

## Management of professionals in school practices

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Alice Juel Jacobsen and Anders Buch

## Management of Professionals in School Practices

**Abstract:** This article investigates organizational reform changes as they are constructed in the interaction between managers and teachers in a school context. The empirical basis is comprised of case studies carried out in Danish upper secondary schools. An ethnographic approach and a concept of paradox related to an understanding of professionals are used to investigate the practices involved in the change processes. The article argues that the ambiguity of a *primus inter pares* management position among professionals leads to several paradoxes, deadlocks, and detours, all of which affect the work for change in the schools. Significant paradoxes are identified on the basis of the empirical material, and methodological advantages of a proposed paradox perspective, are demonstrated.

**Keywords:** *Primus inter pares* management, professionals, paradoxes, organizational change, school setting

Reform of the public sector has been on the agenda in Denmark, as well as in many other Western countries, for the last two to three decades. New Public Management (NPM) has had significant implications for management and professionals who handle the changes in order to create new public organizations. This article focuses on the relations between managers and professionals in upper secondary schools and explores the strategies that unfold in daily organizational life. The aim of the study is twofold: 1) to investigate the management of professionals in practice in the changing upper secondary schools empirically and 2) to introduce the notion of paradox as a productive analytical concept that can bring forward ambiguities, deadlocks, and detours in managerial practices. The article's empirical basis is two Danish upper secondary schools implementing a school reform initiated in 2005 (Reform Act, 2004a, 2004b). The area under investigation in this article comprises the challenges and implications for the actors who are involved in translating the changes into practice. More precisely the article addresses the following research question: How is management practiced in the situated organizational settings? By using an ethnographic approach together with a paradox concept related to an understanding of professionals, the article contributes new knowledge about management in relation to professionals in the schools.

The article begins by presenting the reform initiatives demanded of the schools before positioning the study in the empirical research literature. Next, we present the understanding of autonomy inherent in the professionals' role, both as it is described in the classic literature and in recent sociological theory. The purpose is to sum up the research literature as a background for the empirical analysis. The following section presents the methodological approach based on ethnography and the paradox concept. We then investigate the interactions between managers and employees in practice and present the analytical results of the study. We conclude with a discussion of the broader, more wide-reaching implications of the findings and

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present the research contributions of the article.

## **New agendas for upper secondary schools**

According to Power (1997), the NPM ideas can be characterized as a series of overlapping elements reorganizing the public sector: “It emphasises cost control, financial transparency, the atomization of organizational subunits, the decentralization of management autonomy, ... and enhancement of accountability to customers for the quality of service via creation of performance indicators” (Power, 1997, p. 43). These tendencies are nested in the school reform as central elements of the strategic result-orientation of the school. The point of departure for the reform is a new concept of knowledge and inter-disciplinary education emphasized as the most important competition parameter in the global knowledge society (Reform Act, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). This is a new agenda for the schools with consequences at an organizational level. Teacher collaboration now becomes an inevitable element in ensuring inter-disciplinarity. The school reform legislation also contains a requirement to establish team structures to ensure the collaboration (Reform Act, 2005). In this connection, a central instrument is described. The instrument is a study plan which should be unfolded and created by the teacher teams in order to function as a framework for collaboration within and between the disciplines. The study plan tool is combined with an obligation to provide continuous internal evaluation and external documentation. As for management, they are called for, to fulfill a new role as supervisors and personnel leaders: “Keywords in the relationship between management and team are visibility, supervision and sparring” (Reform Act, 2005). A long tradition of operational management is thus to be transformed into visible, supervising, and goal setting management. Overall, the work can no longer be performed only by utilization of professional knowledge. This is so for both teachers and managers. Managers are faced with expectations of leaving well-known domains of operational management and performing with an emphasis on visible personal management and change management. As for teachers they are challenged by the demands of collaborative rather than individual performance as well as the demands of measurement and accountability. We argue in line with Alvesson (2004) that professionals are under pressure and have to cope with tensions in ambiguous organizational contexts when reform initiatives are meant to transform the knowledge work. Thus we choose a paradox perspective to pave the way for exploring how tensions are prominent in the management processes and subsequently attempted to be resolved. Our use of the paradox perspective is further unfolded in the method section.

