

Rhetorical Resources for Management

The Leading Words

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ABSTRACT

Managing organizations in modern societies takes place through persuasion and the seductive use of language rather than, as in past societies, through physical violence and repression. In this respect new management discourses imply a linguistic process where actors within education gradually become defined within other frames of reference. This article sets out to unpack and reconstruct perceptions of educational leadership in a report from the Ministry of Education and Science entitled *Learning Leaders: Leadership for Today's and Tomorrow's School*. It is inspired by Potter's understanding of discourse. If a democratic, learning and communicative leadership is the solution — what are the problems and causes? What kind of problematic yesterday is the point of departure, and what is the promised future like? I will argue that the leader emerges as a function of a changed way to exercise power.

KEYWORDS *democratic, learning and communicative leadership, discourse analysis, leadership, power relations, pedagogical leadership*

Managing organizations in modern societies takes place through persuasion and the seductive use of language rather than, as in past societies, through physical violence and repression.¹ Language usage, the naming of concepts and the ways of talking about education are crucial factors; discourses determine what categories should be regarded as logical and in line with reality. In this respect new management discourses imply a linguistic process where actors in the field of education gradually become defined through other frames of reference. This article sets out to unpack and reconstruct perceptions of educational leadership using a report from the Ministry of Education and Science as an example. It is inspired by Potter's understanding of discourse. In the analysis of a discourse, the underlying conceptions of meaning, principles of coherence and relations of power can be reconstructed. I will argue that the leader emerges as a function of a changed way to exercise power.

Learning Leaders: A Policy to Guide Principals of Tomorrow?

In Sweden the long cherished concept of *pedagogical leadership* appears to have lost its appeal in official policy documents. For over three decades this concept had been used to point to a solution to the shortcomings of principals who were said to be swamped with administrative matters. Researchers and consultants, but also shapers of government policies such as the National Curriculum, were in agreement that pedagogical leadership was the answer, the hallmark of Swedish principals (Svedberg, 2000). This viewpoint was held with a virtually unquestioned consensus, giving the concept a mantra-like status.

Today, however, a new set of leading words is being launched: *democratic, learning* and *communicative leadership*. The question that has motivated me to write this article is what does this sudden change of buzzwords indicate? Is it more of the same or something else?

In a national survey from 1998² initiated by the National Agency for Education, it was concluded that many Swedish principals lack satisfactory conditions for managing their schools. It was also pointed out that the goal- and result-oriented system of government is deficient and that local schools tend to be organized in an old-fashioned manner. As a reaction to the difficulties that Swedish principals were understood to encounter, the Ministry of Education and Science appointed a group of experts. Their mission was, in short, to 'clearly define the responsibilities and authorities of principals and create better conditions for an efficient leadership. The Government is of the opinion that measures are necessary on all levels' (p. 57).

At the same time it is intention of the Ministry of Education and Science to situate the mission of the group of experts in a wider context. They point out that another group, the Committee for Teacher Education, has recently formulated a framework for the training of public school principals and that introducing guidelines for principals is being considered in the current revision of the legislation on education. In my view, this policy statement from the ministry expresses an urge to coordinate the different initiatives and at the same time to demonstrate a political ability to take action.

The people who were invited to become members of this group of experts were chosen from various levels of the educational system and a member of parliament was appointed as chairman. The composition of the group appears to have been based on a Swedish idea about representation (and on who has been accorded the right to speak) rather than on professional expertise. However, calling the members experts defines them as being fully initiated in and competent to deal with the issues; thus they obtain more authority and legitimacy than would be accorded a group of stakeholders or a reference group.

Two years later, in 2001, this group gave an account of its work in a report entitled *Learning Leaders: Leadership for Today's and Tomorrow's School*.³ The report has the following structure. The cover of the report shows a photo of a handsome young man dressed in shorts standing on his head on a sunny lawn.

In the preface it is stated that the group has arranged a series of dialogues with over 2000 people from different areas of education in seminars and conferences to discuss the educational leadership of tomorrow. The purpose of the report is presented as a 'proposal for how to improve principalship'; the intention is to provide a platform for further dialogues between stakeholders in the educational system.

