

# Mobilizing Norwegian Instructional Leadership: Re-culturing the Role of School Leaders using Evidence-based Practices in a Post-Truth Era

*“The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and principals, since student learning is ultimately the product of what goes on in classrooms”*

*OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results: What Makes a School Successful? – Resources, Policies and Practices (Volume IV, 4),*

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## Summary:

In the press, ‘fake news’ and demeaning of data, form part of our political discourse, challenging the credibility of evidence-based practices. This paper explores a cross-national partnership between Norway’s Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), and OISE/UToronto working collaboratively, developing the capacity of Norwegian school leaders from autonomous managers towards instructional leaders using evidence-based practices. Additionally, there is a focus on using instructional leadership as a lever influencing teaching/learning practices to address issues of equity among Norway’s increasingly diverse students. Using data analysis from two surveys N = 51 (2017) N= 74 (2018), and six focus groups (N =58), the authors examine challenges and enablers to changing professional practice.

## Context/Purpose:

Even outside of the United States, we experience some of the pervasive influence of a ‘post-truth’, and ‘fake-news’ environment. Research and evidence-based practices are called into question. Despite recent emphasis on endorsing charter and private schools, “public education remains a critical driver for social and economic change” (Grose & Freedman, 2014: 34). School/system leaders are continually asked to demonstrate data/evidence of student achievement improvement. OECD endorses “integrating external and internal accountability systems, by supporting their teaching staff to build capacity in aligning instruction with agreed teaching goals and performance standards”, raising academic bars and closing academic gaps (2016:4). This is especially challenging when data and evidence, “are questioned and less influential in shaping public opinion”, as noted in this year’s conference theme. How can collective capacity be developed, and collective efficacy be nurtured, using evidence-informed practices to raise learner outcomes, when traditionalism and individualism are celebrated, and research findings challenged? How can effective instructional leadership influence practice, build professional learning, within a post-truth environment?

Effective instructional or educational<sup>1</sup> leadership, from a principal's perspective, involves a deliberate focus on increasing student outcomes by building teachers' knowledge and skills by creating a professional learning community; emphasizing the intentional use of data, evidence-based strategies supporting program coherence (Fullan, Quinn, McEachen, 2018; Leithwood, 2019). This is in addition to the traditional management demands of the role of school leader. As the role of principal reframes from a management focus, to instructional leadership, effective school leaders are spending more time on instructional issues, using assessment data being visibly present in classrooms, supporting and observing teachers building a professional learning community (OECD, 2016)

While, Norway has the third highest spending on education among OECD nations, "learning environments in schools are less positive than the OECD average" with gaps existing for immigrant students and students of poverty (OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, Norway, 2011: 73 - 78). Traditionally, Norwegian principals or *Rektors*, and municipal leaders emphasized professional autonomy focused on managerial tasks than pedagogical ones (OECD, Education Policy Outlook, 2013). OECD noted a lack of "clear links to professional development to student improvement, identifying the need to provide school leaders with capacities in instructional leadership" (OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, Norway, 2011: 73 - 78). *Rektors* didn't understand/recognize their agency to influence teaching/learning practices to address increasing issues of equity and under-achievement among Norway's immigrant and underserved student population. Privatized practice based previously-held assumptions was the norm, while collective efficacy, as an evidence-informed practice, was inconsistent in practice (Hattie, 2017). Practicing evidence-informed practices requires Norwegian school leaders to leave their offices, become intentionally visible, engaging teachers in collaborative conversations reflecting on their observations and school development plans.

The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS)<sup>2</sup>, responsible for education from grade one through grade 10, responded to the challenge. KS is composed of municipalities, facilitating educational advocacy and collaboration across Norway. Once OECD highlighted the need for more focused, intentional and visible instructional school leadership, KS implemented a strategy to encourage the building of instructional leadership capacity (OECD Country Note, Norway, 2016). KS' commitment to building educational leadership, aligned with direction from the national government<sup>3</sup>. Norway Ministry of Education and Research released a position paper in 2016, outlining their intent to improve the quality of learning, and to increase student engagement. "Classroom management, numeracy, reading and writing are priority commitment areas to vary the working methods in the lower secondary school. Their key measures include:

- School-based professional training in classroom management, numeracy, reading and writing for teachers and school administrators;

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<sup>1</sup> Both terms are used in Norway when referring to the role of school leaders

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ks.no/news-in-english/english-articles/about-ks/>

<sup>3</sup> In Norway School Owners correspond to elected School Board members, since education grades 1-10 is the purview of the municipalities/kommunes

- Development of descriptions of good classroom management and good teaching in numeracy, writing and reading;
- Assistance in and facilitation of local development work; and
- Networks for exchanging experience and establishing a professional community” (Norway, 2016:4).

