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A Licence to Lead Transformative Change: On the Complex Capabilities of School Leaders and the Dynamic Capabilities of Schools

Niclas Rönström and Jan Robertson

Abstract: *Education has always been a vehicle for transformative change in societies, especially so when society is confronted with changing conditions and a need for a different or better future. In the paper, we describe three different and dominant views of education still at work today. Over the past three decades, in particular, we have moved from a nationalist and democratic view of education as a public good to an economic view of education as a private good. This 'user-pays' philosophy is based on the flawed assumptions that competition and choice will provide quality education and equitable outcomes in our school systems. Moreover, we also argue that the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a moment of transformative change in education since it reveals flaws in past and present dominant views of education. We argue that school leaders can lead transformative change if they are gifted with a licence to lead. In the paper, we develop a capability approach to leadership for change in terms of leadership as learning. School leaders with a licence to lead can learn the way forward through the challenges they face, with people they work with and alliance partners. We suggest that the complex capabilities of school leaders and the dynamic capabilities of schools are vital aspects of school leadership for transformative change in uncertain times marked by profound social change.*

Keywords: Transformative change, leadership, learning, dynamic capabilities, complex capabilities, pandemic

Introduction

There has been a renewed interest in school leadership in educational policy, practice and research in recent years clearly reflected in a converging global policy climate geared towards higher performance of, and better results in, schools (Rönström 2012). The (global) economy has increasingly become the dominant imaginary of human co-existence and interconnectivity, and this development has meant a sea change in education to the extent that it can no longer easily be recognised as a public good. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed shortcomings and risks of education to the extent that we argue that the pandemic can be seen as a transformative moment and a call for change which we define as time to re-

examine views, values and what is important in education and leadership. As a consequence, it is time to pay renewed attention to schools as agents for change and we argue that capable school leaders are potentially powerful agents for well-needed change if they are gifted with a licence to lead their schools in their local contexts.

In this paper, we firstly argue that education has always been used as a vehicle for transformative change, especially so when society is confronted with changing conditions and a need for a different and better future. We describe different views of education still at work today. We posit that over the past three decades, in particular, we have moved from a democratic view of education as a public good to an economic view of education as a private good and thus a 'user-pays' philosophy. Next, we depart from what we can learn from schools and school leadership under the COVID-19 pandemic and we argue that it can be seen as a moment of transformative change. Finally, we explicate why there is a growing need for change in schools and the dominant views of education still at work today. We develop a capability approach to leadership for change in terms of leadership *as* learning (Robertson 2021) and we illuminate how the complex capabilities of school leaders and the dynamic capabilities of schools are well needed parts of school leadership in times of transformative change in society that is undergoing a metamorphosis.

Education As a Vehicle for Transformative Social Change

Education has always played an important role in the evolution and modernisation of society. Many of the things most of us take for granted in life, such as basic knowledge, skills, professions, democratic participation, human belongingness and moral commitment are greatly dependent on education. Education is of vital importance as individuals need to be educated to link into a complex society and to acquire the complex capabilities one needs to live, work, flourish and co-exist among other members of society. Education is vital for the continuation of society and its different institutions, traditions and practices to secure the continuation of culture, social order and the kind of agency members of society can expect from one another.

Although education has been described as a conservative force securing social continuity in terms of reproduction and socialisation (for example, Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), a short glimpse at the history of education also discloses its role as an agent for social change. In fact, education has been a vital part of the modernisation of society through transformative social change, as can be seen by reflecting on three dominant views of education which we refer to as nationalist, democratic and economic globalist education.

Early education was typically aimed at nation-building, which meant efforts to shift people's loyalties from the bonds they established in their local communities to the nation as the centre

of economic, moral, cultural, political and social gravity (Rönnsström 2012). The nationalist view of education means that individuals and groups are supposed to link into a society revolving around a particular nation and to develop national identities, a sense of belongingness and loyalty to a nation. It is easy to take nations and nationalist views of education for granted as givens. However, such assumptions neglect hard-fought struggles and practices of exclusion behind nation-building practices and the formation of national education and school systems.

Nationalism and nation building were always troubled with real life diversity (Tully 1995). As a consequence, the formation of nation states actually developed through a kind of domestic imperialism towards minority groups poorly attuned to the promoted majority culture. Groups poorly attuned to the majority culture and images of the normal or representative citizen were silenced or excluded, and they were expected to accept the languages, religions, cultural traditions and institutions favouring the majority of citizens rather than their own lifestyle and culture (Kymlicka 2003). However, in the 20th century the nationalist tuning process met with resistance from various groups in different nations who reacted against domestic imperialism, claiming their right to cultural recognition and the right to a life of their own choice and tradition not necessarily attuned to a majority culture, challenging the cultural traditions on which the schooling system was based (Robertson 2018).