As is very often the case in schools, the managers in the schools under investigation are recruited among the teachers according to the *primus inter pares* principle (Møller, 2009). They are former teachers with the same educational background as the teachers they are expected to manage. The study investigates how a position as *primus inter pares* manager affects organizational work practices. The professionals’ implementation of the reform is, in practice, decisive for the reform impact, both in extent and in character (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Scott, 2008). It is important, therefore, to generate detailed knowledge about professionals’ interpretation and management of the challenges inherent in the reforms of their daily work.

## **Management in school settings**

Many studies focus on the need for management by emphasizing how management should be practiced for schools to be successful, fewer studies draw attention to the

way management evolves in school settings from a relational perspective (Bolden, 2011; Helstad & Møller, 2013). According to Bolden (2011), an overall interest in shared or dispersed forms of management has, however, increased over the last decade, although not all variants have achieved the same degree of attention. The notion of distributed leadership has been especially influential in shaping how management has been conceived and investigated in school settings (Bolden, 2011).

In the perspective of distributed leadership, it has been possible to attend to the way institutional environment enters sense making when for instance novice school principals make sense of their new occupation that seems to encompass contradictions (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Spillane & Anderson 2014; Spillane, Harris, Jones, & Mertz, 2015). The distributed perspective contributes to the analysis that shows that the tensions connected to the leadership are not just a function of the choices of individuals, but rather they are inherent to the principal's job in general. In this way, Spillane et al. (2015) demonstrate how the school principal's choices are constrained by their school's positioning in the broader institutional sector. Thus much management research, from a distributed leadership perspective, focus on the principals and teachers as individuals. In this paper, however, we address relational management traced in the interactions between employees and managers within the context of school changes. We consider management as a manifestation of conjoint action—as a collective activity. From this point of view, we see management as emergent. In taking this perspective, attention turns from generic accounts of attributes and actions of individual managers to situated management practices (Nicolini, 2013). There is also a tendency for much research of distributed leadership to focus on the holders of formal positions. The six cases of distributed leadership, for instance, presented by Spillane and Diamond (2007) focus especially on the role of the principal. In this way, opportunities for recognizing the contribution of informal managers, such as employees, for instance, are limited. A few studies shed light on the tensions and contradictions related to leadership in school settings from a relational view. Helstad and Møller (2013), as well as Vennebo and Ottesen (2012), should be mentioned. The authors explore how the participants position themselves and others through negotiations in meetings. Their studies reveal various coping strategies of professionals as they handle emerging tensions related to leadership. It is also illustrated how school leadership is interactively achieved in social activities (Vennebo & Ottesen 2012). The concept of perspective is used to illustrate the plurality of authorial sources of influence from which leadership emanates. The authors, however, also point to the need for further enhancement of our understanding of the contradictions that emerge in local leadership in schools impacted by the societal activity of regulating schools. In this article, we will address the specific character of the tensions and contradictions that are at play in the school leadership. We suggest a conceptual framework for unpacking the specifics of the tensions based on a relational management perspective and with a focus on contradictions that emerge in the schools. This article contributes with an in-depth analysis of practices involved in the implementation of the change initiatives as well as an understanding of previously unthematized management paradoxes and their anchoring in the *primus inter pares* management of schools.

### ***Professionals' autonomy in classic and recent literature***

This section presents the central ideas about professionals as they are described in classic sociology as well as in recent critical literature. The characteristics of the research literature understanding of professional practice under change are summarized as a theoretical background for the empirical analysis in the study.

No consensus exists in sociology about the definition of a profession, nor about precisely which groups are assimilated into a profession (Alvesson, 2004).