In the first chapter the reader is taken on a tour of a fictitious school by a principal who 'walks the talk', demonstrating the kind of leadership being advocated in the report. In the next chapter the experts discuss the concepts around which their line of argument is centred to introduce a 'new way to manage a school' (*Learning Leaders*, 2001: 44). The label chosen for this approach is, as mentioned, *democratic, learning and communicative leadership* (DLC). After relating DLC to its educational context in the next few chapters, the report concludes with a chapter on the training and recruitment of principals.

In the National Agency for Education's goals and guidelines for the National Professional Training Program for School Heads, DLC has now become legislation and has been given the status of an official leadership model: 'The purpose of the training is that school heads develop and practice a democratic, learning and communicative leadership, building on the National Curriculum.'⁴ Thus *Learning Leaders* provides the conceptual hub around which the National Professional Training Program for School Heads is organised (Skolverket, 2002). Another and perhaps here more interesting aspect of this report is that it is an example of authoritative conceptions on educational leadership formulated by a public commission of inquiry. It will provide concepts and statements which other stakeholders in the educational arena are obliged to consider and to which they are expected to refer, especially in Sweden where in the field of education there is a tradition of strong central governmental steering. For these reasons I regard this report as an interesting object for analysis.

Taking Language Seriously: Points of Departure

This article sets out to unpack and rebuild implicit perceptions of educational leadership in *Learning Leaders*, i.e. the meanings embedded in its key words. The 'linguistic turn' and constructivism are two necessary frames of reference if this kind of discourse analysis is to be meaningful. In the social sciences the term linguistic turn implies that language should no longer be interpreted as a mere reflection of cognitive processes; rather, language means acting, a continuous co-construction of social realities. Discourses determine the boundaries for what is socially and culturally accepted as 'true', 'trustworthy', 'reasonable', 'good', etc. (Börjesson, 2003). By giving language this significance, it becomes a 'reality constituting practice' (Edwards and Potter, 1992)—the backbone of social action. The discourse constitutes practice through its view of the world and its creation of meaning and identity. It is conveyed through texts and verbal action, as well as through symbols, narratives and the modelling of solutions to

problems and visions of desirable futures. In this way power is exercised from within by regulating and controlling our thoughts, emotions and perceptions of ourselves; discursive processes gradually and unconsciously bind us to certain identities.⁵ Thus all forms of organization and management entail the introduction of a particular order or discipline (see e.g. Hindess, 1996; Hollway, 1991; Sjöstrand et al., 2001; Wodak, 1996)

My use of discourse in this article is inspired by Potter's (1996) understanding of discourse, which is somewhat broader than the Foucauldian notion of a discourse as a set of statements that formulate objects and subjects. Potter focuses on discourse to mean that 'the concern is with talk and texts as part of social practices' (p. 105). In Potter's view, people do not use language primarily to create realistic representations of objects they perceive; rather, language is used to *achieve* things. Thus the research strategy in this vein is to be sensitive to the use of language in its productive, constructive and contextual character. It encourages the researcher to take an interest in not only how language in different ways produces an order under the cover of representativity, but also what the use of language accomplishes in specific social settings.

In order to identify and describe conceptions in the discourse and distinguish which ideals are discoursed and which are omitted, I use here an approach that is usually associated with Edelman (1988). A close reading of a text reveals that it can be structured in accordance with the following scheme:

- problems
- causes of problems
- solutions to problems

The text itself points out what is what. If DLC is the solution, what, then, are the problems and causes? What kind of problematic yesterday is the point of departure for DLC, and what is the promised future like? In my close reading of *Learning Leaders*, I have selected statements that I regard as central to the bearing and expressing of meaning; these I have then organized in terms of the previously mentioned structure. I then continue with my analysis of how the three concepts democracy, learning and communicative leadership are used, noting in what combinations and in what contexts they tend to occur, how they contribute to the construction of meaning and what they are intended to accomplish.

