When Dialogue Doesn't Work

School Reforms and Lessons from Denmark

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When dialogue doesn't work: school reforms and lessons from Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that dialogue, as a processual tool, is sometimes not enough to solve deep-seated power-relations in the policy design of school reforms. We show this through a case study of a comprehensive school reform in Denmark that has lasted from 2011 until 2020. An active policy entrepreneur, Antorini, the Danish Minister of Education, tried to design a policy process that included a broad coalition in parliament and aimed to include the teachers as professionals. Since the teachers' union opposed the effort to change the collective wage agreement prior to the reform, the reform has remained controversial. Power and deep-seated interests blocked the dialogue. We discuss the reform's development inspired by an analytical reform policy framework by Patashnik. The lessons learned for other countries are that the power resources that policy makers and professionals possess needs to be acknowledged openly, and that dialogue therefore doesn't always work for school reforms.

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Policy entrepreneurs; policy design; school reform; public management reform

1. Introduction and background: School reforms and policy design

School reforms are often an object of research (Blackmore and Sachs 2007). Frequently, a gap exists between what ministerial policy makers and administrators aim to achieve through reforms and how professionals and teachers as education professionals approach achieving those aims and meeting expectations (Saquin 2019; Lundberg 2019; Downes 2019; El-Taliawi & Van Der Wal 2019). The disparity between what policy makers envisage in terms of the results of a reform and what teachers imagine, whether they are involved or not, is apparently sizable.

One study, for example, described how the Education Service Contracting scheme in the Philippines failed because the government did not succeed in engaging stakeholders to work together (Saquin 2019). A recent Swiss case analysis on multilingual policy found that policy makers based their reform on a seemingly common understanding of the nature of multilingualism but revealed that education professionals held a different

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view that did not match theirs (Lundberg 2019). The pedagogical practice of teachers in the multilingual classroom differed from the policy makers' worldview, and the reform did not attain its objectives. Downes (2019), who looked cross-culturally at the concept of transition in the educational sector, argued that transition represents various things for stakeholders in an educational system. For teachers, change involves alignment with a disciplinary progression, while for policy makers change may represent the inclusion of greater diversity in the classroom.

New Public Management, which is seen as promoting managerialism and mistrust of professionals, is often viewed as a factor in understanding why reform efforts in educational systems do not work as intended (Yifey 2019). There is a gap between how policies are perceived to have an impact, and how the policies actually an impact in practice (El-Taliawi & Van Der Wal 2019). El-Taliawi and Van Der Wal suggested that more administrative capacity building is required if reforms are to succeed. Some studies pointed to policy learning and organizational learning as a way to better respond to reform efforts (Deschamps & Mattjis 2018).

This paper argues that dialogue is sometimes not enough to solve problematic deep-seated power relations in the policy design of school reforms. We show this through a case study of a comprehensive school reform in Denmark that has lasted from 2011 until 2020. An active policy entrepreneur, the Danish Minister of Education endeavored to design a policy process that included a broad coalition in parliament and that aimed to include teachers as professionals. Since the teachers' union opposed the effort, the reform remained controversial. Power and deep-seated interests blocked the dialogue. In accordance with Patashnik's (2008) analytical reform policy framework we analyze how the reform developed.

Our research question states: How are power relations between policy makers and professionals incorporated in the policy design of school reforms?

Section 2 below presents the theoretical discussion by briefly reviewing recent additions to the literature on reforms and their underlying policy. Next, section 3 describes the case study method and presents the data behind the study. Section 4 then examines the case study, tracing the school reform from its inception in 2011, establishment of legislation in 2013, commencement of implementation in 2014 and development in practice until 2020. In 2018 Rigsrevisionen, the national audit office of Denmark, officially evaluated the results of the reform at that point, and in 2020 the Danish Center for Social Science Research (VIVE) evaluated the wellbeing of the pupils. Finally, section 5, which presents the discussion and conclusion, suggests lessons learned for other countries.