Examination of the literature shows, however, that the question of autonomy is considered the most important characteristic when differentiating between professionals and other types of occupational groups (Freidson, 2001; Jespersen, 2012). It is considered to be a characteristic of considerable discretion in enacting professionalism in complex situations. Due to the complexity and uncertainty of the situations that professionals encounter they are not supposed to be liable to fixed procedures and pre-specified rules. They must instead exercise their expertise according to the specificities of concrete situations and their general professional outlook. It is by authority of their expert knowledge that they are given leeway to make situational specific judgements (Collins & Evans 2007). Autonomy is seen as being supported by the expert knowledge that professionals achieve through their specialized education and professional socialization (Freidson 2001). This autonomous role is still an often-repeated theme in more recent organizational theory and studies of professionals (Jespersen, 2012; Noordegraaf, 2007, 2012). More recent studies also indicate, however, that the conceptions of professionalism are changing. This is particularly the case within the so-called semi-professions (Hjort, 2004). Noordegraaf (2007) argues that the developments within the post-industrial society's neoliberal management control and user control have weakened professional autonomy. At the same time, classical professionalism is challenged by the emergence of semi-professions in welfare states (teachers, nurses, etc.). Within schools, for example, we find a new kind of bureaucracy with the NPM initiatives that is characterized by rules that regulate professionals' work. The new ways of being a professional involve discussion, dialogue, and negotiations within the organizations—all of which challenge professionals' autonomy. In his governmentality study, Dahler-Larsen (2001) argue that professional autonomy is eroded by NPM initiatives by turning the professionals into agents for political strategies. Thus, the central question of professionals' autonomy and their relationships in the organizations are framed and influenced in a new way, and new forms of cooperation between managers and professionals emerge. On the one hand, this development challenges traditional professional autonomy while, on the other hand, it leads to new opportunities to influence regulatory instruments as well as standards that are set at the organizational level. Some researchers (Brint, 1994; Noordegraaf, 2007) argue that autonomy has become more restricted since no professional can claim full autonomy in confronting present changes and regulations regarding professional work. In this regard, Noordegraaf (2007) proposes a new frame for understanding professionalism in a knowledge society. He introduces the concept of hybrid professionalism in order to understand professionals in ambiguous domains. The concept refers to the challenge that managers, especially in public organizations, are confronted with. Public sector managers, who often have the same academic background as their employees, are faced with expectations of performing management professionally (personnel management, change management, and strategic management) and at the same time carrying out vocational and operational management (Noordegraaf, 2007).

Alvesson (2004, p. 48) also argues that organizations and working life, especially within what he defines as knowledge-intensive work, consist of distinctly ambiguous phenomena: Ambiguity means that a group of informed people are likely to hold multiple meanings or that several plausible interpretations can be made without more data or rigorous analysis making it possible to assess them. Alvesson notes further that it is necessary to acknowledge this ambiguity in research. The researcher must be willing to investigate the uncertainty that characterizes actors' activities in organizations, if the aim is to reach an understanding of the professional work processes. To Alvesson (2004), we can add that change processes in organizations intensify the ambiguous situations. Searching for new understandings and new practices in organizations will lead to an intensification of uncertainty and add ambiguity. It seems that Alvesson's concept of ambiguity has a special relevance for



understanding professionals' work-life in managerial change.

## **Methodological and conceptual approach to the study of processes in practice**

### ***Ethnographic approach***

The data in this investigation was generated from three medium-sized upper secondary schools, each with 400-500 students and about 50-60 teachers (Jacobsen, 2009). The material includes two surveys, observations of interaction between teachers and managers, and 40 in-depth interviews with managers and teachers as well as an analysis of written narratives regarding reform experiences produced by the participants. The data was generated over a period of two years. This means data was generated from the first preparatory phase of the reform in the fall of 2004 until the end of the first school year with the implementation of the reform in 2006. In this period, the exploration of the responsive processes between managers and employees were guided by such questions as: What were the managers' strategies of managing at the outset? How did the teachers react? And how were the processes evaluated after one year, both by the managers and by teachers? How were the reform ideas translated in the change processes in practice?

In the pursuit of answers to these questions, the observations and interviews provided the most important approaches to the research with the aim of unfolding a detailed ethnographic study of the practices at the schools (Jacobsen, 2014). However, the survey came to play a prominent role in the dialogue with the field of research. The research was presented at each of the schools, and a researcher was present while the questionnaires were filled out. The first survey focused on the management and teachers' expectations in relation to the central changes required by the reform. The final survey was a follow-up of the reform experiences after the first year. The final survey also made it possible to validate the conclusions of the study.

Fourteen central reform and pedagogic meetings during the school year were observed in order to explore negotiations between managers and employees regarding the reform work. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews comprise the interview base in the data material. The interviews lasted one to two hours each. They were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. It might be claimed that by including interviews, an interpretation of another order was chosen than that of participatory observation (Rübow, 2003). An agreement was also made, however, to make the second round of interviews, after the observations, with the same participants after one year. In the second set of interviews, the participants reflected on their understanding of the process, and in this way, the observations could be validated.

The advantage of this design was that the recorded interviews, in transcribed form, became a reproduction of everyday life that could be analysed in ways that are not always possible in participatory observation studies. With transcriptions, it is possible to study the stream of words and make the analysis ethnographically relevant (Rübow 2003, p. 241). An example of this is an observation of contradictory practices that unfolded at the beginning of the fieldwork at one of the schools. A new level of management seemed to emerge consisting of a handful of teachers providing agendas for reform meetings and taking responsibility for the meeting processes, while formal management remained more or less invisible during the process. Interviews with the participants and thorough analysis coding and categorizing made it possible to put these tensions and paradoxes into words, as well as provide the researchers with an understanding of the context of management in this organization.