The first part of the article presents DLC on its own terms, interspersed with some critical comments of my own. In the second part I analyse and discuss the use of the concepts democracy, learning and communicative leadership. In the third part I close with some reflections on the key words, i.e. the management discourse that DLC expresses and within which it is constructed. I argue that the leader emerges as a function of a changed way of exercising power, a central aspect of which is that power is exercised continuously—there is no safe haven.

The Legitimizing Repertoire: From a Gloomy Yesterday to the Promise of a Bright Future

Portraying the present and the past as problematic and undesirable states is a common way of legitimating changes and innovations. Such a strategy embodies the assumption that the greater are the problems being described, the stronger will be the case for authorizing the proposed measures and changes. Starting from this view of the problems, I will highlight the conceptions, ideals and hopes for the future that are central to this management discourse, but will also touch upon what tends to be marginalized or omitted.

In order to describe the difficulties and problems in Swedish school management, *Learning Leaders* refers mainly to a report written by a group of school inspectors appointed by the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 1999). In the inspectors' report it is pointed out that the inadequacies of the national steering system—steering by objectives and results—need to be addressed since the system has not had the desired impact. Too much time has been spent on translating objectives into measurable activities. It is therefore proposed that the present system be replaced by a system based on national values and mission statements:

The opinion of the group of experts is that steering by national values and mission statements is more compatible with the idea of the learning organization than is steering by objectives. This means that the state formulates the educational intentions of society in an overarching but clear way. It is a question of an inner steering by norms rather than by direct instructions and goals tied to results.⁶ (*Learning Leaders*, 2001: 33)

Furthermore, the local policies of the municipalities are criticized for being short-sighted and there is said to be a disturbing credibility gap between politicians, administrators and principals. In many cases principals do not get the support they need from the LEAs. The local school organizations are described as being behind the times—responsibility and authority have not been decentralized and the scope of action for principals is highly restricted, particularly with regard to the school's economy. Administratrivia tend to take over at the expense of the principal's attention to core educational processes. Given these contextual circumstances, a disturbing lack of clarity evolves as a prominent theme in descriptions of the problems facing Swedish schools: 'Local politicians as well as the LEA need to be clear about how they view leadership and the demands for change and development' (p. 32).

There is also an implicit assumption that the principals themselves lack this quality, and, moreover, lack of clarity is said to be a general problem throughout the system. Claims are also made that this state of affairs is related to a counterproductive culture of presumed consensus where teachers avoid conflicts and communicate too little about relevant matters. In this prevailing culture of 'harmony', principals are held hostage; they do not understand the

nature of their mission, harmony is an end in itself and change is difficult, not to say impossible. But while principals are seen as the problem, they are also the solution—they ‘play a key role when it comes to realizing a national education of high equity and quality’ (p. 14).

The solution to these problems is said to be a new approach to leadership: DLC. Definitions of this form of leadership refer to central values in the National Curriculum: ‘Probably the only way for a school to comply with the fundamental value- and norm-structure is for the principal to constantly take the initiative to work with these fundamental values in the school’ (p. 23). With the aim of safeguarding these values and achieving the desired clarity, the concept *mission statement* has been introduced as the hub around which attention and action should revolve. The qualities of this concept are to permeate the entire organization—they should also be a focus for school principals’ and teachers’ learning. These learning activities have to be managed on an organizational level—schools must become learning organizations:

Steering by national values and mission statements in a learning organization means that local politicians as well as leaders and colleagues reflect and learn about the mission statements in order to formulate visions for the development of the local school. (p. 33)

The learning organization being promoted here requires the principal to present his or her vision in a leadership declaration, to set the agenda for school development, and to achieve this he or she must have a supportive municipality. Consequently, the LEAs are portrayed as ‘the municipal support’ (p. 38). In this upside-down pyramid, teachers are to be allowed and encouraged to work in teams with substantial autonomy, at the same time as their experiences and beliefs are to be constantly challenged by their principal. In this respect, principals are expected to act as role models, leading the learning activities. Thus, one of their primary tasks is to transform the culture of the local school from an emphasis on *doing* to an emphasis on *learning*. Alongside frequent remarks concerning communicative and learning skills, what the principal’s attitude to the National Curriculum should be is hinted at in the following dramaturgical metaphor: ‘Does the principal read the National Curriculum as a programme note for the opera—or does the principal read the National Curriculum in order to participate on stage?’ (p. 27).