2. Theoretical framework: Policy design of reforms, power, and policy entrepreneurs

This section presents the theoretical approach we use to examine the Danish school reform. We begin by presenting recent literature on the policy design of reforms in the public sector. We then elaborate on what the literature states about what a reform process is. Acknowledging that reform processes imply an altered distribution of resources, we briefly highlight arguments on power within the policy change literature. We also

touch on the topic of policy entrepreneurs as they are increasingly becoming key actors in reform processes.

Reforms are designed as specific policy interventions (Clarke & Craft 2019; Moulton & Sandfort 2017; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017: 2). The definition of reform used in this study is: "a non-incremental change of an existing line of policymaking intended to rationalize governmental undertakings or to distribute benefits to some broad constituency" (Patashnik 2008: 2). Distribution of benefits can mean taking away opportunities and rights from some actors and distributing them to others. Power is an integral part of a reform process, just as a reform is a political process in which different interests compete for power (Hall 2016; Mahoney & Thelen 2010; Pierson 2016; Radin 2012).

Patashnik (2008) suggested an analytical model of what happens after a reform becomes law that focuses on the interests of the stakeholders in the reform process. Patashnik begins by distinguishing between the composition of actors involved in the reform: Is the composition stable, changed or expended when more actors are added? He then makes a distinction between how engaged actors involved in the reform are: Do they show limited or comprehensive engagement in the reform process? This leads to a 2×2 table with the following four categories: (1) *Reform reversal* as an option (same group of actors, limited engagement). (2) *Reform erosion* over time (limited engagement, new actors that slowly erode the foundation of the reform process. (3) *Entrenchment* (engagement from all sides but the composition of actors remain static). (4) *Reconfiguration* (a whole new ballgame that involves heavy engagement and multiple new actors, altering the situation completely. Patashnik's approach suggests that reforms can be placed in a particular category, but we propose using the table to depict the development of a reform episode.

To provide reforms with momentum, there is often a need for policy entrepreneurs (Mintrom & Norman 2009) with sufficient attributes that can be nurtured, skills that can be learned, and strategies that depend on both their attributes and skills. According to Mintrom (2019, 2) examples of (A) attributes are: ambition, social acuity, credibility, sociability, and tenacity; (B) skills: strategic thinking, team building, collecting evidence, making arguments, engaging multiple audiences, negotiating, and networking; and (C) strategies: problem framing, using and expanding networks, working with advocacy coalitions, leading by example, and scaling up change processes. The modern policy entrepreneur also knows how to orchestra a dialogue between the many stakeholders or partners to achieve a mutually beneficial result. Page et al. (2015) argued that cross-sector collaboration under certain circumstances can lead to improved results.

This section highlighted our theoretical approach and focused on the policy design of reforms spurred by policy entrepreneurs while acknowledging the power relations that might exist in public management and policy reforms.

3. Case study methodology and data

Our study applies a case study method (George & Bennett 2005) to examine a single case study on a school reform in Denmark that a majority of parties in the Danish parliament agreed to in 2013 (Ministry of Education, Denmark 2013). A single case study

is "the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events" (George & Bennett 2005, 5). Our focus on a "reform episode" is compatible with the method for studying a limited reform process, as prescribed by Barzelay and Gallego (2006). The reform episode involves the policy formulation phase, where one main policy entrepreneur created the narrative for the reform that led to the legislation behind the reform, the subsequent conflict in the implementation process, and the ensuing controversy over responsibility and accountability. The data used in our study are derived from government reports and media reports on developments in the Danish school reform, which involved examining major legislation and government reports related to the school reform. We also used Rigsrevisionen's audit reports on the progress of the reform. Finally, we included selected articles and press releases in the Danish media from 2012–2018 related to the school reform, including a trade magazine for teachers, *Folkeskolen*, on municipal primary and lower secondary education.

