

Domain Building or Risk Taking? (In-) equality in Danish School Management

Marianne Abrahamsen

Lecturer, Ph.d, Department of Cultural Studies, University of Southern Denmark

Campusvej 55 5230 Odense, Denmark

Tel: 0045 65504449 E-mail: Marianne.abrahamsen@ifpr.sdu.dk

Katrin Hjort (corresponding author)

Professor, Department of Cultural Studies

University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55 5230 Odense, Denmark

Tel: 0045 6550 2830 E-mail: katrinh@ifpr.sdu.dk

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Abstract

The Nordic Countries are usually seen as the worlds most successful nations when it comes to gender equality, and the Scandinavian population in general appreciates values traditionally labeled feminine as caretaking and the quality of everyday life. However, the inequalities become obvious in school management. Among headmasters in High school in Denmark only 18 % are women despite of the fact that 52 % of the teachers are female. How can we explain that? This article is based on a survey answered by top- and middle level management staff. It rejects all traditional explanations of the relations between gender, values and family obligation but reveals an interesting difference between two strategies for career development: *Domain Building* and *Risk Taking*. Both strategies are applied by both men and women. However, one of them seems to be the most effective with regard to achieve a position as a top manager – and one of them is more often preferred by men than by women.

Keywords: Nordic Countries, School Management, Gender Equality, School Management, Career strategies.

1. Introduction

Compared to other nations the Nordic countries like to see themselves as very successful when it comes to gender equality. International surveys as Hofstede's (2012) display the Danish society as characterized by a culture where egalitarianism and informality are highly valued, and traditional "feminine" qualities as caring and concern for the individual are central even in management and public life. Sweden and Norway are very similar to Denmark but Sweden tops the list as a culture, where consensus is important and traditional "male" competition is not seen as very legal.

In spite of the Danish self-(over)-estimation the fact is that the representation of men and women in senior management in Danish High School is very unequal and more unequal than in other public and private organizations in Denmark. There is no lack of female teachers or middle level managers. 52 % of the teachers are women and 40% of the middle managers. However, at the top management level only 18 % is female. In the rest of the society the female representation among senior executives in the public sector is 18-24 % and in the private sector 4.4 % (UVM 2011, DS 2010), Danmarks Statistik, 2011, Ledernes Hovedorganisation, 2010)

This inequality can be considered as a problem. Not because women necessarily are better leaders than men, nor *have* to make a career in management, if they don't want to. The unequal representation is problematic of economic and democratic reasons. A society needs to use its human resources in the best way, and it's a democratic status is reflected in how the chances of achieving a top position are divided with regard to gender, social and cultural background etc. The issue is of special importance within education, because teachers and school managers – for the good and the worse – serve as role models for new generations.

In order to answer the: "*Why do so relatively few women achieve the highest positions in Danish High School?*" we conducted a survey "Gender and School Management" among top and middle level management (A- and B-leaders) both men and woman - in all Danish High Schools 2009.¹ We asked questions to be answered both quantitatively and qualitatively, and in despite the relatively limited material, our findings supported the following results:

1. Men as well as woman leaders prioritize the classical "*Danish*" *egalitarian and "feminine" values* - informality and care taking - when they are asked to exposed their values and make a self-assessment. There is no remarkable difference between A- and B-leaders at this point. How these statements relate to management performance in praxis and to the picture in the eyes of staff, board, students and parents, this material cannot tell anything about.
2. We *cannot* explain the women's lack of jump from A- to B-level by different family situations or attitudes towards family. The numbers of children are approximately the same, they all state to have good support from family and partners – male or female – and they all declare the ambition to obtain a balance between career and private life. Our empirical material rejects in other words "the usual explanations": Women's

careers are limited by social *structures* as family obligations or by personal *choices* based on family values.

3. On the other hand we can describe two different career strategies. We label them *Domain Building* and *Risk Taking*. The first one is characterized by building up and consolidating a domain in extension of your existing personal and professional skills. The second one, in contrast, is characterized by more radical shifts in tasks – internal within the organization or external between organizations. Both strategies are used by both men and women but the second appears to be the most effective in order to get a top level job - and is preferred by more men, than women.

These results can contribute to explain some of the gendered barriers within (school) management and pose the question, how we can support different career strategies, if we want to achieve (gender) equality in the education system as well as in society as a whole.