The current national aim for “school administrators is giving priority to educational leadership and contributing to developing the school as a learning organisation” (Norway, 2016: 6). For KS, it required building capacity to enable school administrators to move from a culture of self-efficacy, towards one of collective efficacy: developing responsive, situationally aware and collaborative leaders (Donohoo, 2017). To enable this process, over four years, some municipality members of KS<sup>4</sup> worked with OISE/University of Toronto, Canada. This partnership designed and delivered workshops and encouraged ongoing support from municipal leaders to schools to reframe educational/instructional leadership practices supporting collaborative professionalism. This paper explores one approach used by KS to reframe the role of *Rektors* as pedagogical and collaborative leaders, using evidence-based practices. It describes some of the resulting impacts on their practice and lessons learned. There is input provided from municipal leaders who were unable to make the trek to Toronto today.

## Theoretical Framework & Related Literature

The assumption is that nudging Norwegian school leaders towards more intentional use of evidence-based practices will improve their sense of self-efficacy in terms of pedagogical leadership and their ability to lead school development. Informed practices including professional collaboration, analyzing student outcomes, intentional visibility using observational data among other data sets are components of expected pedagogical leadership and is a focus for KS and the Norwegian Ministry of Education. Refocusing and defining expectations for Norwegian school leaders frames the workshops and this study.

Using evidence-based practices to refine teaching/learning remains challenging; however, there is a growing body of research, recognizing the influence of focused instructional leadership and increasing evidence-based practices (Cohen, Schuldt, Brown & Grossman, 2016; Hattie, 2016; Hill, Beisegel, & Jacob, 2014). Instructional leadership grounds this study, nudging principals from their primary focus on management tasks towards increased emphasis on instructional leadership. Effective instructional leadership is, “integral to innovative learning environments” (OECD, 2017:64). Instructional leadership studies indicate that instructional leadership is essential to student achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2006; Leithwood 2019) with principals second, only to classroom teachers impacting student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004). Effective principals can, through feedback, impact coherent evidence-informed teaching practices (Manna, 2015).

Hargreaves and O’Connor (2017), in their monograph *Collaborative Professionalism* discuss the importance of shared teachers’ work and collective dialogue to improve learning for students,

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ks.no/news-in-english/english-articles/about-ks/>

moving schools from congenial to collegial environments. The authors define collaborative professionalism as, “how teachers and other educators transform teaching and learning together to work with all students to develop fulfilling lives of meaning, purpose and success”. Elmore argued that principals needed to routinize direct observation and analysis and offer descriptive feedback to influence teachers’ practice (2004; 2008). Effective instructional leadership is, “integral to innovative learning environments”<sup>1</sup>. Sharratt and Fullan (2009) endorse capacity building including building an evidence-based culture using data, including observational data, strategically. Sharratt and Planche (2016) discussed using observational data, ‘walking and talking’ to support collaborative inquiry. OECD’s *Teaching in Focus #15* indicates that principals demonstrating instructional leadership achieve greater teacher collaboration and reflective dialogue (2016). The KS initiative used research and evidence-based practices as their ‘why and how’ of change.

### The Observation and Feedback Process:

The OECD’s research on *Preparing Teachers and School Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, addresses the emerging roles and responsibilities of 21<sup>st</sup> century school leaders. The lessons learned from around the world, indicate that instructional leadership to be effective should primarily focus on intentionally improving student-learning (Schleicher, 2015). To improve student outcomes, school leaders need to understand learning in their school, and use student achievement data to set targets and identify issues of equity of opportunity and achievement. They must intentionally observe learning, working collaboratively with teachers and evidence-informed practices.

Research indicates that observational data gathered from ongoing and regular classroom visits when woven with other sources such as student achievement, student survey data, and attendance data, creates a data tapestry of learning across the school (Bernhardt, 2004). Leithwood states, “As a principal you want to pay much more attention to the specific forms of instruction that are happening in classrooms, and you want to make fewer assumptions about them all being good” (2010: 3). Whitaker (1997) advocated that effective instructional leaders should visit classes regularly and structure the purpose of the visit to validate that learning is indeed taking place in classrooms. School-based leaders acting as pedagogical/instructional leaders “implies involvement in, and knowledge about, what goes on in the classroom including the curriculum, teaching strategies, and the monitoring of pupil progress” (Sammons, 1999:198). However, the process needs to be intentional and planned. “The typical and infrequent drop-in visit by an evaluator a few times a year without continuous discussion, critiquing, and planning with others, leads to the deadening and routinization of practice.” (Glickman, 2002:4). Hattie (2016) argues, “Leaders who believe their major role is to evaluate their impact are amongst the most effective” (2015:2). The challenge for school leaders is providing teachers with useful and clear feedback that supports professional growth, while honouring collegiality, and relational trust.