It became clear that there was a pattern and a setting in the organization that formed this way of interacting.

Integration of the interviews with the observations thus contributed to the authors' deepened understanding of the management context in the organization. The observations were from the beginning relatively unstructured; they focused on the management practices and employee reactions in connection with the implementation of reform changes. The data was coded and tested through further observations and interviews. Gradually, a higher degree of structure was achieved in both observations and interviews until, finally, new concepts and theory were developed into new insight. With this basis, it has been possible to formulate the emerging paradoxes in the practice of the organizations in relation to the organizational change processes.

Before summing up the analytical strategy in three steps, the paradox perspective is presented in the next section.

### *Paradoxes*

A paradox perspective was used in order to understand the interaction process between managers and professionals in ambiguous work situations. According to Alvesson (2004), professionals' identities are under pressure in ambiguous organizational contexts when reform initiatives transform knowledge work. To cope with the organizational tensions actors typically accentuate contradictions to render the ambiguous context intelligible (Lewis, 2000). Paradoxes are thus produced by actors as sense-making strategies. Reducing ambiguous situations to bipolar objectified paradoxes relieves cognitive and emotional tensions (even though the tensions still reside in the paradoxes).

We chose to use Quinn and Cameron's (1988) definition of paradoxes, which is often used as the basis of studies of paradoxes in organizations (Lewis, 2000; Stacey, 2003; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Quinn and Cameron (1988, p. 2) understand paradoxes as a simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements. They further specify that paradoxes contain elements that are both contradictory and connected; elements that seem logical in isolation but function irrationally together. The paradox literature usually claims that this way of seeing paradoxes, as dichotomies, can lead to simplified either-or thinking that requires a choice between the poles in the paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Stacey, 2003; Lewis, 2000). An alternative to this bipolar approach, according to Wendy Smith and Marianne Lewis (2011), is to see paradoxes as comprising competing demands that must be handled simultaneously. In other words, instead of choosing between one or the other, it is necessary to take both poles into consideration. This way of thinking has a dual both-and structure (Stacey, 2003; Smith & Lewis, 2011). The bipolar as well as this dual approach, however, still carry the idea of eliminating contradictions. At the same time, these approaches have a prescriptive aim for organizational management (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

We have sought a theoretical shift that focuses attention on understanding the relational dynamics in the organizations. For this reason, we use the concept as an empirical analytical lens. We have chosen a strategy of analysis that accentuates a focus on the empirical data identifying tensions and contradiction in the interactions of the actors. The analytical strategy can be summarized in three steps.

In the first step of the analytical approach, it has been essential to maintain the rich and complex ethnographic data on the materials' own premises. The approach to this very first data processing can be characterized as phenomenological and hermeneutic, and based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as described by Smith and Osborne (2003). This phenomenological approach was used because it provided a framework for generating empirically based themes. In the second step of the analysis, there has been a focus on the tensions and contradictions

in the interactions among actors. The aim of the second step was to specify the paradoxes in the relational management processes. On the basis of the first two steps, the third step of the analysis comprises a summary of the paradox themes at each school and across the schools. Related to this, there was a focus on the actors' way of handling the paradoxes.

Using the above-described approach, we have found interaction patterns that are irregular, unstable, unpredictable, and locally constructed by the actors in practice. The strategy of analysis is not prescriptive or normative but rather descriptive. We call the paradoxes organizational when they emerge in the relationship between managers and employees and have consequences for the organizational work processes.

The results of the investigation are presented in the following sections. After a brief introduction to the organizations and management of the case schools, the paradox patterns related to the construction of the changes are presented at HTX and STX respectively. The themes presented are patterns that constitute the dynamics between the participating actors in the change processes. The first part of each school presentation focuses on managements' reflections on how the professionals can best be handled in relation to implementing the reform. Thereafter, teacher reactions to the managers' initiatives are presented, as well as their reactions to the implementation in practice of central reform demands.