The opera metaphor conveys a wish for the power to act, an ability to read the script, possibly topped with the possession of artistic talent. To make this approach possible, strategic leadership is advocated: the principal needs to be brave enough to loosen control and demonstrate the capacity to empower committed and talented teachers. If this is the case, the latest Swedish agreement with the teacher unions regarding working hours ‘can be implemented also based on its principles’ (p. 37).⁷

What is not being said here that could have been said? The predecessor to DLC, the concept ‘pedagogical leadership’, is hardly mentioned at all. Its

absence marginalizes the fact that for more than three decades pedagogical leadership has been put forward as the solution par excellence to the shortcomings in educational management and has served as an unquestioned prototype of the ideal leadership (Svedberg, 2000). The text refrains from mentioning the differences between past and present leadership ideals, despite the fact that they all claim to have the same core values of the National Curriculum as their point of departure and ideological basis. Hence, understanding from where we are coming as a basis for knowing where we are going is made obsolete.

To sum up: it is claimed that there is a lack of clarity and that principals are caught up in a culture of 'harmony' and in time-consuming administration; furthermore, it is claimed that these problems are caused by an outmoded steering system and an ineffective organization at the local and district levels. The solution to these problems is DLC, exercised in a learning organization characterized by clear national values and mission statements. Below I discuss further the meanings attributed to the three core concepts: democracy, learning and communicative leadership.

Democracy

The concept *democracy* undoubtedly strikes a positive note in everyday language and has long been used in combination with leadership to reinforce what is regarded as desirable and humanistic ideals (see e.g. Bass, 1990; Murphy, 2002; Murphy and Seashore Louis, 1999). In *Learning Leaders* the definition of democratic leadership is based on the democratic values expressed in the National Curriculum.

The basis for leadership is that the principal and other leaders, elected politicians as well as civil servants, embrace the values of the National Curriculum and thereby the democratic national values or mission statement of public schooling. (*Learning Leaders*, 2001: 11)

However, the democracy concept is hardly unambiguous and is often given divergent and sometimes competing meanings. In *Learning Leaders* democracy is understood primarily as a value, not as a way to govern and exercise power. If we understand democracy in the way that is implied in *Learning Leaders*, i.e. as a value, schools can be said to be caught in a cross-fire between three idealized sets of values (Pettersson and Söderlind, 1993). These are the state governed by law (rule of law), democracy (democratic governance) and the welfare state (efficient use of tax revenue). All three are no doubt honourable concepts, but sometimes they are also incompatible. Sooner or later conflicts between public good and private good, between rule of law and efficacy, and between the interests of civil servants and (local) politicians manifest themselves in this triangular field of values. Every choice of significance that a principal makes (or does not make) contains a democratic dilemma where there is no obvious right or wrong, just a continuous displacement of balance in this

triangle of values (Svedberg, 2000). Given this understanding of democracy, it is rather a question of trying to find shifting points of relative equilibrium in a constantly changing field of tensions.

From this simple, but hopefully not simplistic, point of view, democracy is not as unambiguous as one is led to believe in *Learning Leaders*. It is true that democracy is understood as a potential cause of conflicts, but they are conflicts of a kind that can be dealt with by talking them through. Harmony is apparently within reach. This emphasis on the communicative aspects of leadership invites a comparison with a deliberative understanding of democracy. Englund (2000: 5) claims that:

... the foundation of a deliberative democracy as a complement to the principle of the majority, i.e. the voting for alternatives, is that a decision-making process needs to be justified and thoroughly discussed between all participating sides. One has to agree upon what to disagree about, what alternative decisions can be made and what procedure is needed in order to make decisions. (My translation)