4. The case of the Danish school reform

This section presents the case of the school reform episode in Denmark. For decades, the Danish school system evolved based on a variety of small and large changes. However, there was a growing sense that the school system was not performing as well as it should, which was confirmed by the release of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) (2018) first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report in 2000, which ranked Denmark in the middle of the countries assessed. Danish pupils did not perform satisfactorily, with only 8.5% of them doing well at problem solving, compared to 29.3% of Singaporean pupils (Politiken 2014). Reports like this spurred policymakers to introduce school reform in Denmark.

The overall conviction was that the school system worked well, until contradicted by OECD data showing that this was not the case (Molin 2007). Various Danish governments subsequently suggested assorted ways to reform the school system, ranging from Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's policy proposal for the Danish government's Globalization Council to an attempt by Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen's government to form a new consensus on the public school system. Both attempts failed.

4.1. A policy entrepreneur introduces a new school reform

In 2011 a new government came into power led by the Social Democrats, a party that had long been in favor of school reform. The new Minister of Education, Christine Antorini, had been the party's spokesperson for education for a number of years, making her familiar with education policy details. She became the main policy entrepreneur in close cooperation with the Permanent Secretary in the Danish Ministry of Education. The government, led by the Social Democrats, also included the Social Liberal Party and the Socialist Peoples' Party but did not have an overall majority in parliament to provide the broad political coalition necessary to pass the proposed

reform, which means it had to work to achieve this. The new government signaled that school reform was its top political priority.

The content of the new school reform included a focus on three overarching goals for the Danish school system: (1) pupils should strive to become as good as they can be, (2) the school should minimize the importance of social background, and (3) trust and wellbeing should be given priority through respect for professional knowledge and practice (Lov om folkeskolen 2013).

Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt (2011) mentioned the school reform in her opening remarks to parliament on 4 October 2011, and the government announced the new, forthcoming school reform in its four-year programme. The three parties in government then began working on how to structure the school reform. Because they had not campaigned together, they spent the better part of their first year, 2012, agreeing on what the school reform should comprise, which involved a great deal of internal work. In the meantime, Antorini took on the role of a reform entrepreneur by starting a new project framed as a national partnership with schools, inviting all relevant stakeholders to participate in a co-creation process. The Danish government also sought inspiration from school systems from other parts of the world, particularly Canada. Antorini also began a campaign for a new idea or narrative dubbed the New Nordic School (Laursen 2012; Ministry of Education, Denmark 2012). The word Nordic gaining legitimacy partially from the New Nordic Cuisine movement led by the Danish restaurant NOMA, named the world's best restaurant four times in the early 2000s. The notion of the New Nordic School can be understood as a contextually magic concept that had broad, normative appeal, suggested consensus and displayed a certain marketability (Carey and Malbon 2018). Its underlying idea was to engage all entities involved in primary and lower secondary school, i.e. Local Government Denmark (KL); the Danish Union of Teachers; and the Ministry of Education to engage in a shared effort to understand each other and improve schools in various ways (Laursen 2012). The aspiration for improvement was related to the consistently mediocre results of Denmark's performance on PISA (Ravn 2011), as well as difficulties encountered in terms of inclusion. The New Nordic School was an attempt to make teachers engage in improving the school by involving them in a dialogue with Antorini.

4.2. Opposition from the Danish Union of Teachers: risk of reform reversal

The Danish Union of Teachers, however, did not want to contribute to New Nordic School, which they saw as "far away from how teachers experience real school life" (Brix and Becher Trier 2014).The new school reform addressed not only content but also wanted to change the rules on the workload and working hours of teachers. Local Government Denmark, the association for Denmark's 98 local governments, wanted more lessons for the pupils, plus less inclusion of children with special needs. The government wanted a new labor market collective agreement for teachers that would make it compulsory for them to prepare at school during the workday and not after hours. If teachers were not present at the school during the whole day, this made daily business, such as meetings on common subjects difficult. The Union argued that, as long as

teachers were not obliged to stay on the school grounds, then the headmaster could not expect them to be available for meetings (Frank 2012).