2. Gendered values

Our methodological perspective on gender can be defined as social constructionism (Gergen 1999). We do not here enter the discussion about nature and nature, as it has been revitalized by neuropsychology (Brizendine 2006). We see gendering and gendered performances as constructed and reconstructed by different individuals in different situations in different historical, societal and cultural contexts (Butler 1990). Paradoxically, we take our point of departure in the surveys of Geert Hofstede (1984, 2012). Correspondently our questionnaire about leadership-style was composed on the on the basic of H. L. Gray's (1993) distinction between a male and a female paradigm in management thinking. Gray leans – as Hofstede - on the classic European dichotomization between rationality and emotionality. Masculinity is defined as focus on objectivity, discipline, efficiency, competitiveness etc. in contrast to the feminine focus on subjective and relational features, caring, consensus making etc. However, Gray do not conform the stereotypical but widespread assumption that men are the best equipped to leadership, because they possess the right values as rationality and efficiency in order to conduct, what is supposed to be best practice.

Within contemporary culture analyses – especially ethno-methodology and Conversation Analyses – the Hofstede surveys have been heavily criticized for their static and generalizing definition of culture and for their limiting use of statistic methods (Moerman 1996). Nevertheless we have found the research of Hofstede and Grey very inspiring in order to question the universalistic versions of culture and gender. The Hofstede surveys has served the purpose to stress that management culture in Denmark and the other Nordic countries do not automatically comply with an “international” standard description of culture, and the Gray categories have help us to illuminate that values can be gendered in many different ways. The stereotypes do not fit in our case. The scene might be much more complicated. Even the Danish male senior executives, who have made the most successful career possible in High School system, like to describe themselves as good and caring parents – or even “mothers” - delegating influence and responsibility to the employees. And the expressed values of all the managers cross the limits of sex division.

We asked the managers – without referring to gender – which qualities they see as characteristic for them as leaders. In the template below we have identified the highest ranked qualities – by more than 50 % - and the lowest ranked – by less than 20 % of the responders. We have marked the qualities according to Grays dichotomization between masculine and feminine.

Qualities – identified by more than 50% of the male top managers.	Qualities – identified by more than 50% of the female top managers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal (F) • Tolerant (F) • Aware of individual differences (F) • Caring (F) • Creative (F) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of individual differences (F) • Informal (F) • Tolerant(F) • Caring (F) • Intuitive (F) • Creative (F) • Disciplined (M)
Qualities – identified by less than 20% of the male top managers.	Qualities – identified by less than 20% of the female top managers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non competitive (F) • Subjective (F) • Formal (M) • Normative (M) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Controlled (M) • Subjective (F) • Normative (M) • Formal (M)

Figur 1: Leadership values

All the top managers characterize their qualities as leaders in terms traditionally labeled feminine. The only exception is that the women mention *disciplined*, which is a term traditionally connoted with masculinity. The less popular qualities are masculine with the feminine exception “subjective” and in the men’s case “non competitive”.

Our empirical findings answer in this way back to the stereotypes: All (management) cultures are not dominated by identical value systems dichotomizing and hierarchy- sizing “hard and soft competences” as male and female respectively, and all managers do not want to see themselves as rational and controlling “fathers”. The Nordic region has historically represented a relatively egalitarian - and maybe even “maternalistic” - version of gendering. Probably due to – supporting and supported by – the Nordic welfare state model (Kaspersen 2006, Hjort 2009, Hjort 2012). Our responders have had access to full time public daycare for children, and they have had no formal obligations to elderly relatives. In this situation “the usual explanations” of barriers for women career might not be totally outdated - but obviously they are not sufficient.

3. Usual explanations

How can we explain that women – in spite of the egalitarian culture and the welfare support –

are “lacking” in top-level management in Danish High School? Gender imbalance is a phenomenon in all companies, public or private, even in the Nordic Countries. The usual explanations of why men are in the majority can be placed into three main categories (Billing 2005). Firstly, the ‘*deficiency theories*’. Women do not have what it takes to be a leader. Through their socialization they do not develop the skills and competencies adequate to handle a management job. They lack the appropriate cultural and social capital, even if they possess symbolic capital as diplomas etc. (Alvesson & Billing 1997). Another category of explanations has the focus on *structural* barriers. These barriers might be linked to difficulties coping with both family and a management career but they might as well be due to management culture, traditional work divisions, different career trajectories and lack of personal and organizational support. Finally, theories of *choice*, which assume that the top jobs in management, are not attractive enough to women. These jobs are too time-consuming, and they are based on values women do not necessarily agree on (Billing 2005).