The democratic view of education flourished after WW2 in the light of the horrible crimes against humanity that could be linked to untamed nationalism and imperial ambitions. The democratic view of education meant linking individuals into a more rational society where tradition- or ideology-guided actions were to be replaced with science-guided actions. It meant, among other things, to develop more impartial knowledge of society, citizenship duties and democratic mindsets (Roth 2006). From the standpoint of society, education was viewed as an agent for promoting a secular or worldly rationalisation of an egalitarian society in which education is a right for all, and for bringing about trust in (liberal) democratic institutions and practices (Sant 2019).

In recent decades education has shifted its change orientation under the banner of 21st century education due to the speed, power, impact and effects of globalisation. This orientation can be best described as an economic globalist view of education. Many nations have been gearing education to respond to the so-called needs of global economies and the competitive edge of nations increasingly interconnected in global markets (Rönnsström 2012, 2020). In short, the recent advancement of education has been part of a neoliberal movement championing a marketisation of society. The public sector is modelled after the private sector and education is mainly conceived of as a producer of flexible 'human capital' who can take on functional roles as producers, consumers or entrepreneurs in a society gradually becoming marketised in all its facets (Dale 2005; Lingard, Nixon & Ranson 2008). From the standpoint of the individual, inclusion in society depends heavily on education and the acquiring of skills and

identities attractive in highly competitive job markets and a working life linked to the global economy.

The nationalist, democratic and economic globalist views of education briefly discussed above show how education is and has been an agent for transformative social change. When institutions, practices and habits of the past no longer match social reality or future visions and risks, education is activated as an agent for social change (Habermas 2001). However, when we aim at next practices and future habits, we always depart from past and present practices. This is particularly important in education since schools and school systems are built up by long-standing traditions, practices and habits to the extent that some commentators argue that schools of today look more or less the same as they did generations ago (OECD 2016). The ongoing mix of past practices, present realities and future visions, but also local, national and global stakeholders add to complexity and tensions. Some of these tensions are bothering to the extent that we argue that there is need for transformative change in education and that school leaders can play a vital role in this change if they are gifted with a licence to lead. Let us give you a couple of examples.

Homogenising nationalist views runs the risk of excluding children and young people since they tend to neglect real life diversity and differences among those who have a right to quality education. Today, respect for and recognition of difference are essential to many school systems while at the same time there are countless reports pointing to the difficulties educators experience in actually walking the pluralist talk (Ladson Billings 2004; Matthews 1996; Rönnsström 2016). Banks (2004) argued that 21st century schools worldwide were burdened by unresolved tensions between visions of homogenisation and unification and an unescapable real-life diversity, and at the same time Khalifa, Khalil, Marsh and Halloran (2019) report how school leaders are frequently recognised as agents for cultural recognition, the decolonisation of practice and securing quality education for Indigenous groups. However, such an inclusive agenda based on respect for real-life diversity and natural differences among children and young people is severely frustrated as long as homogenising nationalist views pervade school systems and depart from images of what is normal, age adequate, representative, average or must be culturally uniform in schools.

The recent globalist economic view of education tends to reduce individuals to agents for economic concerns and competition, and not to life in society in the broad sense. In this view, diversity is often seen as something to manage rather than respecting and learning from. This recent 21st century development has prompted a call for de-parochialising education among educational researchers (Koh 2008; Lingard et al. 2008) and philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010) reacted to bothering tensions and reductions in this human capital-oriented view of education:

The goal of the nation ... should be economic growth. Never mind about distribution and social equality, never mind about the preconditions of stable democracy, never mind about the quality of race and gender relations, never mind about the improvement of other aspects of human being's quality of life that are not well linked to economic growth. (p. 14)

If public education is too closely linked to economic competitiveness and success it tends to crowd out other important aims and aspects of education. It also runs the risk of contributing to new and dangerous divides in society, between winners endowed with the right credentials, diplomas, grades and merits, and losers lacking competitive power in the technology driven global economy. This is what Sandel (2020) refers to when he claims that we have created a market society pervaded by a tyranny of merit in which the winners inhale too deep because of their own success in education and on global markets – in which we tend to denigrate workers and people who contribute to the common good but are not well linked to the global economy.

These examples highlight why there is a need to activate education and schools as agents for change. Our social reality is undergoing a metamorphosis. A multi-dimensional and complex society marked by global interconnectivity is now a reference point we need to steer by in education (Beck 2016; Delanty 2009; Held 2010; Lingard et al. 2008). Moreover, in a complex society, education as a right and public good rests on a promise to children and young people. Every school will enable their unique way of participating and flourishing in society and fight against alienation and exclusion. Such a promise entails transformative change in schools and school systems since they can no longer primarily serve majority cultures or depart from images of normal and typical students or citizens as they have tended to do in the past. Such a promise cannot merely focus on economic agency and exclusively treat children and young people as human capital although this has been quite common in 21st century education, since it erodes education as a right and public good and crowds out other goals worth caring for.