A long struggle between the Ministry of Finance (and the rest of the government) and the Danish Union of Teachers of how to count hours was the underlying basis for pursuing a new agreement. The Ministry of Finance wanted teachers covered by the same type of collective agreement as other types of professions, while the Union wanted to preserve its existing rules, which gave teachers a high level of power and discretion to determine their own workday. Previous governments had tried and failed to change the position of the teachers, but the government led by the Social Democrats tried to tackle the issue head on. Antorini, the minister of education, pushed on with the partnership with schools and the New Nordic School concept.

4.3. A failed collective bargaining process leads to a new law opposed by the Danish Union of Teachers

In spring of 2013 the opposing interests clashed under a new round of nationwide collective bargaining in the public sector (collective wage bargaining is obligatory in Denmark). The Ministry of Finance and Local Government Denmark, negotiating on behalf of the government and local governments as an employer, reached agreements with all labor market groups, except one: the Danish Union of Teachers, which declared that it would go on strike. The government then declared a countrywide lockout of teachers (Trier 2013; Danish Union of Teachers 2013). The standoff lasted 25 days. Institutionalized negotiations took place in the tradition of the Danish labor market. When no agreement could be reached, the government, still in line with the obligations of Danish institutions for solving labor market disputes, drew up new legislation called "Lov 409" (Act 409) defining new working conditions for teachers. The Union was against the new law but was unable to oppose it as it was against the will of a majority of parties in the Danish parliament.

4.4. The policy entrepreneur creates a broad coalition in parliament behind legislation on school reform

In June 2013 the Minister of Education proudly presented a coherently designed policy for school reform to the Danish parliament for the first time in decades. The legislation was supported by a broad political reform coalition in parliament, including the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party (Ministry of Education, Denmark 2013). The only two opposing parties were Liberal Alliance (on the right) and Unity List (on the left). Besides the political parties mentioned, the reform also had the backing of the parents' association, the association of school principals and other key interest organizations.

4.5. Continued dispute creates risk of reform reversal

The Danish Union of Teachers continued to complain about the reform. The head of the Danish Union of Teachers, Anders Bondo Christensen, constantly criticized the reform in the media and when communicating with union members (see, Bondo

Christensen 2016, 2018, 2020). A particular point of contention was that parliament had, against Danish labor market tradition, passed legislation on the teachers' working conditions and pay instead of entering into a collective wage agreement. This also subsequently became a recurring issue. The Union accused Local Government Denmark and the government of having entered into an agreement in advance behind closed doors, before the lockout, which meant that the teachers were bound to lose no matter what and had no real chance to advance their agenda.

The Danish Union of Teachers complained that its views had not been taken sufficiently into account concerning the policy changes they desired in the reform. In reality, politicians had made efforts the previous ten years to enter into a dialogue with the Union, particularly about the ongoing exclusion of children with disabilities (Karkov, 2012). However, the Union was consistently critical of inclusion (Sauer 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Riise 2010; Hansen et al. 2010).

Local Government Denmark felt that it had taken responsibility for criticisms launched concerning poor discipline in lower and upper secondary schools. The Danish Union of Teachers, however, felt that Local Government Denmark and the government were to blame for link between the new school reform and the collective wage bargaining. A key player in the reform, Bondo Christensen even explicitly used the word guilt to describe the situation: "The teachers are not guilty of the reform's lack of success" (see, e.g. Skovhus 2016; Jyllands Posten 2018). When Bondo Christensen stepped down in September 2020, he maintained that (1) the lockout in 2013 happened overnight, i.e. the Union had never heard the new political demands on primary and lower secondary school, and that (2) management of schools is a virus, like corona is a virus, and that the management virus must be contained and obliterated. To claim that the politicians' wish for better management of primary and lower secondary schools is a virus is the equivalent of bluntly saying that policy reforms are a disease.