To build capacity in terms of sharpening the intentional observations of learning and focused feedback, the Norwegian/Ontario team used a TIDE frame for the observation of classrooms through learning walks: **T** for tasks, **I** for instructional strategies, **D** for the design of the classroom as learning space and the **E** for learning through the eye of the pupil. Workshops provided the research background and reasons for intentional and frequent observations of learning with opportunities to visit schools and classrooms to practice and refine observational

skills. Participants, working in smaller teams (5-8) observed a variety of classrooms using the TIDE frame.

Following five to seven classroom observations, while continuing to work in their learning walk group, observations were shared, and commonalities noted; and feedback was collectively crafted to be useful and collaborative. The challenge is to construct feedback that mirrors what was observed without being seen as critical/evaluative or negative<sup>5</sup>. The learning walk's TIDE frame is intended for professional development, and not for appraisal purposes. Each individual group presented their observations; and after collaborative discussions, consensus on what was observed emerged for each of the four frames. The observations run across classrooms developing a snapshot of learning for the school as a whole rather than for a given classroom lens. Following the collective understandings of the observations and collegial feedback, time was spent on examining approaches to school development based on evidence-informed practices and current Norwegian educational direction. Then there were more shared discussions on creating suggestions aligned with the host school's development plan. This required the participants to think and collaborate using their instructional leadership lens in a whole school approach.

If the host school requested, then the feedback, which had been collaboratively developed among the participants was shared with the teachers at the end of the school day. This include building time for teachers' reflections and questions. The feedback process was modelled and observed using a 'walk and talk' frame could be delivered. This feedback template was available for participants to use, given their own contexts, in their schools<sup>6</sup>. Following the presentation to staff, there was another debrief in terms of collegial feedback and any questions or issues were raised by the participants. The same process was modelled over two days of training. Then the municipal leaders followed the process up with supports and being visible using learning walks with their own *Rektors*.

The aim is building a community of professional learners. The learning walk tool and the evidence-based practices form a component for school leaders to use as part of their practice. School leaders whose municipalities through KS had participated in the instructional leadership workshops including learning walks were invited to become part of this research study, sharing perceptions and input through the survey instruments and focus groups.

## Methodology and Data Sources

This study employed a mixed methods approach consisting of two online surveys (N=125), and eight focus groups (N=58) of Norwegian school leaders, who had participated in the training, across municipalities. The survey items queried pedagogical practices and beliefs of school leaders. The practices and beliefs were drawn from the instructional leadership literature. These

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<sup>5</sup> Asked members in the groups to review comments to take out any they perceived as critical or evaluative of individual teachers

<sup>6</sup> The workshop included sharing of the templates for feedback and modelled the process for Norwegian school leaders and engaging in discussions on what collegial feedback entails

are areas that KS would like Norwegian principals to intentionally and regularly engage in as effective school leaders.

The five-level Likert scale measured either positive or negative responses to a statement. Representatives from KS and the researcher collaboratively developed survey items. The survey was posted in Norwegian for school leaders who had previously attended KS-sponsored workshops on school improvement/development planning. Questions probed demographic data, professional background, and questions pertinent to their professional assumptions and practices pre and post workshop. This design of the questions/statements probed emerged based on TALIS<sup>7</sup> results, *Rektors* were neither visible nor often supporting co-operation among teachers to improve student outcomes.

A series of focus groups were held in the spring of 2017 and 2018, in different municipalities corresponding with the delivered workshop sessions. These were constructed as purposeful conversations with school/system administrators expanding on their perceptions of instructional leadership and school development/improvement. The focus groups explored principals' views on the extent to which they involved teachers, in the planning process to increase student outcomes. Additionally, there was 2018 feedback, from one municipality where teachers were queried whether they saw a difference in instructional leadership and visibility after the workshop sessions. As noted earlier, the use of pedagogical strategies were identified as an area for need by OECD reviewers (OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, Norway, 2011).

Data were gathered from the participants' invitational responses to the voluntary, online confidential survey items, N = 51 (2017) N= 74 (2018) following initial training, resulting in a 40% return rate. Data were also gathered from focus groups with principals. Six focus groups were held with principals to add context to the survey data, N = 58<sup>8</sup>. These were structured as 'conversations with a purpose' providing opportunities to investigate actual leadership practices including visibility and involving teachers using collegial feedback for collaborative planning for increased student outcomes (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Hatch, 2002; Kvale, 1996).

Data from the survey items and from the focus groups were coded and analyzed to identify common themes among the responses. The overall question summaries from the survey data is the result of the compilation from the data tables, which were generated for all closed-ended survey questions. Filters<sup>9</sup> were applied to see trends and patterns in the data, as well as to analyze specific groups, such as male administrators compared to female administrators<sup>10</sup>.

## Findings:

This describes the demographics and the themes. Where both data sets are included, the first set are the 2017 results, then the 2018 results.