A deliberative conversation in this vein is, according to Englund, an attempt that goes beyond concepts of teaching and methods of instruction, and instead emphasizes conversation as an end in itself. Such a deliberative process presupposes a true respect for individual freedom and autonomy. The participants must have a desire to reach agreement as well as the capability and competence to participate in conversations of this kind. However, if these conditions are lacking, then the deliberative process will be distorted and it risks becoming manipulative (Habermas, 1998).⁸

In *Learning Leaders* several lines of argument are introduced that bear some resemblance to a deliberative interpretation of democracy. The rational conversation is one example: 'the principal must have the capacity to participate in profound conversations fraught with conflicts' (*Learning Leaders*, 2001: 11). However, learning based on mission statements that are hierarchically mandated will jeopardize the prerequisite freedom and autonomy. Nor is deliberation as a mutual and critical consideration of alternatives compatible with the idea of strong leadership (in a populist sense).

In the discourse expressed in *Learning Leaders*, democracy is constructed as a fairly solid and unproblematic object. The familiarity and authority of the word 'democracy' gives it a taken-for-granted quality and its implications become natural and commonsensical (Potter, 1996: 102). The point of modern management is not primarily to force employees to submission. It is, rather, a question of establishing an exchange between the managing and the managed, i.e. a kind of co-management through which the individual shares, at least partly, the responsibility. In opposition to the understanding of democracy as a value, this understanding builds on the assumption that governing, to be legitimate, has to respect the character of each individual, group or collective (Hindess, 1996). How is this character to be determined? Rhetorically, it is possible for the individuals themselves to decide this. However, government as

a regime of power rests upon certain knowledge-based assumptions about its citizens: what they are, could be and should be.

Learning

The second key concept used to introduce the new leadership ideal is *learning*, also a master signifier in the title of the report. Learning is described as something that occurs through all aspects of life all the time—it is something that the individual can never stop doing. The term learning is used in various combinations: *learning organization, learning leader, learning situations, continuous learning, everyday learning, life-long learning, learning practice, collective learning, individual learning, learning culture, learning process, learning conversations and learning by experience*. This understanding of learning appears to have been inspired by constructivism, i.e. the view that knowledge is constructed in a social context: ‘Learning by experience is a point of departure for school development in a learning organisation. To reflect upon learning and experience leads to new reflections as a basis for further learning and acting’ (*Learning Leaders*, 2001: 26). However, the intensity inherent in this broad use of learning suggests that one is never, nor should ever be, at ease—enough is never enough. Learning as a concept is constructed to have an impact on the actors. It is portrayed as the unquestioned and natural road to the future—things have to improve in the name of development, all the time and in all aspects. These continuous evaluations and reflective activities become politically correct rituals that border on religious confession. Learning is not an empirically constructed phenomenon—it has rather become a beacon in a moral and political universe.

Still another contiguous and recurrent concept is *reflection*. It can be assumed that the connection here is to Schön (1983) and the reflective practitioner, renamed, however, as the ‘reflective and learning practitioner’ (*Learning Leaders*, 2001: 20). At first glance, it appears that what is being asked for here is a problematizing way of working in education. Public education should adopt a more academic style where teachers and principals explore arguments and concepts from several perspectives to find a basis for mutual understanding. But in competition with this view, a more technical-rational approach is covertly introduced. The frequently recurring recommendations for evaluation and quality programmes build on the assumption that knowledge is an entity that can be measured, or at least described, by goal-rational means and procedures. On the other hand, as Bohm (1980: 23) argues, ‘when measuring is identified with the very essence of reality, this is *illusion*’. In this respect there is some dissonance between academic ideals on the one hand, and the goal-rational ideology on the other. The academic seminar represents a free and open attitude toward knowledge; not learning *according to*, or even less *about*, a stipulated set of mission statements. The question of what the learning and reflection referred to in *Learning Leaders* should be about is obscure and left fairly

open—here stake is discounted in what Potter (1996: 112) calls *interest management* in the production of facts.