We have no previous studies to test these theories in Danish High School. Marianne Colman, senior lecturer in management of education at the University of London has studied English secondary principals (Colman 2002, 2004). Her findings support in some areas the main theories. The balance between job and family are especially difficult for female managers. More of them are single or divorced and more of them have no children than they male counterparts. The women describe they must live in a male-dominated culture, where sexism understood as patronizing attitudes towards them as women are not unusual. Coleman’s studies furthermore confirm that men and women have different career trajectories. Men are increasingly planning their careers and acquire deliberately relevant skills through experiences and education, while women seems to be more “drifting” into leadership depending on occasion, encouragement and support from others. “Career is something that happens to you”. However, it is worth noticing that the self-assessment of the leaders doesn’t apply with the standard stereotypes of male and female.

As mentioned our findings doesn’t correspondent neither with the main explanations nor with Coleman. However, we still face this “misfit” between the number of woman teaching in Danish High School and the number of women holding a position in top management. How does it come, and do we need to worry about it? Aren’t the traditional gender patterns changing more or less automatically as a consequence of the general modernization of the society? Will they be history a few years from now? Maybe new generations are gendered in new ways or maybe the demands to management is changing in a direction that can be characterized as less masculine and more feminine in the traditional sense?

In regard to the first question our material points to an increasing amount of middle level managers among the females but this change doesn’t show yet among the top-leadersⁱⁱ. In regard to the second question contemporary research in school management points to the need of “transformative leadership” (Leithwood et al. 1999, Green 2003, Moos & Kofoed 2011). Transformative leadership is identified as an approach that is the best in order to handle the current challenges of school. Transformative leadership differs from a traditional management style – transactional leadership – where efficiency is rewarded with money, and

the focus is on control and regulations. Transformative leadership is an approach where the ability to be supportive and understanding and involve others in decision making are crucial. It is tempting to see this style as feminine and assume that it will favor women in management but as Anne Gold (1996) points out: A “feminine leader style can make a women appear as “too soft” and ineffective”.

So... as a consequence of the difficulties explaining why women do not achieve the highest positions in Danish High School, we turned the question around and asked: How do men? Or more precise: *How do the top-leaders become top-leaders?* Which career trajectories do they follow and which career strategies do they apply?

4. Competing strategies

Within our material, we have identified two career strategies that can be found with both men and women. The one we called "*Domain Building*" and the other "*Risk Taking*". The template below is based on responses from both top- and middle management:

Domain Building	Risk Taking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Councilor • Subject adviser in Professional Bodies • Subject Advisory Boards in the Ministry of Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifts in field of responsibility (e.g. from teacher to deputy, inspector, training manager) • Shifts in <i>subject-area</i> (e.g. from human science to social science or vice versa) • Shifts in <i>place of employment</i> (e.g. from school to school or from school to municipalities or counties, ministries or private companies)

Figur 2: *Domain Building and Risk Taking*

Domain Building is a strategy where you build up and consolidate a domain as an extension of you existing professional and personal skills. If you are a teacher educated within human science or psychology, you can extend your domain to include related areas as student counseling, educational leadership, human resource management and internal communication. If you have a social science degree a possibility could be to move into the administrative or economic sphere, and with mathematics and natural science it is obvious to expand in the direction of IT and logistics. Another “natural” step could be to work part-time for the professional bodies or for the Ministry of Education as an adviser within your subject-area.

The *risk taking* strategy, in contrast, is characterized by shifts. As a school internal strategy it means that you are moving from a field you master to "something quite different", i.e. tasks acquiring a new type of experience and competencies. It can be a move from human science to accountancy or from natural sciences to educational development. Risk taking includes not

only internal moves but external as well. The move might be changing from one school to another, but it can also be switching to other types of jobs in the public or to the private sector. Identical for both approaches is that they are not all about one straight movement from bottom to top in an organization but rather about cross-movements, where you at the same time takes one – bigger or smaller - step "sideways" and one step "up". However, the risk taking represent a more vertical and the domain building a more horizontal trajectory. The question now is what works – for whom?

If we take a closer look at the numbers in our material, it appears that some strategic moves work more efficiently than others, if you want to be a top executive. It also appears that some career trajectories among the one sex than among the other.

5. Gendered selection

In order to "move up" from middle to senior manager participation in a master program for example in public management is a good choice. 60% of chief executives have a *master's degree*, versus 40% of middle managers. 10% more men than women among the top leaders has a master's degree (63% versus 53 %), while it is just the opposite among middle managers. Here are women with a master's degree in the majority and may represent a future possibility for female top leaders (38 % versus 45 %).

