

# *Supporting School-leaders in Leadership for Social Justice Using a No-homework Policy After a Top-down Decision*

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## Abstract

*This case study contributes to the research on leadership for leading school change and improvement for social justice, examining the research question: What kind of support do school leaders need when using a no-homework policy after a top-down decision? The study has a participative action research design and presents a complex case to elaborate on paradoxes for school leaders. Data collection is done via a qualitative survey (N=16 school leaders) and field notes from reflective conversations with lead groups at 11 schools. The findings reveal that leaders may need support to make a paradox reversal when using a no-homework policy to lead for social justice after a top-down decision.*

**Keywords:** leadership support | paradox reversal | no-homework policy | learning organisations

## Podpora vodjem šol pri izboljševanju socialne pravičnosti z uvajanjem politike brez domačih nalog po odločitvi od zgoraj navzdol

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## Povzetek

Obravnavani primer prispeva k raziskavam o vodenju na področju uvajanja sprememb v šolah in k izboljševanju socialne pravičnosti, saj proučuje raziskovalno vprašanje: Kakšno podporo potrebujejo vodje šol, ko po odločitvi od zgoraj navzdol uvajajo politiko brez domačih nalog? Študija je zasnovana kot participativni akcijski raziskovalni načrt in predstavlja kompleksen primer, ki podrobneje predstavlja paradokse, s katerimi se soočajo vodstva šol. Podatki so bili zbrani s kvalitativno raziskavo (N = 16 ravnateljev) in terenskimi zapiski na osnovi refleksivnih pogovorov s skupinami vodij enajstih šol. Ugotovitve kažejo, da vodje pri tem, ko po odločitvi od zgoraj navzdol uvajajo politiko brez domačih nalog in s tem izboljšujejo socialno pravičnost, za preobrat paradoksa morda potrebujejo podporo.

**Ključne besede:** podpora pri vodenju | preobrat paradoksa | politika brez domačih nalog | učeče se organizacije

## Introduction

Schools are pluralistic organisations with multiple stakeholders (Watson 2013). Moreover, organisations store knowledge in routines, norms, rules, and forms (March 1991). Organisations learn from their members, but members also become socialised within organisations. Learning paradoxes arise in the tensions between these two processes, which relate to adapting to current and changing contexts. This can lead to an apparent contradiction in which the learning rate of the organisation is inversely related to the knowledge held by its members and the ironic outcome that ‘the development of knowledge may depend on maintaining an influx of the naive and ignorant’ (March 1991). When a member of the Norwegian parliament, who was a school inspector and priest, put forward a proposal to ban the harsh and arbitrary methods of punishment in schools in 1881, it was voted down. His initiative to improve the integrity protection of children had significant personal consequences. He was mocked and scandalised in the Norwegian press and lost his political and civil position. It was not until 1936 that it was decided through a unanimous vote that a new law for education should contain the following provision: “Corporal punishment should not be used in schools.” (Befring 2022).

Leading change that promotes social justice requires courage and conviction (Robertson 2021). When leading changes for social justice, educational leaders experience resistance from parents and teachers (Theoharis 2007). This may be why only 2 percent of headteachers report that they have developed and put into practice a no-homework policy for the whole school, and only 8 percent of schools have done this in one or more classes in Norway (Rogde, Daus, and Pedersen 2019). About 30 percent report that they are considering implementing a no-homework policy.

Social justice leadership is “the lessening or elimination of unfair inequalities in several areas of the school” (Robertson 2021). Regarding staff, this means fairness in the distribution of resources, participation in decisions (participative justice), respect for identity and beliefs (cultural justice), and opportunities for learning and personal development (developmental justice). Personal integrity means the protection of one’s self-confidence, trust, and expectation of one’s future and is often neglected in teaching (Befring 2022).