## **Reform, professionals and paradoxes in practices**

### ***HTX and STX***

At the time of the investigation, the case school, STX, is an independent institution housed in its own building, whereas HTX is based in a larger organizational context as part of a technical school. HTX is thus a department with its own educational characteristics, but at the same time integrated within a larger organizational management set of values and economic responsibility. At this point, the two case schools differ organizationally, but they are similar in that the daily management is the primary responsibility of one person assisted by three middle managers. Managers at both schools are recruited according to the *primus inter pares* principle. The head of education and middle managers at HTX were formerly teachers at the school. At STX, the head of education was a teacher at a similar school, and the same applies to the middle managers. The two schools' decision-making processes are organized in different ways. At STX, decision making is delegated to a committee structure where the committee's work is based on consensus processes; they discuss until they agree. At HTX, decisions are made collectively in the Pedagogic Council after presentations by relevant working groups. The following section presents the empirical practices connected with the implementation of the reform changes in the two schools.

### ***HTX: Visible management through the backdoor***

According to the reform of upper secondary schools, transparency and supervision are keywords for the relationship between managers and employees (Reform Act. 2005). Managers are expected to contribute visible goals and frameworks for the reform effort as part of the school's holistic framework. As the basis for the preparatory reform phase at HTX, the head of education expresses his view of management by referring to the teachers' background as academics and professionals and their wish to be self-determining:

[I]n the school environment where people are mostly academics they don't like

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anyone to decide very much for them. We can shout and scream at them, but if they see it as management, “we” [the teachers] are insulted because “we know very well how it all should be.”

The manager thus communicates that employees are alienated in relation to the management. This is in line with the traditional understanding of professionals. With this as a basic condition for management, in the perception of managers, there is little room for open and visible management at the school. Seen in relation to the picture of the autonomous professional who is represented as alienated from management, it can be a complicated task to live up to expectations for change. Therefore, a flat structure and equality seem to become essential management goals. A consequence of this approach to management, in relation to the new ideal of visible management, is that it is practised sporadically and with the notion that management has to be sneaked in. In connection with implementation of a new evaluation system, the manager states:

One can say that some of the ideas we have had about these things [reform initiatives], we sneak them in when we talk now with people about the different things that there should be. I mean, we haven’t—I mean, we haven’t forced anything that way around.

The management initiatives are thus half-hidden, but since management is necessary, it is sometimes sneaked in. The managers themselves sometimes indicate that their management is through the back door. An employee describes the school’s management by the term fluid management, explaining:

It is not especially transparent, what is happening when things are fluid ... and it is precisely right there we have the big problem. A middle manager expresses what in her view characterizes decent management ... of course, it would be possible, but it would not be decent if a manager is not also a teacher while being a manager. I mean ... I think that we should all teach.

It is managements’ assumption that it becomes much more acceptable for both managers and employees when managers are still teachers—and therefore in an equal relationship with employees. In order to manage the reform’s concrete changes that match the equality ideal at HTX, formal management chooses to enable a group of dedicated members of the staff to drive the change processes. The formal manager creates a management level of employees that often act as dedicated initiative-takers. They are appointed to act as a driving force in the change process by using “the pen and the whip,” as the head of education formulates it. In this way, the figures in the forefront of the change process remain the teachers’ colleagues and equals. The *primus inter pares* aspect constitute the way leadership is understood, even though this causes ambiguities when the reform is put into practice. The idea of a collegial community is also reflected in the managers’ way of verbalizing management. Employees are consistently referred to as colleagues, and management is described in vague biological metaphors—groups are “crystallized,” they “sprout,” “emerge” or “grow naturally” and are “dynamic.” In this way, the processes are naturalized. The exercise of transparent management, without managers being recognized as such by the teachers, leads to paradoxical practices that permeate everyday life at the school. In other words, the daily management of the reform at HTX is full of detours in order to manage via non-management.

### ***The teachers’ responsive processes***

A recurring theme from the reform implementation among the teachers at HTX is

that multi-disciplinary and team collaboration is regarded as the greatest challenge. At the same time, however, there is no doubt that the changes towards more collaboration are regarded as desirable. This view is maintained after the first year with the reform. A teacher says:

It is really good to make such collaborative projects. We are forced into connections that we would probably not have chosen by ourselves. It is very motivating, and you can feel that the students are motivated as well. Collaboration has been much better, but not easier.