4.6. A new government with a new minister of education: Risk of reform erosion

A new government led by the Liberal Party came into power in 2015 and appointed a new Minister of Education, Ellen Trane Nørby, who canceled the New Nordic School initiative pursued by the government led by Social Democrats as one of her first actions in office but otherwise pushed forward with implementing the reform (Ministry of Education 2015). The "magic concept" (Carey and Malbon 2018) of the preferred narrative of New Nordic School was gone. A year later, the Liberal Party invited the Conservative Party and Liberal Alliance to join the minority coalition government. The next new Minister of Education, Merete Riisager, was a member of the Liberal Alliance party, which originally had voted against the school reform. Even though Riisager declared that she would not oppose the school reform, her actions soon proved otherwise. She tried to set up various obstacles to the implementation process, echoing what Patashnik (2008, 32) calls the erosion of a reform. Riisager was against using too much digital technology in schools and favored having schools opt out of the reform's requirement to extend the school day. Her 2018 initiative on behalf of the government (Ministry of Education 2018a) proposed an adjusted, new type of school that would

allow schools to operate outside the school reform for a longer period, essentially serving to begin eroding the school reform.

4.7. Evaluations of the school reform: reform entrenchment?

A formal evaluation process was woven into the design of the reform to determine the outcomes. The first main policy entrepreneur and the coalition for the reform had put in a clause to ensure official evaluation of the school reform after a five-year period. The government set up regulatory bodies to monitor the school reform, allowing the Ministry of Education to keep track of its progress, allowing measurement of the original three overall objectives. An applied science programme also existed that conducted research evaluations of the reform (Ministry of Education 2018b). Before the official evaluation, the new government decided to conduct a status of the progress of the reform in 2018 (Ministry of Education 2018c). Riisager, wanted to adjust the reform before the designated implementation process was over, which led to an adjustment agreed upon by a broad coalition of parties in parliament (Ministry of Education 2019).

Rigsrevisionen (2018) produced an interim report on the results from an evaluation focusing on the first two and a half years of the school reform's implementation process. Basing its assessment on the three goals stated in Act 409, Rigsrevisionen concluded that the reform was on track to fulfill many of its promises but also criticized the Ministry of Education. One particular point focused on how many teacher hours were available per pupil per school year. The Ministry asserted that this was the responsibility of local governments because they represent the primary administrative body for regulating the individual schools.

VIVE (2020) conducted an official evaluation five years after implementation of the reform that was published in 2020 that concluded that the impact of the reforms was slowly surfacing. The learning standard of Danish pupils had not risen, and additional teaching hours had not led to better results. The VIVE report stated, however, that it was still too early to evaluate the reform as a whole and estimated that doing a comprehensive evaluation was only possible up to 15 years after initiation of the reform.

The question of teachers' pay and working conditions came up again in the collective bargaining round in 2018, but the issue between the Ministry of Finance and the Danish Union of Teachers remained unresolved. A new commission focusing solely on teachers' pay and led by independent experts was established to come up with a solution. In December 2019 the commission published a report (Laererkommissionen 2019) and an agreement on was finally reached in spring 2020. Shortly afterwards, the head of the Union, Mr Bondo Christensen, stepped down from his post.

5. Discussion and conclusion: when dialogue does not work

Our initial research question asked how power relations evolved in practice between policy makers and professionals in the policy design of the Danish school reform.

To address this question we described the policy design and implementation process behind the Danish school reform from its inception in 2011 to today (2020). The

process involved the Minister of Education, Antorini, acting as a policy entrepreneur from 2011 to 2015, where she introduced the reform and created a broad coalition in parliament, but the design, link to the collective bargaining process, and subsequent implementation were met with resistance from the Danish Union of Teachers. Acting as a policy entrepreneur in accordance with Mintrom's (2019) theory on attributes, skills and strategies, Antorini (1) was ambitious and had credibility as a new minister due to policy insights into the area accrued over many years in parliament; (2) demonstrated skills in strategic thinking in terms of the content of the new school reform, i.e. longer school days and a new mission statement containing three overarching goals, but also engaged in team and coalition building within the three-party government, in addition to crafting a strong narrative as to why a new school reform was needed; and 3) acted strategically by framing the problem in terms of improving the school based on the mediocre PISA results, by promoting the narrative of the New Nordic School initiative that preceded the reform, by working with broad advocacy coalitions in parliament, and by leading by example by visiting schools and reform projects across Denmark. Antorini also aimed to scale up the change processes based on the evidence of projects around the country.