Communication

The third key concept is *communication*. This concept, alongside dialogue and conversation, is used frequently to construct the virtues of DLC. It is argued that these concepts are consistent with a system that emphasizes a local interpretation of policies. However, note that amplifying words such as *continuously*, *mutually* and *constantly* are used repeatedly and in various combinations: in the learning organization the principal and the teachers are expected to 'learn *continuously*', 'reflect *continuously*' and 'analyse *continuously*' (*Learning Leaders*, 2001: 27, 33, 16; my italics). The dialogue is presented as 'a form where visions and mission statements are *mutually* communicated and formulated' (p. 11; my italics). And 'in a *constant* dialogue the principal converses' at the same time as 'the teachers' conceptions about teaching and learning are *constantly* challenged', '*constantly* abolishing temporary truths and beliefs' in an organization that '*constantly* develops' (pp. 5, 6, 6 and 29; my italics). Behind this anxious repetition of adjectives, there is concern about not wasting time and not being 'on task'. Somebody seems to be very nervous!

The way other related communicative concepts are framed deserves further comment. First of all, no distinction is made between a dialogue, which is a conversation between two persons, and a conversation, which is something that takes place between two or more people (Isaacs, 1999). Second, statements such as 'the dialogue characterizes the conversations' (*Learning Leaders*, 2001: 29) or 'the mutual conversation' (p. 11) are somewhat like biting one's own tail. Tautologies of this kind could very well be regarded as an 'optimistic' strategy adopted to reinforce a message. Third, the meanings of certain concepts, for example, communication, are altered. In its original meaning, communication builds upon and presupposes mutuality. Therefore, it is striking when, for instance, a vision is presented as something that is to be communicated in a one-way direction. A main characteristic of a vision is that it is shared among those inspired souls who formulated it. Through statements like 'communicating a mission statement' (p. 13), a mutual quality is introduced in the distribution of tasks—or what otherwise used to be called, more bluntly, giving orders.

In this way traditional hierarchal relationships become veiled when humanistic communicative concepts are imported into management. Several of the terms and concepts referred to above, such as learning, communication, meaning and reflection, were given altered connotations in the 1970s and 1980s when positivism came under fire (see e.g. Edwards and Potter, 1992). First of all, these concepts served as an epistemological critique of positivism; and second, they were used to express disapproval of the functionalistic and meritocratic society. These and similar concepts have now inhabited the world of

management, which is blind to their roots and to the fact that the meaning of these concepts changes when they are launched into the power structures of private and public organizations.

Governance of Meaning

As we have seen, *Learning Leaders* introduces not only altered leading words, but also a different use of language where familiar words and concepts are used in a dissimilar mode.⁹ However, the text wrestles with a troublesome organizational heritage which it wants to get rid of but at the same time keep. In a traditional hierarchical organization, steering is based on fairly open asymmetric subject-object relations. Terms like 'boss', 'employee', 'job description' and 'the giving of orders' are examples of concepts consistent with such an organizational world. This top-down project from the last century centres on the assumption that the future is something that allows itself to be planned for and managed. In this case control and consistency are important and overt principles.

Current thinking on educational policy is based on an assumption of continuous development and the notion that there is a fertile market for alternative, more contemporary, organizational orders. Now, words such as conversation, dialogue and reflection are communicative concepts that are intended to demonstrate a shift of organizational ideals. Teachers are no longer presented as objects—they are introduced rather as subjects in the name of participation and professionalism. The current Swedish standard is constructed around teachers who work in teams (preferably without a fixed time-schedule) and concentrate on questions concerning curriculum in a broad sense in order to plan, organize and manage learning processes according to local possibilities and constraints. Symmetrical subject-subject relationships are brought forward as an ideal and as being in line with the rationale of decentralization.

However, it appears that a stubborn organizational heritage does not want to loosen its grip. Notions that are inherent to a hierarchical organization tend to shift in meaning. Today concepts and combinations of concepts are being constructed that are intended to embrace an ambivalence between different ideal-type conceptions of management.¹⁰ In concepts and words that can be recognized from past times and at the same time open up for something new, defenders of an old organizational order can recognize themselves as well as appeal to supporters of a new order.