The new collaborative processes seem to live up to expectations. But they also result in unexpected challenges that have to be met underway. The fluid management results in managers not necessarily reacting when employees seek management. In relation to a conflict involving cooperation among teachers in two disciplines at HTX, the ball is tossed back to management when employees request intervention. The chairman of one of the disciplines submits a written complaint about the way the new student courses have been developed on the group's behalf. He writes that when technology is the only discipline that is delegated responsibility for the coordinating dimension of a new course it causes dissatisfaction in relation to other disciplines. This has led to a technology course where the other disciplines just trail along because the technology teachers will not cooperate. It turned out, however, that this concerned a challenge to collaboration that had long been thematized, but it was reinforced by the reform's obligatory demand for collaboration. The demand for collaboration also made the need for management support in the difficult new collaboration processes visible. This need was not met, however, since the manager never answered the complaint. According to the chairman of the social science group, such absence of management leads to the formation of unofficial and very unpleasant power constellations between colleagues:

[W]e get these unofficial power constellations—strong teachers, weak teachers. Who is good at keeping the others down? It can't be right that we have to sit and quarrel with colleagues and correct one another.

In this way, an organizational paradox emerged in the relationship between manager and employee that had consequences for the change process. The ambiguous situation let managers' refrain from managing on the basis of the assumption that teachers' autonomy should be protected, while the teachers seek more management in relation to the difficult aspects of the change processes. In this situation, an organizational deadlock arises that in this context could be called a *primus inter pares* deadlock, in other words, a situation in which each part reacts to the other part in such a way that a mutual, but for both parts unsatisfactory, interaction pattern is maintained (Spencer & Dale, 1979).

The reform's obligatory demand that teachers are no longer to see themselves as individual teachers but to understand themselves as employees in an organization is a mixed experience for the teachers at HTX. As the preceding section illustrates, the reform lived up to the positive expectations in some important areas. After the first reform year, however, there are still concerns regarding team collaboration. A comprehensive administrative responsibility is laid onto the team structure. During the first year with the reform, teachers experienced extra team tasks to be very time-consuming and create problems on a daily basis. One teacher recounts an aspect of the reform that what worries her/him the most: It is the all-encompassing registration of everything, especially study plans, both the intended plans and the realized ones. That's really what everyone is talking about, what everyone hates, and almost no one can see the point of.

The descriptive work introduced by the reform in order to create cohesion in the organization—and as a result, better teaching—is experienced by the teachers to

draw attention away from the job of teaching because of the administrative overload. Ambiguous situations like these also cause the employees to seek more management, as a need for support arises in relation to team collaboration work. An interview with the head of education about the challenge of team collaboration makes it clear, however, that the strategy for daily practice in the organization is that it is to continue to be as flat as possible. This means that the team's functions and the distribution of responsibility will not be outlined further. Structures for team collaboration are lacking, and the fluid responsibility is continually debated in the teams.

### ***STX: Visible management and discrete control***

At STX, all managers teach, based on the assumption that the distance between manager and teacher must not be too wide, and the managers have no doubt that this is the way it should be. It is considered important to put "your finger in the ground," as one manager expresses it, and remain connected with teaching. The head of education also provides insight into the reasons managers seek to level out the differences between managers and teachers:

[T]he school environment is very resistant to management—or not resistant, but distant. We [the teachers] prefer as little management from outside as possible. From outside—that's me! From outside, that is everything but the teachers themselves. This kind of ambiguity regarding management is very difficult to deal with.

The ambiguity articulated in the above quotation can be regarded as the double-pressure that is experienced when having to navigate between the reform's demand for visible management while at the same time ensuring a close collegial relationship with the teachers. In practice, management at this school agrees that an important aspect of their work as managers is managing through communication. One of the school's managers describes his management as follows:

To me, management is dialogue, and dialogue, and more dialogue. I have some more or less loose ideas about value-based management that it is through conversation and definition of common values that we achieve our goals. That's my general idea as a manager. I am not the type that issues orders at all. As a manager, you have to have a great deal of empathy, to know what is going on in the individual teams. You need good communication skills, and you must be very flexible.

The same manager states that employees must be pushed, but without feeling that they are being managed or constrained by the manager. Management is vaguely defined as: "the intuition of knowing when to intervene as administrator. In other words, help and guide without it being felt like management. I am actually there just to push the process further ... and this is what I feel is the really big job."

To the question of how, with a very wide independence margin, it is possible for a manager to follow up on the work being done, she/he answers that this is, of course, done by asking questions. The teachers cannot be placed under surveillance; on the contrary, trust is essential. At the same time, however, there is a need for some control. It should be carried out, but discretely: "We follow up on the formal things that are done. Are the things on the website like it should be on the website? You can control these things very discretely."