The growing mismatch between past and present views of education and a metamorphosing society characterised by global interconnectivity, interdependence and risks, but also of increasing and real-life diversity is disturbing and perilous. In a recent report (Rogers 2019) based on the experiences of 500 American principals, 80 per cent of the principals testify that they are facing problems with students and parents challenging the curriculum and the school as they are endowed with alternative facts or unfounded claims they are drawing from less reliable or tendentious media sources. This situation echoes the need for a democratic view of education in the mid-20th century as a response to dangerous polarisation in society and a need for trust in education and other public institutions. It is time to activate schools as agents for change again since they seem to be designed for a society and problems in the past but not for present and future challenges with regard to the inclusion of individuals in and the continuation of society.

The Growing Need for Change and the Coronavirus Outbreak As a Transformative Moment

In 21st century education, change is already an essential and coveted dimension of schools and school systems, as highlighted in the following six ways (Rönnsström 2021). First, in many countries there is legal basis for change resting on the idea that every child should be able to reach their potential regardless of their background and capabilities. Second, change has progressively become a vital part of the professional identities and professional development of school leaders, middle managers, teachers and other professionals in the school sector. Third, there are socio-political motives for change since policymakers and reforms tend to use schools as agents for meeting a variety of societal challenges, such as advancing digitalisation, upskilling the workforce, preventing exclusion, alienation and mental illness, sustainable development, cultural recognition, democratisation, marketisation, or boosting school performance in the light of international comparison and competition. Fourth, the landscape of change and improvement in schools and in education is constantly changing and involving a number of local, national and trans-national actors rooted in both public and private spheres of action (VanGronigen, Meyers, Scott, Fantz & Dunn 2020). Fifth, change is also actualised because of societal and empirical factors since any school can be challenged by a number of factors, such as fluctuating demographics, refugee flows, pandemic, market arrangements, school choice or other circumstances affecting its capacity to ensure quality education or even its survival. Sixth, since many Western countries have adopted a more de-centralised view that schools are self-governing enough to be responsible for their own change, the concepts of capacity building and leadership capacity for change have been growing in importance and relevance (Robertson 2016; Stoll 2009).

Although change has become an essential part of schools, the school professions and a requirement for school leaders in nations all over the world (Wei 2017) it is important to distinguish between globalists' cries for world class schools, increased performance, better results as well as higher quality and equity, and the call for transformative change away from problematic unresolved tension and towards education as a globally informed locally rooted agent for a public good. We can use this growing focus on change as an important resource but a licence to lead transformative change needs to transcend the recent developments. In the following, we will discuss how the coronavirus pandemic can be seen as a transformative moment and a call for change since it unveils some of the problematic tensions in education and society as we touched upon earlier. The coronavirus pandemic is, as Gurr (2021) points out, likely to be one of the most, if not the most, disruptive forces in education since the second World War. Below we will reflect on and to learn from this disruptive force since it is a call for change.

Reflecting on a series of ISEA special issues devoted to educational responses to the pandemic, editor David Gurr (2021) discusses some possible implications for education and school leadership. He predicts that there is likely to be an increased use of technology, blended learning and mixtures of remote and face-to face learning situations in schools although schools as physical entities are likely to gain in importance. Gurr (2021) also predicts (with some caution) that school leadership will to a larger extent embrace moral purpose and value orientations as a result of the pandemic. Moreover, he also predicts the involvement of more people in leadership and 'there is likely to be a more future focussed, responsive, crisis ready and contextually sensitive orientation to change and improvement' (Gurr 2021: 5). Although there are ongoing predictive discussions among school leadership researchers (see also Harris & Jones 2020) we suggest that there is a need to discuss the pandemic as a call for change, that is, a call for re-imagining education as a globally informed and locally rooted public good. We agree with Gurr (2021) that moral purpose and value orientation will be an important aspect of this change, through leadership that is responsive to changes in society, local context and real-life diversity.

As a transformative moment, the pandemic made and continues to make us grapple with both taken for granted and problematic features of schools and society without suggesting an easy way out or an open road forward. As COVID-19 gradually became the pandemic reality of nations around the world, some nations responded with complete lockdown strategies, others relied on recommendations and regulations but there were also a few nations whose political leaders denied the existence of a pandemic and dismissed the warnings from international organisations and experts (Rönnström & Roth 2020). The different responses to the pandemic expressed diverse value orientations in the global society. Some political leaders thought of the pandemic as a call to action towards solidarity, to collaboration, to addressing inequities, to looking at our environment, to addressing moral commitments to what is good for many (if not all) and not just a few (Council of the European Union 2020), but others used the pandemic as a strategy for doing away with international cooperation and protect ethnic uniformity against intruding strangers since solidarity is a scarce resource belonging to a uniform in-group and not to outsiders (Rönnström & Roth 2020).

