can be defined as an interactive process in which principles are constructed and communicated in an institutional context (Schmidt, 2003).

Discourse includes ideas both as they are represented and in the interactive process through which they are conveyed. The ideas articulated in discourse are not easy to separate from the interests or institutional interactions expressed in the discourse, nor are they easy to separate from the interactions that create the forms of expression or from the cultural norms that frame the discourse. Thus, discourse can be seen as one of several variables that affect events and as a defining 'variable' because it makes it possible for public actors to create new ideas instead of just reflecting on them. Therefore, discourse makes it possible to map alternative patterns instead of simply following old patterns, and it reformulates cultural norms instead of only exemplifying them (Schmidt, 2003). Additionally, descriptions of the discursive process contribute to explanations of why some ideas are successful, and others are not based on how, to whom, and where they are presented (Schmidt, 2008). In discourse, representations of ideas can be expressed on different levels as different types of ideas (cognitive or normative) and in different formats, such as narratives, myths, collective memories, stories, and images.

Education is part of the public sphere. The public sphere is funded according to the politics of a country. Political science focuses on the public sphere, but sometimes it is especially focused on the policy sphere, in which policy actors engage each other in *coordinative discourses* around political constructions. Furthermore, the focus is sometimes on the political sphere, where political actors engage the public in a *communicative discourse* on political constructions (Schmidt, 2002). In the policy sphere, coordinative discourse occurs among groups of individuals and groups that jointly construct policy and program ideas. Policy actors (e.g., service providers, experts, interest groups, and activists) work together in different ways to coordinate policies and agreements among themselves. Coordinative discourse can be maintained by individuals who share normative and cognitive ideas in a kind of epistemic community or by individuals who clearly share ideas and have the opportunity to create policies (Schmidt, 2008).

Whether discourse contributes to the success of an idea is determined by how discursive endeavours can articulate the substantial content of the idea and maintain consistency and contingency across sectors of society (Schmidt, 2008). Discourse becomes successful when it is relevant, adequate, applicable, and suitable for the context and is consistent and coherent across different spheres of society. Discourse

becomes successful when speakers direct their speeches to the right audience at the right time and in the right way. Thus, discursive messaging needs to be convincing both at the knowledge level and the content level and must be convincing in normative terms (Schmidt, 2008).

## ***Institutions***

DI treats institutions as the context in which actors think, speak, and act, and as the result of those thoughts, words, and actions. Actors' internal institutions function as structures or limitations. External institutions can be created and changed by actors. Actions within the framework of an institution are not seen as products of the actors' rational actions within the framework of appropriate norms and rules. Instead, they are processes in which actors create and maintain institutions according to their ideational backgrounds and abilities (Schmidt, 2008).

An actor's ideational background ability supports the actor's ability to handle situations in a given context of meaning (i.e., the ideational rules or rationality of that environment). Institutional action can also be dictated by actors discursive foreground abilities, through which they can change or maintain their institutions. Actors' idealistic background abilities and discursive foreground abilities represent the communicative logic that enables actors to think, speak, and act outside their institutions, even if they are within them. Actors can free themselves from institutionalised rules, even though they use them, and they can persuade each other to change or maintain institutions (Schmidt, 2008).

## ***Power***

For discursive institutionalists, power is not defined exclusively by an objective position because ideas and values affect how power is exercised. Specifically, ideas and values affect the subjective perception of the position and give power to actors, even when they may lack a position of power. This can apply, for example, to social movements and enterprising actors who set agendas in policy or political spheres.

Carstensen and Schmidt (2016) explored ideational power within DI and defined ideational power as the capacity of actors (individuals or groups) to influence other actors' normative and cognitive perceptions by using elements of ideas. *Power through ideas* means that actors can persuade other actors to accept and adopt their way of thinking and acting with the help of elements of ideas. *Power over ideas* is related to obligatory power and the position of power. *Power in ideas* means that ideas have become accepted to the extent that they are no longer questioned and have become invisible or taken for granted, even if they de facto influence the actions of other actors (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 321).



Regulative Principles for Social Actions

NAT offers a language and a theory regarding education and educational leadership, while DI provides a framework for following and even understanding how educational and political ideas are transformed in discourse. In discourses, basic constitutive concepts of individual aspects and basic regulatory concepts of social aspects can be followed (see Fig. 12.2). As DI provides us with a framework for following how theories of education are transformed in society in a municipality, it concerns the processes that can be observed in Benner’s figure below, where the theory of education and Bildung are combined with basic concepts of individual and social aspects.