## Homework and social justice

A growing body of literature recognises that homework has little effect on students learning and can be counterproductive concerning both learning

and non-academic effects. Hattie's meta-analysis of 161 studies, examining the effect of homework on learning, found almost no effect and ranks homework at 136<sup>th</sup> in terms of its effect on learning (Hattie 2009). Homework is more important for the learning outcomes of 15-year-olds from a high socio-economic background than for other pupils in most countries. This means that homework contributes to widening the performance gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds (OECD 2014). Analyses of TIMSS data also show that homework has less effect on pupils' results in mathematics for pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds (Gustafsson, 2013; Nilsen and Bergem, 2016; Rønning, 2010). On the contrary, schools concerned with the quality of teaching and good follow-up of pupils during school hours are achieving better results for pupils from a low socio-economic background (without homework) compared to the effects with homework (Nilsen and Bergem 2016).

Lupton (2005) found that using homework effectively takes longer in a school where many pupils struggle with basic literacy and do not have support with reading at home than in schools where pupils are supported and have good basic skills. Therefore, homework needs to be more carefully designed and differentiated if used. The evidence shows that ensuring parents contribute to students' learning at home is quantitatively and qualitatively different for schools in high-poverty areas, for example, in schools where most parents are motivated and knowledgeable enough to contribute compared to where many parents have not had favourable experiences of school, are not familiar with the school system, or are not convinced of the value of the education their children are getting (Lupton 2005).

A cross-national study by Hampden-Thompson et al. (2013) examined the association between parental involvement and student literacy in 21 countries by comparing PISA results. Three different parental involvement strategies were examined, social communication, cultural communication, and parental assistance with homework. Consistently across all 21 countries, they discovered that increases in the frequency of parental assistance with homework were negatively and significantly associated with student literacy. This finding provides robust cross-national support for the reactive hypothesis, meaning homework is counterproductive.

A qualitative study of homework in the Norwegian School context from 2016 concluded that homework is a significant risk factor according to essential quality indicators of a good childhood, causing conflicts in close relationships for some students and when teachers are not cautious when students have different kinds of extra challenges (Holte 2016). Evidence

from a quantitative study asking 4371 students from high-performing schools representing the higher middle-class show that the more homework they did, the more engaged they were in school, but also the higher were levels of school stress, physical health problems, and lack of life balance. The conclusion was that students from privileged families do have some advantages of homework in a competitive environment but that it inhibits their learning, being fully engaged, and their well-being (Galloway, Conner, and Pope 2013).

This backdrop shows that homework is an issue of social justice in education and a question of well-being for all students. Based on this evidence, some political parties in Norway want to ban school homework to protect students' integrity and promote education for social justice. The teachers' trade union objects to this, arguing that politicians should not interfere with their professional decision-making about teaching (Ertesvåg 2019). Since homework is strongly linked with long traditions and norms, and the identity of teachers and parents, some politicians have lost patience and faith that necessary learning will occur in professional learning communities. Although it is discussed at a national level, it is mainly locally that politicians have made decisions for schools to carry out no-homework or inclusive-homework policies. Some municipalities have chosen a few schools to test approaches to determine the innovation's consequences. When decisions about changes come from the top, it can be more challenging for all to have the conviction and courage to lead these processes (Weick and Quinn, 1999). How leaders can be best supported in such situations has yet to be fully understood. Therefore, I want to address the research question: What kind of support do educational school leaders need when using a no-homework policy after a top-down decision?

## **Theoretical framework**

School leaders are critical for developing competence and addressing social justice issues. Furthermore, according to the literature on Leadership of School Development, school leaders play a crucial role in leading development. This can be looked into using five different theoretical approaches: theories of distributed management, theories of leadership for learning, theories of learning organisations, democratic leadership, and theories of leadership in organisational development (Aas et al. 2021). This paper mainly uses theories of learning organisations, leadership for learning, and leadership of organisational development.

Senge (1997) describes learning organisations as organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they want, where new and expansive ways of thinking are nurtured, where collective ambitions are set free, and where people continually learn to see everything as a whole. Stoll et al. (2006) connect professional communities with learning organisations. Orton and Weick (1990) understand organisational learning as sensemaking in social structures where you have both individual and collective development, and learning through reflexivity and dialectic. Therefore, it is interesting to find out in what ways and to what extent educational leaders need to build these capacities at their schools to deal with the top-down decision of a no-homework policy.