In populist and right-wing media, identarian and populist nationalist voices urged us to go back to earlier ways of closed off co-existence as if global interconnectivity and interdependence were superficial and effortlessly reversible traits of society and as if nothing of weight has happened because of globalisation. These recent cries for exclusivist nationalist or identarian views brought to the surface by the pandemic triggered unresolved tensions within the nationalist view discussed above, and forms of vaccine nationalism. We believe, in harmony with many researchers in the ISEA special issue, that the pandemic calls for moral purpose and value orientation in 21st century schools. However, we also believe that the pandemic raises questions about the scope and character of moral purpose and value orientation. In diversified nations and globally interconnected society the inward and ingroup moral commitments, the increasing polarisation between groups and the value

orientations of nationalist views are dangerous, as well as the moral silence of recent economisation of education. Neither nationalist, democratic nor economic globalist views of education are resources to draw from in a social reality marked by global interconnectivity, increasing real-life diversity and bothering distrust in public institutions. The pandemic reveals how past and present views of education are running dry and need to be imagined anew, and how they can accelerate danger in times when the safety of the few depends on the safety of all.

The call for re-imagining education as a globally informed public good is not only challenged by exclusivist nationalist views and practices operating in schools and in society. It is also challenged by the economic globalist view of education discussed above. From an economic globalist standpoint, the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost seen as a disruption in the circulatory system of the global economy. The pressing questions it raises are mainly about who will gain competitive advantage when things go back to normal (Feffer 2020). However, COVID-19 also revealed societal inequities such as the digital divide within and between schools and in society between those who can work or study virtually and those who depend on physical encounters for their income or learning as well as those who can get vaccinated and those who have no access to vaccines (UNESCO 2020). This concern for going back to our competitive normalcy is reflected in global discussions about school leadership as an agency for bridging the digital divide (Zhao 2020).

Some critics of the economic globalist view of education argue that COVID-19 is not a short time crisis to be solved, and that we should re-think education through the lens of the pandemic (Schley & Schratz 2021; Zhao 2020). Some advocates of the economic globalist view of education, however, argue that current changes in education due to the COVID-19 outbreak are temporary, and that the pressing question raised by the pandemic is chiefly how to bridge the new digital divide between those students who can and those who cannot connect virtually since this digital access has turned into a requirement for schooling (Gurr 2021). Why, then, are we arguing that the pandemic is a moment of transformative change and that going back to normal as if nothing of importance happened is not a viable option?

First, the pandemic has made us aware of the parochial character of the economic globalist view of education crowding out other important aims of education as a right and a public good. In the ISEA special issues on the pandemic, several authors highlighted the many important roles schools have in society, and in this sense the pandemic can be seen as a call for de-parochialising education (Gurr 2021; Houlian 2021; Huber 2021; Ugwu 2021). Second, the pandemic highlighted schools as important socio-cultural nodes in their local communities but also the importance of schools being rooted in and recognised by the members of their local communities. Education as a right and a public good must be

experienced as such in the local community as discussed earlier. Similar views are reflected as Harris and Jones (2020) stress the need for a context sensitive and community-oriented school leadership as a response to the pandemic. If members of the local community feel that education for all is not education for them or they lack trust in local schools, education as a right and a public good is eroded. The pandemic has actualised the re-vitalisation of schools as agents for a public good rooted in their local communities and where the local context is their ally. Third, the pandemic made visible the responsibilities schools and educators have to the most vulnerable groups who depend on physical schools or viable solutions not only for their right to education, but also for their ongoing welfare. Gurr (2021) discusses the still largely unknown but highly predicted negative impact of the pandemic on low-GDP countries, low-income families, rural and remote areas and students with diverse need. The pandemic has to a large extent made our responsibilities to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and individuals come out of the shadows and into the light and highlighted the social and education inequities locally and globally.

Finally, the pandemic as a transformative moment has also shown that significant change is possible in terms of the strengthening of change leadership, pedagogical innovation, productive collaboration, digital learning environments and new blended forms of schooling (Gurr 2021). In many respects, the pandemic ignited schools and school leaders as agents for change in disruptive times. It is now, therefore, that we turn to the role of school leaders and school leadership as agents for transformative change to meet the specific needs in their unique contexts in times of social metamorphosis.

Towards a School Leadership Licence To Lead Transformative Change

There has been a renewed interest in school leadership in educational policy, practice and research in recent years. In a recent research overview, Wei (2017) argued for a worldwide increased recognition of school leaders as agents for quality teaching and learning, change and school improvement, teacher professional development and for local implementation of education reform. There are also a number of research-based frameworks or models for understanding school leadership in relation to the core practices of schools, such as teaching and learning (see for example Drysdale & Gurr 2017; Hallinger 2011; Leithwood 2021; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Andersson & Wahlstrom 2004; Leithwood & Strauss 2008; Pashiardis & Brauckmann 2019; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd 2009). These frameworks and models are generally aimed at constructing a knowledge-base for school leadership and the work of school leaders, and they have potential to inform researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike (Leithwood & Riehl 2003).