As shown in Fig. 12.1, the municipal educational institution is extremely complex because the ideas that steer municipal education are formed both nationally and municipally; they are both internal and external, and they are constantly transformed by reforms interpreted by both national and municipal actors. Sometimes, political considerations and power over ideas (i.e., positional power) dominate. Other times, it is educational leadership grounded in pedagogical and scientific ideas and the power to influence through and in ideas that dominate, although the practice forms are in a non-hierarchical relationship.

The discussion about non-affirmative educational leadership in a municipality in terms of DI can begin with Item (4) of Fig. 12.2, which highlights problems in society that need to be solved or developed through reforms. National educational

	<i>Constitutive basic concepts of the individual aspect</i>	<i>Regulative basic concepts of the social aspect</i>
<b>A Theories of education (Erziehung) (2:3)</b>	<b>(1) Summoning to self-activity</b>	<b>(3) Pedagogical transformation of societal influences and requirements</b>
<b>B Theories of Bildung (1:4)</b>	<b>(2) <i>Bildsamkeit (Bildsamkeit)</i> as attunement (<i>Bestimmtsein</i>) of humans to receptive and spontaneous corporeity, freedom, historicity and linguisticity</b>	<b>(4) Non-hierarchical order of cultural and societal practices</b>
<b>C Theories of educational institutions and their reform (1/2:3/4)</b>		

Fig. 12.2 Four basic concepts of pedagogical thinking and acting with associated theories of education and Bildung (*Erziehungs- und Bildungstheorien*). (Benner, Chap. 2, this volume)

reforms are negotiated and depend on political power relations. The discourse can be coordinative or communicative, depending on what power relations and ideas are expressed in it. Sometimes, higher educational leadership cooperatively steers the discourse, and at other times, the public is involved or demands to be involved. At both the national and municipal levels, the actors are often political parties and organisations, such as a strong teachers' union.

As national educational laws and reforms pour down from the national to the municipal level, another discourse that involves local politicians, educational officials, and parents is launched. The local discourse depends on the strength of the steering instruments used at the national level to achieve the reform and whether they are laws that need to be strictly followed or only recommendations that can be locally applied by relatively autonomous municipalities. National curriculum reforms are examples of reforms that are strongly demanding but with negotiable details at the municipal level. This is the case in Finland, for example.

Autonomous municipalities can reform their educational systems without national influence. Those that reformers consider (schools with teachers) are, therefore, closer to those in the municipality who make the decisions, and again, internal and external institutions are affected by ideas evolving through coordinative or communicative discourse. Every citizen has educational experience, and many municipal citizens have children enrolled in schools that are to be reformed. Therefore, every citizen has the opportunity to make their voice heard. Still, as municipal power relations and strategies vary, it might be demanding for citizens to be involved in educational reform matters in a municipality, and they might rely on their elected representatives. National laws and scientific influence are important in granting pupils freedom—in determining children's right to choose their own destinies. If municipal economic and political power interests or municipal traditions are powerful, pupils' freedom might be negatively affected or compromised.

If reforms have been decided upon and the 'what' behind them is reasonably clear, then the reforms move to the 'how', as observed in Item 3 of Fig. 12.2, pedagogical transformation and societal influences and requirements. Because pedagogical reforms always have economic implications, the elected municipal representatives still have power over the ideas. Here, however, the discourse might be dominated more by educational officers with a background in the educational sciences. Every citizen has had an educational experience, but if they are not particularly interested in educational matters, they might lean on tradition and experiences from their own schooling from years past to inform their opinions on the actual reform. Here, educational officers, elected representatives on educational boards, principals, and teachers can choose to involve citizens and parents in communicative discourse about the reform, thus enabling every actor's internal institution to make sense of the external institutional changes that are needed to lead to the best reform policy. Societal changes can be difficult to implement, and this especially applies to changes to old societal institutions, such as education.

The basic constitutive concepts of individual aspects leading to the summoning of self-activity (1) are obvious through (3) and (4) in Fig. 12.2 because it is human actors who invent and implement ideas and reforms, although they are situated in

external educational institutions. However, if one continues with the example of a municipality having decided upon a reform, then the summoning to self-activity (1) in Fig. 12.2 on every level is also obvious. The chair of the educational board summons the director of education to implement the reform. The director then gathers together the principals in the municipality in meetings, summoning them to self-activity as a very concrete act of pedagogical leadership. The principals take the reform ideas to their schools and present them to the teachers, and so on. The schools invite parents to discuss how the reform might be implemented in the local schools. However, if we believe in non-affirmative educational leadership, we cannot know exactly how every actor will interpret the summoning; the end result is open. The well-educated autonomous educational staff will interpret the reform according to local conditions, continue the discourses, and thus, by working together, change the ideas and the internal and external institutions.