The Core of the DLC Discourse

The key concepts and bearers of meaning used in *Learning Leaders* are in my understanding 'democratic', 'learning' and 'communicative', and to some extent also 'mission statement', 'learning organization' and 'clarity'. Judging from the emphatic way in which they are used, it appears to me that these concepts

together constitute the core of the discourse. They no doubt occur frequently in the text; but above all, they represent claims for meanings central to the discourse around which a particular social order is constructed (and at the same time excludes possible variations). The school principal who emerges from *Learning Leaders* is a communicative and learning knowledge worker of the new millennium. He or she should possess considerable rhetorical resources and social competency and have access to a broad network with branches that reach beyond the local community (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Muncio, 1996). Principals should be reflective, systematic organizers who can free themselves of routines and administrivia by formulating visions, getting their priorities right and delegating. Over and above this, they should maintain a continuous dialogue with everyone in the school and anyone in the community who has a professional interest in what is taking place in the school. In this vein the leadership ideal of *Learning Leaders* can be summed up as boundless principals who 'converse in a continuous dialogue' (p. 5)—i.e. can talk their way out of ambivalence, anxiety and conflict. The quotes below can serve as illustrative examples of this:

In the dialogue the mission statements and the vision are communicated and accepted. (p. 33)

The dialogue becomes a form where visions and mission statements are mutually communicated and shaped. (p. 11)

The principal formulates and communicates a personal leadership declaration with his or her own vision of the development of the school. (p. 12)

In this discourse the necessity for leadership is stressed and underlined. No doubt crucial issues are put forward, but they become trivialized—the work of the principal is sorted into idealistic categories. If the leader gets things right, the entire organization will flourish—qualities of omnipotence are attributed to the leader. The imperative to the leader is to adjust and fine-tune his or her personality and learn about styles and strategies. An underlying assumption is that management is a free-floating entity more or less independent of its context—the possibilities of the strong leader are virtually unlimited (Edwards and Potter 1992). Models and structures thrive without being disrupted by everyday trivia and human flaws. And above all, this kind of management text invites projections and contributes to myths about the bold and passionate super-principal.

An illustration of this is the first chapter of *Learning Leaders* where we meet a fictitious principal 'who walks the talk'. This constructed narrative or anecdote is not just a story, it intends to make a point (Potter, 1996: 5). This anecdotalizing is geared to assigning blame and guilt to principals 'who do not understand their mission'. It is intended to illustrate who needs to change their behaviour.

In an apparently increasingly open educational system, traditional control is

being replaced by a more concealed variant of the theme, namely by establishing that principals'/teachers'/pupils' activities are possible to monitor through evaluations and quality-control programmes. A combination of decentralization-evaluation is introduced as a rational management technique in harmony with the interests of each and everyone concerned. In this discourse, with its frequent emphasis on decentralism and learning about the mission statement, the principal is presented as both independent and responsible and *at the same time* as both subordinate and loyal. The subordination (or unwavering loyalty) is mainly secured by expecting the principal to keep to the budget and produce good results in the name of what cannot be questioned: the mission statement. This firm orientation towards results outlines normality, regulates the principal's compliance and constitutes means for control and motivation.

By defining the identity of the principal in relation to this kind of management, disciplinary power is exercised from within. An identity is constructed that is more similar to the status of an employee than of a professional, i.e. is more in line with the mission statement than with professional judgement and experience. This identification with the mission statement is akin to the old hierarchical order—an order belonging to the gloomy yesterday (Lundgren, 2002). Fashionable buzzwords in the service of goal-rationality are used to fend off similarities with the past and an irritating insight about the future as a project that is unwilling to be managed or controlled in a goal-rational manner.