At HTX, management is implemented through the backdoor; at STX, managers do follow up on the reform initiatives, but discretely and invisibly. The ideal management keeps a low profile and emphasizes equality in relation to the employees. Managing in this way, while also living up to the demands for more

visible management, thus becomes a paradox at STX—a paradox that leads to other related paradoxes in the organization. Also here, there are parallels to the dynamics at HTX.

### ***The teachers' responsive processes***

After the first period with the implementation of multi-disciplinary collaboration in practice, the teachers were asked about their experiences. The interviews reflected a dominant pattern. New opportunities to work with colleagues were considered one of the best aspects of the reform, but collaboration was not without problems. One teacher summarizes the experiences in this way: "It is positive and irritatingly difficult." Closer investigation of the positive aspects shows that collaboration is experienced to be connected with a social dimension, and in connection with this, a supporting collegiality and professional exchange that replaces the former competing collegial relations. A teacher explains:

I think it has been extremely rewarding that we as teachers can now receive professional inputs from each other and now we don't just sit at home and prepare the individual lesson. We develop our professional understanding together, instead of just having a meeting and a chat once in a while to show how much cleverer we are than the others.

It seems that the need for professional feedback is legitimized by the reform's demand for multi-disciplinarity. In the discussion about forming groups for the multi-disciplinary collaboration, however, it also becomes clear that there are different ways of tackling this process. The process was characterized by a great deal of anarchy and discomfort. A teacher explains:

[B]ut there will always be some who remain outside the groups; you can't just decide to join. In addition to having our class team, some teams stick together because they work well together. They will quickly decide what a course should be about, and then others just can't be part of it.

The multi-disciplinary work processes were left to the teachers' self-organization, and they stated that the process suffered from a lack of coordination and shifts in responsibility from one person to another. It all ended well, but this was a result of alliances that arose by chance. One teacher expressed the feeling that the managers seemed to lack management tools for intervening when problems arose in the organizing of the collaboration. The lack of management tools is a possible interpretation of the absence of management. However, it is also possible that the managers refrained from suggesting a structure for the work for fear of seeming controlling in what they call the independency culture. In any case, it is clear that the teachers wonder about the lack of management; and at STX, the teachers express anger about what they interpret as the managers' misinterpretation of the employees' needs. Seen from a teacher perspective, it is a misinterpretation of the need for management, when managers manage problems by inviting an external lecturer to whistle about management, teams and willingness to adapt, etc. As one teacher expressed it during the reform practice phase, this is an insult when we are in need of management that listens and helps to structure the collaboration processes.

The managers thus step aside out of respect for the need they assume the teachers have for self-determination. As a result, the lack of management at STX in regulating the collaboration is experienced as a management vacuum. This causes the employees' feelings of anger and frustration. The managers simply refrain from managing, while the staff demands more management. This paradoxical situation leads to an intensified polarization in the patterns of interaction and the dynamics

that support the development of bipolar meanings at this school.

## **Primus inter pares—paradoxes, deadlocks, and detours in practices**

This section summarizes the changes with a focus on the paradoxical dynamics of the management practices. Thus this research contributes to the theorization of school management by specifying the content and unfolding the paradoxical struggles and coping strategies that management in contemporary school changes are involved in (Helstad & Møller, 2013; Vennebo & Ottesen, 2012).

At both HTX and STX, *primus inter pares* management seems to be the dominant basis for management. This has important implications for the change processes in the organizations. Ambiguous situations led to almost identical paradoxes at the two schools, resulting in similar dynamics but with local variations. Based on the empirical analysis, we find that in the school context, the reform's demands put *primus inter pares* management into play, resulting in the following paradoxes at the two schools:

- A paradox of management visibility and equality;
- A paradox of visible management control and teacher autonomy;
- A paradox of visible management and self-management in teams;
- A paradox of visible management and empowerment in flat structures;
- A paradox of visible management and opaque communication.

The assumption that professionals see themselves as autonomous—and therefore alienated in relation to management—makes the managers prioritize managing while also ensuring a flat structure and equality along with a not too visible management. Management is sneaked in, is discrete, even though the reform stipulates visible management. The first and basic paradox emerges here between management's visibility and the goal of equality, a paradox that results from the leaders' double pressure between traditional vocational and operating management and the new professional management. The second paradox reflects managers' efforts to follow up on the teachers' reform work, by means of invisible control. The managers understand avoidance of control and maximum freedom as central management strategies, based on their assumption of a strong independency culture.