The leadership of learning is described as a constant orientation toward stimulating the will to learn and to sustain the teachers' engagement to ensure quality, as defined by the following five criteria: 1) focus on learning, 2) creating good conditions for learning, 3) dialogue, 4) distributed leadership through structures and routines that secure solid participation and 5) a shared understanding of responsibility (MacBeath and Dempster 2009). In a review of different models for teacher collaboration by Vangrieken et.al (2015), five characteristics of a well-functioning professional community were identified. The five characteristics are:

- supportive and active management
- shared values and common goals
- collective learning processes
- development of practice
- supportive environment

The decision to implement a no-homework policy will likely challenge the leaders on some of these criteria. Therefore, it is interesting to find out if they need support.

Theories of the leadership of organisation development point out resistance to be addressed and sometimes a need to take the role of the mediator where they coordinate political demands with internal demands (Shaked and Schechter 2017; Starr 2011). One crucial issue is contributing to sensemaking about decisions through dialogue (Henriksen 2018; Weick 1995). An interesting question is whether the leaders are convinced that a no-homework policy can contribute to social justice if they can make sense of the decision and if they need support to mediate and lead development

processes. Smith, Binns, and Tushman (2010) suggest that leaders should engage and encourage conflict by providing an environment where tensions are explored and worked through and legitimate divergences in values are acknowledged. In this way, pluralism can be exploited to produce greater cognitive discord and ensure more creative debate and learning.

Extensive literature has developed on paradoxes and decision-making in organisational contexts (Watson 2013). A paradox may be defined as ‘contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time’ (Stoltzfus, Stohl, and Seibold 2011). Smith and Lewis (2011) set out a typology of such paradoxes in four core areas: organising, performing, belonging, and learning. Organisational paradoxes can, for example, be the need for stability yet change, collaboration yet competition, and empowerment yet direction.

Performing paradoxes refer to competing strategies and goals stemming from the plurality of stakeholders like the local community, governance, and society. Individual professional autonomy, characteristic of a pluralistic context ‘can constitute a barrier to integrated organisational action. As mentioned, the teachers’ trade union argues against a no-homework policy referring to professional autonomy, which applies in this case.

Belonging paradoxes are about the tension around organisational and individual identities. Identification with the organisation is regarded as beneficial in terms of loyalty. Assigning and expecting children to do homework is a question of identity for some teachers and parents. For some students doing homework can be a part of their identity (Watson 2013). A no-homework policy may, for them, represent a belonging paradox.

Learning paradoxes revolve around the processes of sense-making, innovation, and transformation that reveal interwoven tensions between old and new in an organisation and learning as exploration or exploitation. It can be that new teachers contribute less as individuals the more they become socialised within the organisation and adapt to the organisational norms (Watson 2013). Exploitation refers to activities that use current knowledge, giving rise to efficiency in the short term. By contrast, exploration ‘includes things encapsulated by terms such as search, variation, risk-taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, innovation’ (March 1991).

Paradoxes in an organisation represent paradoxes for school leaders (Watson 2013). Paradoxes can produce anxiety and defensive responses at individual

and organisational levels, like repression, denial, and ambivalence, which can make the organisation dysfunctional (Lewis 2000). Smith and Lewis (2011) state some possible responses to manage the paradoxes:

- The paradox may be accepted and lived with
- Spatial separation – different parts of the organisation may deal with the oppositional aspects
- Temporal separation – oppositional aspects are dealt with at different times.
- Synthesis – seeking to accommodate and resolve the apparent tension

Living with the opposite poles of the paradox is only possible with the first of these responses. The others attempt to remove or bypass the contradiction (Watson 2013). Holding inconsistencies simultaneously fosters creative solutions to problems and can, in that way, be a powerful strategy and catalyst for innovation and school development.