School leaders need to build capability at individual and organisational levels for many tasks, duties and practices, and leading change is only one of many. However, many frameworks for understanding school leadership do not make a distinction between leading change and

leading the ordinary core practices of schools, and they tend to blur a distinction that we find important to make. We argue that it is important to distinguish between change leadership and ordinary leadership, and we will use the common distinction between leadership and management to prove our point.

In a research overview on school and system improvement, Hopkins, Stringfield, Harris, Stoll and Mackay (2014) link transformative leadership for change to the recent research aiming at throwing light on the connection between school leadership and enhanced student outcomes. A report from the Wallace Foundation is cited (Leithwood et al. 2004) highlighting three generic aspects of what successful school leaders do. First, they set directions for schools, establish high expectations and they use data to follow up on school performance. Second, they develop people in terms of providing support and opportunities for professional learning, and, third, they develop an organisation focused on the core practices of teaching and learning. However, this widely accepted view of successful school leadership blurs the distinction between leadership for change and ordinary school practice, and in this context, it is a distinction worth caring for.

We stress the need for a licence to lead transformative change and not only the continuation or gradual improvement of schools as they stand. We make a distinction between two important aspects of the work of school leaders. Management is ordinary in the sense that it helps to maintain the everyday continuation of the school, its tasks and its day-to-day operations, and usually therefore, the status quo. Management is vital for school leaders but it should not be confused with the school leadership that is needed in times of complexity and transformative change. Teaching and learning are ordinary core practices in schools and they can be seen as the standard operational procedures of schools whereas change can be seen as dynamic meta-practices of schools since they take ordinary core practices as their target or focus of change (see Kotter 2012; Zollo & Winter 2002 for a similar distinction between ordinary and dynamic practice). We think of practices aiming at change as meta-practices since they take the character and qualities of ordinary practices as their target, that is, they are dynamic practices aiming at changing the ordinary practices of schools. Therefore, we reserve the concept of leadership specifically for the dynamic meta-practices of change and it is about future orientation, transformative change and pedagogical innovation. Management, then, is reserved for the continuation of and stability in the ordinary core processes or day-to-day operations of schools.

If we do not recognise this distinction, we run the risk of promoting management when we actually need to empower leadership. We may stress the importance of working harder with management when we in fact need leadership, and we may pay the price of over-managed but seriously under-led schools in times of when transformative change is needed. Moreover,

if we don't acknowledge this distinction, we run the risk of continuing a long-standing problem complex addressed in research on educational change and school improvement. That is, change initiatives are crowded out by the ordinary practices of schools since the complex dynamics of change is underestimated, blurred and deceptively simplified (Hopkins 2005). This is particularly relevant since it is not easy to break out of the dominant views at work in education today although they are running dry. However, the distinction between leadership and management was and is brought to the fore during the pandemic when many school leaders needed to exercise leadership for change without blueprints, answers or proven experience to fall back upon.

In the rest of the paper, we sketch briefly a capability approach to school leadership for transformative change and a licence to lead transformative change for school leaders. We will do this in three steps. We will outline a multi-layered concept of capability, then we will roughly sketch the complex and combined capabilities of school leaders and finally the dynamic capabilities of school organisations.

A Multi-Layered Concept of Capability

Capabilities are not in any way new to education and leadership. Nussbaum (2011) has argued that a capability approach is important to education as public good in complex societies defining what is important to learn for a good and dignified life (see also Rönström 2019). In recent years, a capability approach to organisations and organisational research has been growing in importance stressing, among other things, the need to distinguish ordinary from dynamic capabilities of organisations (Helfat & Peteraf 2009; Nelson & Winter 1982; Piening 2012). There are also capability approaches to school leadership developed in recent years (Caldwell 2002; Drysdale & Gurr 2017; Duignan 2004; NZCER 2018; Robertson 2016). Duignan (2004) argues that the concept of capabilities can replace performance indicators drawn from economic views of education, and generic checklists separating the actions of school leaders from the contexts in which they are put to work. He also argues that capabilities are likely to replace simplistic competence models since there is no single formula for school leadership. However, Duignan does not stop at the importance of introducing the concept of capability in school leadership since the development of capability in others can be seen as the primary concern for and capability of school leaders. He says:

Leadership capability is, therefore, primarily concerned with expanding people's capabilities so that they can lead valued and meaningful lives and, in doing so, making a significant difference in the lives of those they touch. ... Capable leaders need to have adequate levels of knowledge, understandings and competencies to discharge their responsibilities effectively. Many leaders, however, who seem to have been exposed to development programmes in, for example, interpersonal relations, conflict management, even decision making, do not, necessarily perform well in these areas. (Duignan 2004: 8)

The multi-layered concept of capability for meta practice of change we develop here is drawn from the traditions above. It is multi-layered since it can be used to understand autonomy, competence and performance of all actors in school systems. In fact, in education as a public good one can understand the development of capability as the primary task of schools. This is a first step toward restoring schools as agents for the public good and learning since capabilities can be seen as a more productive way to understand aims and outcomes in education compared to the emphasis on production of goal behaviour, results, merits and league tables we find in many schools of today. A primary concern for school leaders is to develop capability in students, teachers, school organisations and themselves. However, in this paper we will focus on the capabilities school leaders and school organisations need to develop in order to lead transformative change.