Thus the principal's identity (as well as that of other actors in the school arena) is constructed when mutually dependent meanings of democracy, learning and communication are formed. Among the leading words, it seems to me that learning holds the more prominent position. My reasons for this view are as follows: it is proposed that, to enhance clarity the Swedish goal- and result-oriented system should be replaced by a system based on mission statements. Becoming fully versed in the mission statement and communicating in its spirit is defined as the principal's *raison d'être*. Hence, learning is fixated as a superordinate concept. This learning about the mission statements unfolds itself as a way to control perceptions and meanings and counteract ideas and understandings that could disturb the organizational order. Crucial to this is the need to create conceptions of consensus in the organisation (Potter, 1996: 116). It is true that the modern exercise of power through knowledge formation has always influenced how we see ourselves and others, but what is specific today is that this influence is far more deeply penetrating than before. It has to do with the continuous exercise of power from within and where we become increasingly involved in different forms of evaluation and reflection—eventually as a 'self-inflicted' professional purgatory.¹¹

To use ambiguity in communication as a way of reaching acceptance and thereby steering clear of doubt and debate is an effective discursive strategy. By paying little attention to the question of referential adequacy (for instance, by neglecting all reference to pedagogical leadership), the message 'sounds good' but, at the same time, is tricky to relate to. 'Democracy', 'learning' and

'communication' are used ambiguously and repeatedly—they run the risk of becoming buzzwords in the acoustical sense. This is similar to what Potter (1996: 187) calls ontological gerrymandering:

If we combine the role of descriptive categories in constituting actions and events with the potential for selectively gerrymandering what is to be formulated and what is ignored, we can see that there is an immensely powerful system for producing versions designed to do particular things.

By the very fact that the leading words remain unproblematicized, complexity and dilemmas are avoided—it is more a question of persuading the reader than of providing enlightenment. True, problems are mentioned, but the message is that if one's faith is strong enough things will work out and success is just around the corner. Key concepts are open and hover in a moral vacuum: concepts that can mean almost anything mean nothing, which at the same time is a rhetorical move. In accordance with this unproblematicized stance, the concepts are presented as natural and reasonable waypoints in the view of the world that is presented. Taken together, the softened key concepts become so ambiguous that the reader can interpret the message in virtually any way he or she pleases—and thereby come to accept the message.

In this way management discourses hold rhetorical resources to steer clear of contradictions and ambiguities. They stipulate the outcome of meaning-processes and establish an order of power that defines and limits the principal. Of course, higher management is not interested in narrow conservatism or rigidity; instead reorientation and dynamic approaches are advocated. But at the same time strict limitations are set, formally but even more so informally, for the kind of reorientation that is acceptable. In the case of *Learning Leaders*, the outcome is a discourse that lacks intelligibility but which, paradoxically, has clarity as a cornerstone—a discourse where democracy hovers in the borderland between obedience and loyalty, where communication tends to become a one-way concept and where learning entails a strict hierarchal subordination.

Notes

1. Foucault (1980) uses the concept governmentality.
2. Utvecklingsplanen 1998/99: 121, p. 57 [The national plan for school development].
3. My translation. The Swedish title is *Lärande ledare: Ledarskap för dagens och framtidens skola*.
4. The National Agency for Education's goals and guidelines for the National Professional Training Program for School Heads, §4.
5. This is expressed by Foucault (1980) in his discussion of the creation of the subject, with particular regard to self-regulatory functions.
6. This and subsequent excerpts from *Lärande ledare* are my own translation.
7. In this agreement teachers are expected to work more collectively with curriculum issues.

8. According to Habermas, true communication based in the life world only takes place if the participants speak from personal conviction, seek what is good and true, give mutual confirmation and strive for a shared understanding.
9. An example of shifts in meaning is the word leader, which today has a positive connotation. In the 1990s this word was associated with German National Socialism.
10. According to Leithwood et al. (1999), this shift of rhetorical focus from what could be called restructuring towards reculturing implies that the legitimating of new structures moves from form to content.
11. Fendler (2001) suggests that this is what characterizes our journey from 'disciplinary societies' to 'control societies' and inscribes many of the aspects that distinguish modernity from postmodernity.

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