## Method

This case study is a part of a project with a Participation Action Research (PAR) design. That means that as a researcher, I take an active part in the ongoing processes in the organisation and act simultaneously as a researcher, entrepreneur, team member, and critical friend (Ottosson 2003). Unlike the other participants in the action research project, I am able to move out of the system to view it from a distance and compare what is happening with theory and other systems and processes. The point of doing this is to optimise for a deeper understanding of the complexity of what is going on in the organisation. Action research builds upon a long-established process-oriented approach to science that aims at “the transformation of power relationships in the direction of greater democracy” (Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy 1993). Action research, in general, can be understood as the collaborative production of scientifically and socially relevant knowledge, transformative action, and new social relations through a participatory process (Bradbury and Reason 2003; Dick 2004; Ramos 2006)

I was considered an experienced researcher on homework and how and why schools developed no-homework policies or inclusive-homework policies. Therefore, I was engaged by the Moss municipality through an arrangement for the local development of competence, in schools called DEKOMP. This was a partnership between universities with teacher education programs and local school governance and schools, for developing competencies.



The Moss municipality has about 50'000 inhabitants. Altogether they have 16 public schools, both primary and secondary. A political decision was made locally in January 2022 that all schools should have a no-homework policy by 2025 and that they should practice an inclusive-homework policy until then. After discussing principles for an inclusive-homework policy at a meeting with the network of headteachers, they agreed it would be easier and more practical to implement a no-homework policy earlier and decided to do that. The representatives of the school ownership were surprised and made it a topic of one more meeting, to be sure that that was a decision they wanted to opt for. The decision was made in March 2022, and the no-homework policy was expected to be implemented in August 2022. The teachers' trade union did not agree with the decision and complained about too little involvement in the decision and their freedom to choose teaching methods. Parents were informed about the decision in different ways, and they were given the opportunity to ask questions.

Building on interviews with educational leaders in schools with a no-homework policy and experiences from several schools piloting it, eight principles for a no-homework policy were developed. These were applied in this case as guidelines for development. The eight principles are:

1. Teachers will not assign students schoolwork to do after school hours.
2. The school takes the primary responsibility for the students achieving competence goals in the curriculum and can only relieve the responsibility from parents if the student is learning enough at school.
3. If the student is not learning or needs more motivation, adjustments must be made at school.
4. Parents will be encouraged to support their children's education in other ways (ensuring that their children get enough sleep, get varied nutrition and physical activity, sustain relationships supporting a growth mindset, and actively participate in local sports, music or art).
5. The teachers and the school value the student's role in the family, home environment, leisure activities, and the local community.
6. Teachers will facilitate the review of knowledge and skills at school if needed.
7. Teachers will give opportunities for the students to prepare for different forms of assessments within school hours.
8. The school will allow parents to get good information about their child's social and academic development.

After the decision was made, some headteachers felt uncertain and needed more information about no-homework policy schools, in order to lead the process in August. The school owner arranged a session where a headteacher from a school which had had a no-homework policy for three years, presented her experiences and gave some advice. On request of the municipality, I gave a presentation on the research and experiences from schools with no-homework and inclusive-homework policies in general. This presentation was made available for teachers in long and short versions. The school owner provided the headteachers with presentations they could use when meeting teachers and parents.

The schools in Moss have a structure of distributed leadership. Every school has a group of leaders with at least three people, including the headteacher.

To find out more about what kind of support headteachers need when implementing a no-homework policy and how it can be done, I distributed a survey to the headteachers in August 2022. They were asked where the school was in the process of implementing a no-homework policy, how they experienced their staff's attitudes toward the decision, what they thought was most exciting about the change, what they thought was the most challenging, whether they needed leadership support and if so what kind of leadership support they needed. All sixteen headteachers filled out the survey. In addition, I scheduled a time to come and visit the headteachers, whereby they could sign up voluntarily. I had eleven school visits and made field notes from these.

The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) four steps for thematic analysis. The first step is preparation by looking through the material and making notes. During the second step, I made codes by writing down ideas, underlining parts of the text, and writing down essential words. In the third phase, I categorised the codes into several overall themes. Finally, presentation of the findings constitutes the fourth phase.

## Results

The results showed that twelve leaders had reported wanting leadership support. Two leaders did not know if they wanted support, and two answered that they did not need it.

Some headteachers reported concerns about the process leading to the decision to implement a no-homework policy in all schools, and that the attitude

towards the changes could have been different. The headteachers who reported this also reported that they had moved on and focused on ensuring quality teaching. During my school visits, I observed resistance against the decision within the leader groups at four schools. Resistance has also occurred in groups of parents at two schools where they took action through the media, social media, and via democratic instruments for participation at school.