However, the wish expressed by teachers at both schools is for more management support in the processes that involve difficult new forms of collaboration. The reform's challenging demands related to collaboration processes result in a third paradox of visible management and self-management in teams. The intention is that the teachers should enter into work in teams in order to establish multi-disciplinary collaboration. The teachers are generally positive about these changes, but they express the need for management in supporting and facilitating the change processes, and sometimes even intervention by management. Regulation of the new collaboration processes is placed between adjustments made by employees and adjustments made by managers. According to the teachers, a management vacuum occurs when the processes are not guided. At both schools, the ambiguous situation appears to cause unsatisfactory interaction patterns.

At STX, this leads to strong bipolar tensions after the first school year with the reform. At HTX, it even comes to deadlocks in the organizational processes. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the collaboration stipulated in the new reform is still evaluated positively by the teachers. Based on the empirical analysis presented in this article, the interaction patterns are found to illustrate that teachers' traditional autonomous practice has undergone change.

A fourth paradox emerges during the reform processes at both schools—that of



visible management and empowerment in flat structures. At STX, management becomes more acceptable both to teachers and to the managers themselves, because the managers are former teachers. This is also the case at HTX.

When management must be invisible, indirect communication becomes a central element in the management efforts. This kind of communication reflects ambiguous and opaque dynamics, and in this connection, a fifth paradox emerges in the schools: a paradox of visible management and opaque communication. At STX, managers agree that management of the demanding change processes is best carried out through well-chosen communication strategies. This is also reflected at HTX by the managers' use of biological metaphors when speaking about management. The metaphorical language functions as a kind of black box, which provides the managers with the chance to manage without being too visible. Fluid management is the most descriptive term for the kind of management practiced at HTX, where a very creative detour is used to manage with non-management.

With the paradox analysis, the *primus inter pares* aspect of managing professionals is brought to the fore. To accommodate and alleviate the tensions brought about by the ambiguous situations the teachers and managers construe paradoxes: bipolar reductive representations of ambiguous situations. As earlier mentioned, the concept of hybrid management has gained impact in recent theoretical discussions of public management (Noordegraf, 2007) and in line with this Alvesson (2004) has proposed the concept of ambiguity. These concepts have, however, so far only been used to a limited extent, to describe how management is carried out in everyday practice. Our conceptualization of paradoxes thus builds upon Noordegraf's and Alvesson's insights and contributes to the theorization of management. In our study, we have drawn attention to the way management evolves from a relational perspective, and we have seen management as a conjoint action with the employees. In this way, it has been possible to maintain a focus on situated management practice rather than on the individuals. We have constructed a research perspective and position emphasizing the complexity and the generation of rich empirical material at the expense of generalizations, normative categories and causality. Thus we contribute to the literature on shared and dispersed forms of management in school settings by shedding light on tensions and paradoxes related to school management (Bolden, 2011; Helstad & Møller, 2013; Spillane et al., 2015; Vennebo & Ottesen, 2012). The analysis specifies the content of what *primus inter pares* management is struggling with when interacting with professionals and it specifies how the interactive work processes unfold. Thus the findings of the article add to the insight of the ambiguous work processes of practices in school management in NPM transition by unpacking tensions and paradoxes that have not previously been specified.

## **An ethnographic approach and the paradox concept revisited**

This final section briefly returns to the ethnographic approach, and the paradox concept used to investigate change processes in this article. The aim has been to study the changes in a relational and dynamic perspective. We have used the concept as a heuristic approach to a detailed ethnographic analysis of the data material, with a focus on understanding how professionals cope with and manage ambiguity. On the basis of the empirical data, it should be noted that the concept of autonomous professionals constitutes the basis for the view of management at the two schools. When formal management is under pressure by the reform changes and moves toward the new management paradigm of transparent, goal-setting, strategic and personnel management, the ambiguous processes become reflected in paradoxes, deadlocks and detours in the managers' efforts. The use of paradoxes as an analytical

lens provides the opportunity to investigate heuristically the meaning attributed by actors to tensions, and the way they were handled in practice. The ethnographic approach maintains sensitivity in relation to the generated data, which provides an opportunity to see the complexity in the professionals' ambiguous working life. Combining ethnography with a concept of paradox allowed insight into the professionals' practices and thus in the *primus inter pares* management in practice. In this way the approach represents a promising possibility for gaining further insight into change processes by doing justice to the ambiguous and paradoxical work processes.

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