



Carrying Leadership Knowledge Across Borders

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Over the last decades, educational policy and reforms in the public sector in general have raised expectations of schools, especially concerning the output of schools. It can be argued that several waves of public management reform have attempted to modernize the education systems of many countries, by implementing accountability arrangements and specific leadership language and behavior in an effort to bring about changes related to structures and management processes. During the last 15 years, we have also witnessed a growing global movement toward evidence-based practices. School principals are increasingly experiencing a work environment in which student test scores and benchmarking take center stage. Much faith is put in assessment tools to generate data to demonstrate effectiveness, efficiency, excellence, and competitiveness, but the data are also intended to be a basis for improving educational practices. Generally, school leaders and teachers are expected to apply a variety of knowledge sources, and not only test scores, in their professional work. Recent developments show a growing number of meta-studies and research syntheses intended to inform key actors in education systems about the current state of knowledge. This is due to increased knowledge production and access to research and information in a global, digitalized world, as well as a strong belief in evidence as a basis for decision-making on the policy level and in practice (Bhatti et al, 2006). In the Scandinavian countries, Black & Williams' formative assessment and Hattie's visible learning have been particularly popular in recent years, along with increasing expectations of school leaders to use student performance data to improve school quality.

Because research evidence is often presented as global and general ideas, those ideas can easily be carried across country borders on the policy level. An evidence-oriented policy agenda is, however, often criticized for its linear rationale, and for being too 'top-down'. Critical voices also emphasize the lack of context sensitivity, as teaching and learning take place in contexts characterized by a high degree of unpredictability and complexity, and decisions are often made based on normative judgements (Biesta, 2007). In many ways, a stronger focus on student outcomes and evidence represents a break with the traditional conceptions of knowledge and key values in the teaching profession. Whereas research evidence is often presented in abstract and general terms, the traditional professional language used in schools is based on experience, context, and a focus on student relations (Lortie, 1975).

In this paper, I focus on how school leaders meet expectations about evidence-based practice and use of student performance data, as well as how they carry abstract knowledge into local practices by problem-framing and sense-making processes. With this as a basis, I would like to raise questions about what counts as evidence, who should be involved in defining it, and what kind of rationale we want our research to be based upon.

References:

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