The results also showed how some headteachers had used their concerns to make a paradox reversal, embracing the differences in values and interests of students, parents, politicians, and teachers. Some headteachers reported that they experienced the decision as a catalyst in the staff for interest, sharing, and discussions of how to ensure quality teaching. Many of the headteachers experienced the decision as fuel for school development. On the question of what they were excited about in this one headteacher answered:

Our work with assessment!! Collaboration with parents. Reflections around our ways of teaching. The possibility of discussing our practice in light of the new curriculum. That teaching is not outsourced but taken care of by professionals. This is like a gold mine with many opportunities for us.

Five headteachers reported that they found sensemaking of the policy difficult and needed to get ownership of the change narrative, and support, in order to mediate. One headteacher was particularly concerned if this could cause an increased workload for the teachers. Some reported that they needed to clear up misunderstandings about a no-homework policy, assess to what degree the school needs to change teaching practices, and take responsibility for the changes.

Interest in leading teachers learning and development was highlighted clearly by seven headteachers and was not exclusively related to the decision. They had a positive attitude towards this and saw parallels between implementing the new curriculum and the no-homework policy. They saw this as an excellent opportunity for schools to develop pedagogical practice in fellowship. For instance, one headteacher expresses how the decision opens things up for deeper learning by opening up the place where the student's life and experience of motivation are central. Most of these headteachers had prioritised concrete areas for development. They wanted support to succeed in these. Many of these schools had many creative examples of good practices to be shared in a possible network setting. These schools had ideal structures and systems for being learning organisations. Development and learning through professional fellowship were possible. Some other head-

teachers reported concern about the learning culture and how to engage all teachers in learning and development at their school.

The findings showed that most headteachers wanted leadership support to ensure quality school teaching. Seven headteachers saw significant opportunities of this, while five headteachers saw it as a significant threat and needed to feel safer. This may mean they need more confidence in what teachers can achieve under the current conditions.

While some headteachers have a positive attitude and some are skeptical, there are also a few neutral headteachers. They express that they do not know if they need support and what the decision will mean for their practices. They do not have ownership of the process and do not see the decision either as an opportunity or a threat. These schools seem to be randomly distributed learning organisations, with considerable potential for empowering leaders, teachers, and students. They need support to build a learning culture. There are four schools in this category.

The differences in headteachers' attitudes and their need for support are related to how they respond to paradoxes.

On the question of how they would like to be supported, suggestions like conversations with a critical friend, support from the school owner, and networking groups of leaders came up. One headteacher would like to present good questions about developing the practice to see if they were heading in the right direction. Another headteacher said that support, in this case, should help them to develop the organisational culture at the school level, in order to consider the differences in contexts in a good way.

To sum up, the results reveal that some leaders need support directly related to the decision of the no-homework policy and support in sensemaking, mediation, making a 'paradox reversal,' and creating sound systems for collaboration with parents. Nevertheless, most headteachers needed general support, on things like ensuring quality teaching and responding to paradoxes, for the professional community to function well.

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate that top-down decisions can be difficult for leaders to handle if they need to be convinced that the decision is sound. This is particularly important with a decision about a no-homework policy

