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## Towards the Future Through a Democratic and Non-affirmative Bildung Discourse

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**Accepted for publication:**

### **Towards the future through a democratic and non-affirmative *Bildung* discourse**

This exciting volume edited by Lejf Moos, Elisabet Nihlfors and Jan Merok Paulsen from Denmark, Sweden and Norway, respectively, contributes to an ongoing international paradigm shift in educational leadership research, taking it from a functionalist to a critically reflexive paradigm, more strongly based in education research.

In order to be successful with such an initiative something has to be pointed out as less fruitful, while at the same time outlining features of an alternative agenda. The authors of this volume approaches this task by successfully taking its fundamental point of departure in a distinction between two policy and research traditions. Most educational leadership researchers are familiar with the first, fewer with the second. The first approach is an *outcomes-based discourse* while the second is a *general education* discourse. The editors locate the birth of the first approach to the neo-liberal politics that developed rapidly during the 1990's after the fall of the Berlin wall. Given that education, innovation work and research stepwise got such a significant role in knowledge driven economies, the instrumental role of education in general was emphasized. Simultaneously most western societies experienced a nationalist orientation as well as an ideological right-wing turn. In retrospect we see how this put an emphasis on traditional back-to-basics schooling with an increased and conservative focus on subject matter teaching. Content- and context-neutral general competencies like language and mathematics were also strongly supported by OECD. This volume recognizes that a connected decentralized accountability policy strengthened and directed the interest for educational leadership research in the Nordic countries from the 1980's onwards. Educational leadership started to answer questions like how leadership could increase school's performance level.

This volume realizes and makes the case that contemporary mainstream educational leadership research came into being under influence of such specific economic, cultural, ideological and political circumstances. The *outcomes oriented discourse* captures metaphorically that change.

However, this instrumentalist and somewhat technical view of knowledge and education increasingly appear as a limited language for talking about what education might mean and should be about in a deeper sense of the word. As there is a need in education of today to move beyond instrumental competencies and brute subject matter knowledge that focus the attainment of predetermined knowledge, the language of education must change. Today, not only educational researchers, trained in a *Bildung* oriented general education paradigm, but also to an increasing degree policy makers, feel a growing uneasiness with such a view of education, schooling, curriculum making and leadership. After all, will we really be able to educate morally, politically, socially and culturally aware and reflective individual, cultural beings and citizens by such a performative and instrumentalist paradigm? How can control paradigm foster citizens for an unpredictable future? Well, it cannot. That the future is radically open and unpredictable was not only demonstrated by the global Covid-19 pandemic,

but something that the Western culture embraced in moving from a pre-modern to a modern view of the world. This move then required a new foundation for education. This foundation was first developed by the modern classics like Rousseau, Herder, Kant, Herbart and Schleiermacher. This *Bildung* centered tradition of human growth has since revitalized educational research over and over again. This is also the case in the present volume.

This volume contributes to the ongoing paradigm shift to replace the outcomes oriented paradigm with a *Bildung* oriented paradigm. In this volume a *democratic Bildung discourse* means "empowering professionals as well as students to learn as much as possible and develop non-affirmative, critical and creative interpretation and negotiation competences in doing so."

During the second decade of the third millennium, that is during 2010s, we have witnessed several initiatives in Nordic educational leadership research representing genuine "of the box" way of reasoning. This volume definitely belongs to one of these. By viewing educational leaders as professionals in education rather than leadership, this volume sees the field as connected to educational policy and philosophy, curriculum research as well as *Didaktik*.

After originally having been very much a US based phenomenon the past three decades saw educational leadership research establish itself internationally during the 80s, where it had previously been a neglected field in educational research. The 90's and 00's were about expansion and differentiation. The past decade 2010s, however, turned out as those critical years where the field restructured itself on a broader scale. This volume confirms this transitional decade. At the same time, it contributes in inspiring ways to shaping a path for future research in educational leadership research. There are promising signs indicating that the future of educational leadership research belongs to a democratic and non-affirmative *Bildung* discourse, of which the volume edited by Lejf Moos, Elisabet Nihlfors and Jan Merok Paulsen is a valuable and welcome contribution.

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