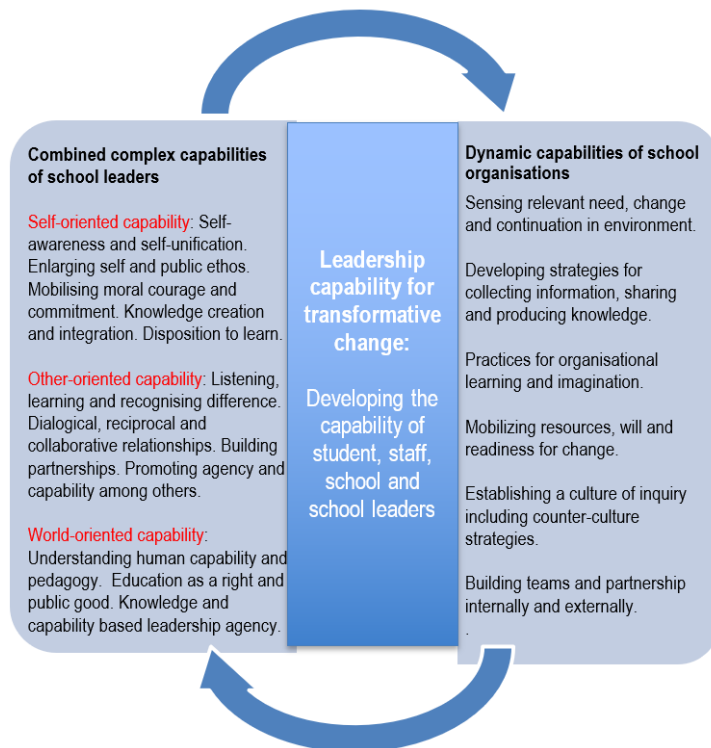
Capabilities acknowledge the holistic nature of human agency and the fact that agency involves cognitive, cultural, social, aesthetic and emotional capabilities leaders can put to work. They combine basic human functioning (perception, talk, thought, interpretation, prediction, etc.) into complex capabilities. This is good news for leadership for transformative change which requires navigating between past, present and future without stable knowledge, fixed solutions and earlier experience to fall back on. Leadership for change is not about applying evidence, standards or experience from the past in future situations. It is about combining capabilities in the light of new situations in new ways and thereby opening up for innovation. Capabilities require autonomy and judgement about what is wise to do in the absence of given paths or answers and they should not be conflated with performance standards based on evidence.

Capabilities can be defined in the intersection between competence and performance, or capacity and agency (compare Drysdale & Gurr 2017: 135), and this is important for the work and education of school leaders. Learning may result in passive or silent dispositions for action, and school leaders may be able to do many things that they rarely do in leadership practice. The concept of capability that we highlight here involves both what one is able to do and actually doing what one is able to do (Nussbaum 2011). They are orientations that should be activated rather than being silent dispositions for action, and the licence to lead captures the weight we must give to experiences of and contexts for exercising leadership capabilities. A primary focus on management might isolate school leaders from experiences of functioning as school leaders exercising leadership for change, and thereby developing the leadership capabilities they need to lead transformative change. A focus on generic skills and competence disconnected from practice may result in silent dispositions hardly ever put to work, as Duignan reflected on exposure development programmes. Leadership development for capable school leaders may seek creative, experiential, boundary-breaking and arts-based

strategies to take participants into new learning spaces for developing capability (Robertson & Webber 2002).

The capabilities we outline here, therefore, capture what school leaders are able to do, actually doing what they are able to do but also to have a licence to do what they are able to do in times of complexity and transformative change such as the pandemic required. School leadership for transformative change can be summarised under one core capability, that is, to be able to exercise (and actually exercise) *leadership as learning* at individual and organisational levels. Leadership as learning means that school leaders learn the way forward through the challenges they face, with the people they work with and with their alliance partners without easy ways out or given routes ahead (Robertson 2022). Schools are complex entities and transformative change away from the bothering tensions caused by our dominant views of education still at work today, can rarely be guided by fixed solutions, simple analysis or reliable experiences from the past. In what follows, we will briefly discuss the combined capabilities of school leaders and the dynamic capabilities of schools since we suggest that they are of crucial weight for school leadership for transformative change.