because of social justice issues. As Robertson (2021) states, an educational leader dealing with social justice issues needs conviction and courage. Dealing with social justice issues implies experiences with resistance (Theoharis 2007). In the case I examined, some educational leaders said that the fact that all the schools had to implement the same was a relief. As leaders of just one school making these changes, they would expect it to be more challenging regarding resistance. While the teachers' trade union strongly disagreed with the decision and the way it was made, sensemaking of both the decision and the process of deciding was needed, according to Henriksen (2018) and Weick (1995). This is an example of a learning paradox (Watson 2013). Some leaders shared their skepticism towards a no-homework policy and revealed that they were unconvinced. This can cause difficulties leading the school as a learning organisation; how can one facilitate people to expand their capacity to create results, find new and expansive ways of thinking, and see things as a whole in the way that Senge (1997) describes learning organisations, when one as the leader does not participate? This discovery is an example of school leaders' involvement in the belonging paradox (Watson 2013), experiencing that their identity differs from the organisational identity. These findings indicate a need for support in responding to the paradoxes by accepting and living with them instead of trying different ways to bypass and remove the contradictions. The findings revealed that some headteachers did this and that it had worked as fuel for development in professional learning communities. An essential aspect of this is to take the dilemmas of teaching, the competing interests, logic, and values, and use them as tools for reflection and learning. When supporting leaders in this, the task can be to problematise to learn as much as possible from change. The minor problem, in this case, is to stop giving assignments. According to the leaders, the most significant challenges are ensuring high-quality teaching, finding new ways to engage parents, and engaging all the teachers in developing practices. Besides the new curriculum to comply with which many were developing their approach, the principles guiding the no-homework policy opened new and expansive ways of thinking. This underpins Watson's (2013) point about the benefits of making a paradoxical reversal for developing the school. However, Smith, Binn, and Tushman (2005) argue that school leaders must be "capable of building and maintaining organisational designs that are internally inconsistent, of managing the ongoing conflict and engaging in long-term integrative thinking." Given our psychological and sociological penchant for consistency, conflict avoidance, and rational thinking, this can be challenging, and leadership support will be needed.

Furthermore, how can one contribute with supportive and active management to find shared values and common goals and a collective learning process, as found by Vangrieken et.al (2015) to be two of the essential characteristics of a well-functioning professional community, while not being convinced about the policy? This indicates that different kinds of contributions to understanding the research and ethical foundations for a no-homework policy are essential. One challenge is that while the evidence of the problems with homework is clear, more evidence is needed on the effects of the no-homework policy for many to be convinced. Still, there are standards for high-quality teaching that can serve as guidelines for inclusive education at school. It is important not to shame those who are reticent. That can cause leaders to pretend to be convinced and refrain from speaking up about their concerns and questions, things which can be helpful to both ensure the hold of the decision and to get more understanding of concerns that different stakeholders can have.

## Methods of leadership support

The findings suggest supporting methods like internal and external counselling, guiding questions, being part of a network of educational leaders, and increasing competence in leadership for cultivating learning cultures for well-functioning professional communities, where all teachers participate actively in developing practices.

Counselling from the school administration and university or consultant firms can help support leadership. However, according to headteachers, school improvement partners or coaches had varied effects (Swaffield 2015). Swaffield found that, according to headteachers, school improvement partners can be used for learning dialogue if they have the necessary insight, competence, trust, and patience and if the dialogue leads to learning. What makes this a good strategy depends on whether the headteachers accept the school improvement partner or not.

Guiding questions can be used both for learning and developing conversations. The leaders wanted to know more about how they could lead well-functioning professional communities. Questions concerning the five characteristics of Vangrieken et.al (2015) and the guiding principles can be helpful. In that case, important questions for supporting leaders' can be: Is the leader group at your school convinced about the decision and capable of executing supportive and active management for development? Does the

professional community have shared values and goals aligned with the decision and the new curriculum? Are there collective learning processes going on for more inclusive education? How do you develop the practices?

Moreover, how supportive is the environment? Questions like this can be used to cultivate a learning culture for learning organisations. Learning will improve if the communication is respectful, honest, and without fear. Practicing this type of collaboration is essential to model collaborative learning for the students (Vangrieken et al. 2015).

Strand and Emstad (2020) researched the use of Principal Professional Learning Communities and found that it was important for supporting headteachers' leadership skills and promoting strong leadership for school development. In this case, there is an established network for the headteachers and one for all school leaders. According to Strand and Emstad's findings, this can be effective and give positive experiences. They suggest inviting external support to these groups to create structure and improve their results.

## Conclusion

This article has aimed to contribute to understanding on how school leaders can be supported in leadership for social justice and school development while implementing a No-Homework policy after a top-down decision. A top-down decision on a no-homework policy creates organisational, belonging, performing, and learning paradoxes. To ensure a professional learning community, school leaders must respond to paradoxes by living with them and embracing them as catalysts for the school's engagement, creativity, and development. The results reveal that this is challenging and that leadership support like counselling and guiding questions should be given.

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