Again, if we consider non-affirmative educational leadership and autonomous actors, the reform ideas can come from below as well—not as top-down ideas but as bottom-up ideas and discourses. Power in ideas can be executed by local actors who see a need for reform, get other citizens to join them, and create a discourse so strong that it changes the internal and external institutions in the democratic municipality. Power in ideas can also be executed by local actors who are against reform, and they might involve local media, social media, and influential groups in acts of resistance.

## Discussion

A non-affirmative interpretation of pedagogical leadership in a democratic education system means that pedagogical leaders, elected representatives, teachers, and citizens are allowed and required to participate in the joint decisions that affect a country, municipality, or school's educational activities (Uljen & Rajakaltio, 2017). NAT offers a language for educational theories but not for structure—for how ideas evolve in changing institutions in discourses. Thus, NAT was complemented by DI.

The DI and NAT originate from different fields of science, but both can be used to investigate and describe public society and places of education. The education system is value-bound, and the ideas that promote educational progress can be assessed at different societal levels. Ideas can be traced both at the general-society level (i.e., national discourses on the role of education and upbringing in contemporary society) and at the individual level. The transformation of ideas can be followed at different levels of society (e.g., from transnational and national policy levels to everyday pedagogical conditions in schools and municipalities, and vice versa). Actors' freedom to act at various levels is framed by current laws, but from a non-affirmative perspective, actors can and must pursue their ideas through public debates and activities.

The intention was to explore how NAT and DI could complement each other to expand the investigation into educational and pedagogical leadership and how

public interests are transformed into pedagogical practice. On which issues is it beneficial to initiate an extended debate and involve citizens? Which cases require more limited and restrictive treatment within traditional institutional frameworks? NAT offers a language—a theory to explain pedagogy and pedagogical leadership—while DI offers a framework for how pedagogical and political leadership ideas are transformed into discourse.

According to the NAT perspective and as informed by the concepts of *Bildsamkeit*, encouragement of self-activity, and the non-hierarchical order relationship, all actors possess the freedom to act and the opportunity to take the initiative and provoke discussions and public debates on matters that they consider important.

In this context, central concepts taken from DI are idea, discourse, and institution because the text touches on leadership power. DI deals with the everyday activities of actors and organisations. Furthermore, DI provides insight into the processes that occur behind official discourses and allows room for an understanding of how non-affirmative pedagogical leadership is exercised. By accepting DI's conceptual apparatus in relation to the education department's pedagogical leadership, the ideational background ability of leadership can be expressed as supporting its discourse-driven foreground ability to maintain or change the educational institutions they lead. If the internal institutions of leadership correspond to those of other actors in this context, the activities of the joint external institution may be strengthened. If they differ, the discursive abilities of all actors are involved, and the common internal and external institutions may change. The department of education is sometimes externally reformed to respond to societal needs; at that stage, everyone's internal institutions are challenged, and non-affirmative pedagogical leadership is then challenged to create new joint internal and external institutions by encouraging actors to self-activity and believing in everyone's ability to learn new things and change.

If educational and pedagogical leadership agree with NAT, they might find themselves mediating between different praxis to preserve and maintain the freedom of the pupil to develop according to their own needs and ambitions. All actors in the municipality can take part in the discourse about what local schools should and could be. There can be high expectations for how the school, as an institution, should maintain local society, especially since many countries, such as Finland, value education and have seen their country prosper due to rising educational levels. In Finland, for instance, the national constitution and education laws are clear about the rights of youth, and society and caretakers need to keep that in mind when school reforms take place. The questions posed at the beginning of the chapter—*In which issues is it beneficial to involve citizens? Which cases require more limited and restrictive treatment within traditional institutional frameworks?* It can be answered separately from decisions regarding people and matters that require secrecy. In this context, a communicative discourse about education in a municipality is preferred, although a coordinative discourse is legal and correct. Everyone with an interest in the local school should have the opportunity to use their voice.

Within DI, ideas are the substantial content of discourse, and it is through discourse that ideas are shaped and reshaped. Pedagogical leadership contributes to the change of ideas in discourse at all levels of society. At the time of writing, the

COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing. Over the last 2 years, the educational system has had to adapt to new situations and function at a distance, with only some groups or all pupils in school and staff in or out of schools depending on the infection rate. Decisions about the work of schools have been made at the highest national, regional, and local municipal levels. Educational leadership has been challenged in ways never before experienced, and different societal norms are now visible like never before. Similarly, the different social circumstances in which young people live and the inequalities that need to be addressed are more visible than ever. The mediating role of non-affirmative educational and pedagogical leadership will be much needed in the near future and must be strengthened. We need ongoing, enlightened conversations about education, pedagogy, and *Bildung* at the local level.

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