Figure 1: Leadership Capability for Transformative Change



The Complex and Combined Capabilities of School Leaders

The capabilities school leaders need to develop in order to lead transformative change can roughly and overlappingly be categorised in terms of their three basic action orientations: the self or leadership identity; the other or leadership interaction and coordination; and the world or leadership knowledge of the school, leadership, community and society. Leadership as learning requires us to think of school leaders as learners (not just data users) and leadership as learning (not just data use) in all three action orientations. School leaders need to be able to develop capabilities in all three action orientations. The leadership capabilities we suggest here are linked to the need to de-parochialise education in times that are calling for an education linked to inclusion and participation in schools and society in the broad sense.

Self-oriented capabilities are self-awareness and self-unification, enlarging the self and public ethos, moral courage and commitment but also knowledge construction and integration. School leaders need not only to be capable of self-awareness as a fixed object tied to a stable subjectivity. They often work in complex and conflicting environments in schools marked by tensions. They seek feedback from others, they listen and learn, and they challenge at the same time as they are willing to be challenged. Given the complex, intense and interactive everyday life in schools, school leaders also need to engage in continuous self-unification and be capable of unifying themselves in the light of their complex environments and interactions. As they lead change, they will change and they are unlikely to form fixed identities isolated from their complex work environment and tasks (Lumby & English 2009).

School leaders need to be capable of moving beyond the self, enlarging the self and developing a public ethos based on the view that education is a public good and a right equal to all rather than a commodity on the market (Robertson & Webber 2002). This can mean to move away from the competitive view that only the success of one's own career or school matters towards and understanding of oneself as a system leader, a community leader and public leader. The enlarged self or identity is a result of a de-centring move beyond the self and placing oneself in wider contexts of action and influence, and to think of one's own actions in wider contexts than the concrete context of one's own school and one's own students. The capability to move beyond one's own self and immediate circumstances towards an enlarged mind and identity is significant for the public ethos school leaders need to lead educational change (Rönström 2019).

Linked to the enlargement and public ethos capability, there are also the capabilities of making inclusive moral commitments which is crucial in order to stand up for quality education for every child, and to mobilise moral courage to lead change in schools in which ordinary practices are still worryingly marked by marginalisation and exclusion. As a consequence, school leaders need to be able to stand up for important aims and values in

education even when they are challenged by different stakeholders they depend on in their work. Moreover, since school leaders need to be able to learn the way forward through the challenges that they face without easy ways out and given routes ahead they need to be capable of constructing and integrating knowledge locally and engage in pedagogical innovation rather than just applying evidence, models or experience from sources outside themselves and their schools (Robertson 2022).

Other-oriented capabilities are linked to encounters, interaction, collaboration, relationships, partnerships and needs for coordination (Robertson 2010). We suggest being capable of listening, learning and recognising difference among others as one important and combined capability. The recognition of difference is important and it has two sides. In leadership for change it is important to overcome blindness to difference in relation to what one asks from the other but also what other asks from oneself at individual and organisational levels. Leadership as learning for transformative change also involves the capability to enter and sustain dialogical, reciprocal and collaborative relationships since such relationships are essential for learning the way forward together in schools. We know that school leadership is about setting directions, developing people and organising for the different tasks of schools, but the other-oriented capabilities qualify how school leaders engage in such practices when leading transformative change. Leadership as learning requires that school leaders build trust and learning relationships with different stakeholders and in doing so, they are guided by strong values and moral commitments linked to education as a right equal for all and a public ethos as they take on the tensions and wicked problems that will assuredly arise as they lead change (Camillus 2008).

School leaders capable of moving beyond the self towards an enlarged self and a public ethos are likely to develop partnerships, alliances and networks as they have developed the rudiments for thinking and acting in the roles of system leaders, community leaders or public leaders. As they lead change, such partnership and networks may open up for new contexts for learning, decision making and valuable resources for realising change with extensive support. We can talk about boundary breaking school leaders when they unlock and de-centre traditional ways of working and organising with an exclusive focus on the school's internal environment, and enlarge their leadership with external partnerships and networks (Robertson & Webber 2002). Moreover, the capability of building external and internal partnerships and alliances is of crucial importance for the rootedness of schools in their local communities so that they can pay attention to and meet the needs of the members they depend on and the needs of the school (see Pashiardis & Brauckmann 2019). Boundary breaking school leaders tend to inspire and encourage others to do the same, and this reflects the capability of promoting agency in others as they are learning their way forward together.

World-oriented capabilities are closer to conventional views of content knowledge although they must be activated as things that schools are able to do and actually do if they are to count as capabilities. World-oriented capabilities involve school leaders developing a practical understanding of education, pedagogy and capability, as well as education as a right and a

public good together with the laws and regulations governing schools as they as school leaders exercise public authority. We also suggest that school leaders need to develop knowledge and capability-based leadership agency, and this has several dimensions. School leaders need to develop, among other things, practical knowledge of the dynamics and meta-practices of change, organisational learning, change leadership and school management. They also need to be capable of using digital media, information technology and engaging in e-learning communities. However, the conventional areas of leadership content knowledge need to be complemented with knowledge of their own community, school, staff, students and parents, and practical knowledge about how to build and bring about knowledge about one's own school, its conditions, processes, outcomes and challenges. Moreover, we also think it is a capability to deal with one's non-knowing in leadership due to complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty.