Using Patashnik's reform analysis framework, we suggest that the development of the school reform went through different stages after being proposed and legislation was passed. First, there was the *risk of reform reversal*. The Danish Union of Teachers showed resistance to the new laws on wages and working conditions. The Ministry of Education (and the employer side in the Ministry of Finance and Local Government Denmark) established a small number of actors within well-defined positions. This resistance did not lead to a reform reversal, but the reform was later met with activities that might have led *to reform erosion*. Reform erosion happened when a new actor, the new Minister of Education, Riisager, took office. However, the majority of political parties in parliament still backed the reform. More actors were involved in the school reform so it was not so easy to erode it. Recently, the school reform was also evaluated by various organizations. For example, a commission operating from 2017 to 2019 examined the differences in teachers' working and wage conditions. The most recent stage of the process involves *reform entrenchment*, where both parties have stood firm on their viewpoints and interests. The next five years will perhaps see a period of *reform reconfiguration*, which would involve more actors, e.g. parent organizations, donors (A.P. Møller Foundation), and school managers working to implement the reform.

The reform process began at the same time as the government and the Danish Union of Teachers were involved in a collective wage bargaining process in which the government opted to enforce a lockout, a move the Union viewed as sabotaging the dialogue. The Union perceived the Ministry of Education as a principal actor and power holder.

The Ministry failed to acknowledge fully that they were perceived as the main power holders because they had the power to lockout the teachers while simultaneously leading negotiations for a new policy design of the school reform. The government's reform proposal had won the backing of a large majority in the Danish parliament. Amidst their protests the Danish Union of Teachers seemed to overlook, or at least

temporarily ignore, that they are part of a democracy with a parliament that had enacted a law. The Union's lack of willingness to collaborate casts doubt on how the Union views the role of government and parliament in conducting comprehensive policy reform. As Pierson; Hall; Mahoney and Thelen; and Patashnik remind us, politics and power are crucial features in a reform process, and if politics and power are not fully acknowledged, the reform process suffers.

The main lesson that other countries can learn from is that sometimes dialogue does not work, for example if: (a) some of the actors decide to exercise power, or (b) they do not to openly recognize their role as power holders. The Ministry of Education created a policy design intended to engage multiple stakeholders, including the Danish Union of Teachers, to make them co-creators in the development of the Danish school reform. This empirical case analysis shows that engaging the teaching professionals through the Union was not sufficient in terms of making the teachers collaborate in developing the school reform. Throughout the process the Union maintained that the collective wage bargaining and the lockdown instigated by the government interfered with the substance of the school reform. From the Union's perspective, the Ministry was a powerful state power holder or principal actor that would always have the final say. While the Ministry and policy entrepreneur, Antorini as Minister of Education that introduced the reform, viewed the relationship between the Ministry and the Union differently, i.e. that the Union, with its knowledge, was asked to participate in developing the school by engaging in the school reform.

This case distinguishes itself from other types of research in the field of school reforms that call for a policy mix as a combination between substantive and procedural elements (Saquin 2019). Our study shows that it is sometimes not enough to design the conversation and that the key actors must discuss the fundamental purpose of the reform to determine if it is compatible with their different interests. School reforms from the top down do not work if professionals and their unions stand their ground on individual traditional union values and do not engage in partnership coalitions to achieve jointly negotiated aims for the reform. Our findings show that it is insufficient to design the conversation or suggest a dialogue process without addressing the more fundamental power interests related to the school reform.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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