Being a *student counselor* doesn't seem to be of crucial importance as a springboard to a position as supreme leader. Approximately 20% of all chief executives have been counselors. The number is a little bit smaller than among the total population. More women than men are or have been counselors both in the group of middle- and the group of top-managers.

Neither involvement in *professional bodies* as the "The Association of Teachers in Psychology/Mathematics etc." appears to be crucial for becoming a senior. 36 % of the top managers have been involved in such activities versus 43% of the total population. In both groups women are a small majority.

Having been an *official subject adviser* working for The Danish Ministry of Education ⁱⁱⁱ seems in turn more effective, if you want to obtain a top position. 19% of senior manager have been functioning as subject specialists compared to 11% of the overall management team. More female than male top managers have experience with subject counseling (26 % of the females versus 17 % of the men). Among the middle managers the numbers are equal. Here is thus an example of how a career move that can be categorized as a sub-domain strategy works effectively - and apparently most effectively for women.

The picture is different, if we go to the other responsibilities within the schools. Not surprisingly, two thirds of the senior managers (64 %) have previously been *deputy leaders*, but also former inspectors and department heads are richer represented at the top than among the management team as a whole. So these activities - as well as degrees - seemingly increase career opportunities. 68 % of the male and half and 50 % female executives have previously been deputy leaders, and women are in general less represented at the above mentioned type

of leadership positions than men. Here is a career strategy that women apparently have not yet taken advantage of as effectively as men have done it.

With respect to *change of subject-area* a large proportion of the current top managers in secondary schools have a background within the humanities. This applies to approximately the half. The rest is divided almost equally between social sciences and natural sciences. Among the top leaders educated in human science 80% of are responsible for the economy of the school but 40% have previously had financial responsibility e.g. as a deputy, while only 30% of current middle managers have been responsible for economic matters. All the executives educated within mathematics and natural science state that they previously have had responsibility for staff or teaching development. Change of discipline or subject-area seems in this way to be an effective strategy.

Finally, *change from one working place to another* and from sector to sector appears as a feature that works effectively. Approximately half of the current top executives have been "visiting reality" while only one third of middle managers. 16 % of the current chief executives, who have been "out of school", have been employed in the counties. 20 % of the men and 5 % of the women. Among the current middle managers more of men than of women have been employed in government departments but more women state in the questioner that they have "other experiences". To what extent these "other" - perhaps less formalized - the experience can be productive in a career strategy, time will tell.

We can conclude that both the domain building and the risk taking strategy work as career strategies, if you want to be the top leader in Danish High Schools.. Especially, employment as subject advisor seems to be a good move for domain builders. However, *risk taking* – making more or less radical change of responsibility, subject or place of employment – is like *the most effective strategy*.

Both strategies can be chosen by both sexes, but the domain construction is chosen more often by women, while *men more prioritize risk taking*. In other words, *women choose in general less effective strategic moves*, than men, which may help to explain their lower success rate in the transition from middle to senior manager.

6. Advantages and disadvantages

Each of the two career strategies has their own advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of a domain strategy is that it establishes a space where it is possible to act on the basis of sound and well-grounded professional skills and competencies and govern according to own professional and personal principles and convictions. This enables the domain builders to gradually expand his or her comfort zone, i.e. the area where you feel at home, and where your experience and "survival strategies" can be applied. The disadvantage is - as Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) describes it - that you are tempted to gradually lock yourself in, routinize your work for the good or the worse - maybe develop an instrumental relation to the job and exclude others. You can make yourself indispensable at the workplace but also move into a dead-end position from which it is difficult to advance or get a new job content.

An advantage connected to the risk taking strategy is that you actually get tested - and thus often learned something new by moving beyond your comfort zone to "unknown territory". It might be challenging and exciting. You get the opportunity to mobilize your resources and relativizing your experiences. To achieve robustness and perhaps be forced to reassess some of your basic assumptions. This can make you a better and more broad-spectrum leader but you also run risks. Including the risk, that you actually cannot manage the new task, you do not get the support necessary to develop relevant new skills or become a part of power games you cannot see through or handle. You can be tempted to opportunism and superficial attitudes. You can get stuck according the Peter Principle, i.e. on its level of incompetence. You can become a bad manager or dismissed.