School leaders who develop self, other and world-oriented capabilities are well prepared to learn the way forward with staff, students, parents and other community members and stakeholders. As school leaders learn the way forward, they also pay attention to and develop the dynamic capabilities of the school organisation and the meta practices essential to change.

The Dynamic Capabilities of Schools

School leaders do not work in isolation since leadership is closely linked to an organisation rather than to a personal trait, and school organisation is inherently linked to leadership. Analogue to our distinction between leadership and management discussed above, we need to differentiate between those aspects of a school organisation that are linked to ordinary practices, day-to-day operations and the reproduction of previously performed and well-known tasks, and those aspects of an organisation that are linked to change, learning and innovation (Nelson & Winter 1982). In relation to the complex capabilities of school leaders, we suggest that the *dynamic capabilities* of school organisations and school leadership enable schools to make sense of and learn from their environments and to mobilise, integrate, create and re-appropriate resources, procedures and interactive patterns in order to productively engage in the meta practices of change as they are challenged by change (Zollo & Winter 2002).

School organisations that can productively deal with the dynamics of change demonstrate what Heifetz and Laurie (2001) call adaptive leadership aiming at organisational learning. If we are to choose one dynamic capability that stands out as the capability among others in this organisational context, we choose organisational learning or developing a learning organisation (Kools et al. 2020). Organisational change and learning are seen as a continual and necessary quality tied to the meta practices of change in schools. However, the dynamic

capabilities of schools as learning organisations can be broken down. Dynamic schools need to sense and make sense of a dynamic environment and their own organisation, and pay attention to felt needs, change or continuity in their environment and local community. Such schools need to be capable of learning from their environment and build strategies and habits for collecting information and share but also create locally produced knowledge. Dynamic schools continually review their practices and recognise that it is through their own transformation that innovation will be found and new knowledge will be created.

Schools developing dynamic capabilities will not stand alone but see themselves as integrally connected to other places of learning in the community and act as a hub for the reaching out and the involving of a diverse range of opportunities for learning and collaboration. They link the internal organisation, resources and processes to external networks and they build shared visions and imagine real possibilities for change in the school and within partnerships. Dynamic schools will also build a culture of inquiry, exploration and innovation (Kools et al. 2020). They will seek and value the use of counter-culture since it triggers change dynamics – spaces where possibilities and alternatives are deliberately at variance with the current practices and view of education – in order to be further challenged into new ways of thinking (Robertson & Webber 2002). Dynamic schools may see the value of offering their services to other organisations, and they may seek development and challenge from other organisations. Dynamic schools can enable leadership that will not only adapt to the current times and challenges but will be visionary enough to ameliorate many of the future challenges that we otherwise could be facing in our communities of fate. Dynamic capability, in short, is the organisational side of the leadership as learning coin. We argue that it is necessary for schools of today and tomorrow to develop dynamic capabilities that will enable them to engage productively in the meta practices of change to meet the social realities of today and not only the realities the schools once were designed to respond to.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that there is a need to activate education and schools as agents for transformative change since the dominant views of education are running dry although still at work in our schools of today. Schools run the risk of turning into public risks rather than public goods since they are designed to meet past social challenges rather than those in present time and in our future lives. We have also argued that capable school leaders can play an important role in this well-needed change if they are gifted with a licence to lead. We have also maintained that the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a transformative moment and a call for change in education since it has revealed flaws in dominant and present day views of education and leadership with regard to its parochial character, its need for rootedness in local communities and contexts and to its responsibilities to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and individuals.

In contrast to an ongoing predictive discussion about what is likely to happen in education and leadership as a result of the pandemic, we argue that the pandemic calls for educational change away from dominant and present views of education. We conceive of education as a right and as a public good, and therefore a common concern that should not escape our influence, and this is why we do not only observe and predict the future of schools and school leadership. As a transformative moment, COVID-19 is a call for re-examining schools and school leadership. We suggest that it is time to activate schools and school leaders as agents for change and we develop a capability approach to educational change that does not conflate change-oriented leadership with management of the ordinary practices of schools.

The capabilities we outline capture what school leaders are able to do, their doing of what they are able to do, but also what they need licence to do in times where transformative change is needed. In short, our capability approach captures school leadership as a *leadership as learning* at individual and organisational levels. Leadership as learning means that school leaders learn the way forward through the challenges they face, with the people they work with and with their alliance partners without easy ways out or given routes ahead. We argue that the combined capabilities of school leaders and the dynamic capabilities of schools are of crucial weight for school leaders and leadership in times of transformative change.

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