7. Possibilities for change

If we – on the basis of the qualitative as well as the quantitative data - sum up the features that are supporting a career as school manager in the Danish High School the results are:

	Promoting a career	Restricting a career
Personal	Engagement, inclination to seek challenges, boredom, bravery. Incitements from parents, spouse, children and friends.	Lack of support from family and friends.
Organizational	A manager and /or a mentor who discusses organizational matters and encourage to further education and new types of jobs.	Gendered work-division Few positions as managers Lack of identification of females with leadership potentials.
Societal	The degree of equal opportunity at the labor market. The degree of public service as child- and eldercare.	Lack of role-models Lack of incitement structures Lack of policy on gender equality.
Cultural	Egalitarian Culture A culture where ambitions are legal.	Stereotypes of gender and management A culture with an ambivalent attitude towards leadership.

Figure 3: summary of survey results

If we on basis of these results will make some concluding recommendations in order to support gender equality in school management some advices are quite obvious. Personal decisions are personal but it might be productive especially for women with leadership ambitions to dare to face them, name them and discuss pros e contras in “secure surroundings” (Jironet 2010). At the organizational level the top management can sdo a good job focusing more on identifying younger women as well as men with leadership potentials and encourage them to take part in organizational development, further education and external networking (in spite of the fact that they run the risk to lose good employees). At the

social level good welfare services for all are off course crucial, not only for female leaders. In the Nordic Countries young fathers in families with two breadwinners and the ambition of shared family responsibilities are pressed as well. Hopefully, the equalitarian Nordic culture will continue to support collective welfare solutions in spite of the current welfare state transformations and the economic crises in Europe (Hjort 2009, 2012, Pedersen 2011).

However, as a part of the school culture in Danish High Schools an ambivalent attitude towards leadership can be identified (Albrechtsen, 2012, Hjort 2010). As a prolonging of the general egalitarian culture – and their status as academics – the teachers have used to see themselves as rather independent and autonomous. For the good and the worse. On the one hand they have been very responsible for the quality of their subject teaching and their students learning within the disciplines. On the other hand they don't like colleagues “playing managers” and interfering in areas where they have limited concrete knowledge. Cooperation in teams is often difficult because no one wants to make decisions on behalf of others. These “animosities” against leadership – and its cultural roots – have its reasons and are well described in the history of Nordic Culture (Tellhaug 2003, Tellhaug et al. 2006, Østergaard 2006, Hjort & Raae 2012, Raae 2012) but it can be a hindrance to leadership development, because it makes it difficult openly to address leadership ambitions. Maybe, still especially for women.

When it comes to societal solutions as official policies we can notice an interesting difference between Denmark on the one hand, and the other Nordic countries on the other. In the other 4 countries it has been perfectly legal to try to implement political strategies as equal possibilities with regard to gender, language, ethnicity, religion etc. by the means of laws, quota systems, economic incentives and so on. This kind of policy is not popular in Denmark. Neither between men or women. “I want to be assessed on equal terms” and “I want to be appreciated for my qualifications not for my gender” are the common arguments. Maybe as a consequence of the individualistic or liberal trend – that in spite of the collective or social attitudes – are more widespread in Denmark (Østergaard 2006, Hjort & Raae 2012, Hofstede 2012).

So.. if we look for gender equality in Danish High School management, maybe we will have to wait for a new generation of women and men entering the scene, creating new possibilities – and maybe new kinds of difficulties (Schmidt 2012). In the meantime the avoidance of stereotype pictures of good management and male and female leadership styles - e.g. awareness of that a woman in management can perform leadership in a variety of ways – might make a difference.

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Enclosure

	Men	Woman	Total
All teachers	5.253	5.652	10.915
Middle management with responsibility for teaching, logistics or finance.	271 57,5 %	201 42,5 %	472
Middle management with responsibility for organizational decisions as deputies and inspectors	161 75,5 %	51 24,5 %	209
<i>Top management (head masters, directors)</i>	176 82,4 %	36 17,6	212

Figur 4: Survey of the distribution of men and women in management positions in Danish High Schools. The managers are numerated by the authors from the schools' websites. The number of teachers is the number of members in the high school teacher's trade union, GL and collected from the official Danish Statistics, 2011.

ⁱ Total number: 886 respondents. Answers: 52%. The data have been processed I SurveyXact.

ⁱⁱ The percentage of women among the middle-level-managers is only 40% but in the age-group minus 45 the number is 49%.

ⁱⁱⁱ Holding a position as official subject advisor in the Danish High School system is comparable to the former HMI's (Her Majesty's Inspectors) in the UK system.