## Demographics:

- 2017: 64% female, 2018 71% female

<sup>7</sup> TALIS – Teaching and Learning International Survey, 2013

<sup>8</sup> Some of the focus group participants opted for the survey, which was confidential

<sup>9</sup> Gender, Years of experience, panel,

<sup>10</sup> Analysis was assisted by Dr. Anne Lloyd

- 2017: 40% elementary, 45% lower secondary and upper secondary, rest mixed panels,
- 2018: 54% elementary, 27% upper secondary and the rest mixed panels,
- For both years, over 55% are academic or theoretical<sup>11</sup> schools, less than 5% from technical schools and the rest composite schools offering both academic and technical courses

Females made up 65% of the respondents and the respondents were experienced administrators, with male administrators indicating more experience than their female peers (17.5 years to 13.6 years). Elementary and secondary administrators are equally represented: about 40% of all respondents were from elementary, while 45% are from secondary or upper secondary. Twenty-six of the respondents' schools are academic or theoretical<sup>12</sup> schools, and 18 composite schools

### Becoming Learning Leaders: Increasing use of Evidence-Based Practices

Learning leaders shape the design creating effective learning environments. In terms of practices, respondents indicated as leaders they set tone, direction, vision, and mission. They highly rated their role in terms of management issues, budget, timetables, schedules, and safety and security issues. Slightly lower priority is their work with teachers to improve instructional practices and their perceived use of observational data with feedback, which increased as a priority following workshops/support<sup>13</sup>. The respondents reported most practices as important, which led them to feel as one respondent mentioned, “being pulled in multiple directions”. This challenge of finding time and knowing what to emphasize was confirmed, given comments shared in the focus groups:

- “Everything is important. How do I know to choose?”
- “I rely on my department heads to let me know.”
- “I try and know what is going on but so much is happening.”

While effective management ranks as important, the shift is happening stressing instructional leadership through focusing on improving student outcomes. In the focus groups, over 60% of principals talked about the importance of, “using learning walks and focusing priorities”. This aligns with responses from the 2018 survey where the use of data from classroom observations and student data and feedback from teachers had increased. Thirty percent were “more comfortable making key decisions using data”, and re-occurring comments included, “working with teachers on development challenging assumptions for immigrant pupils, I didn't do that before”.

### Increased Intentional Visibility with Feedback Brings Challenges

When asked, on the survey about school leaders' practices prior to and after the courses, in terms of intentional classroom visibility, 14% visited weekly, and after the course, 26% indicated they were in classrooms weekly. For 2018, the figures also showed an increase: weekly visits

<sup>11</sup> Theoretical schools are academic focused on traditional post-secondary options such as university. Tuition for post-secondary education is free in Norway.

<sup>12</sup> Theoretical schools are academic focused on traditional post-secondary options such as university. Tuition for post-secondary education is free in Norway.

<sup>13</sup> My doctoral research indicated that principals thought they were more visible than their teachers' perceptions. Some data from Kongsvinger in a follow up from teachers that they too perceived their principals were more visible

increased from 11% to 33% and less frequent visits such as several times a year decreased from 45% to 16%. (Figure 1) In 2017, monthly visits increased from 10% to 23%, and across the responses 60% of respondents reported being more visible in classroom. In 2018, 66% of respondents were observing weekly and/or several times per month. The focus groups indicated “we are expected to be instructional leaders” and 65% reported having more conversations with teacher on the influence of practices on student outcomes, since the initial training. The conversations in the focus group raised the issue of challenges in dealing with greater diversity in classrooms and challenging traditional assumptions about achievement.

Initial feedback from the 2017 analysis was shared, refining the focus of the training. In 2018, there was increased support from the municipal leaders, ‘visiting one another’s school, and working with achievement data were identified as enablers. Issues of equity were woven into the 2017 content, and 2018 data indicate equity issues continue to be influential. Challenges for respondents across both surveys and in the focus groups, finding time, creating/crafting feedback for teachers and wanting more instructional leadership support were identified:

- “I want to go out, but then a phone call or another issue comes up and my plans are changed”.
- “I observe but worry that what I will say will be critical or not well received, so sometimes I just go less than I want to”.
- The conversations with teachers are the hardest to do”.

Based on the feedback from the survey, issues of time management and setting priorities were emphasized in the fall 2018 and early winter 2019 sessions. In the focus groups, principals who identified as visible felt there was “more of a professional fellowship” and “systematic conversations and reflections after the learning walks leading to focused discussions about pupils, tasks and their learning”. “Teachers feel more confident about working with immigrant children, given our discussions”. “We need more strategies to work with teams of teachers” was offered as feedback by over 40% of focus group participants.

### Moving Intentionally to School Development Offers Opportunities

Focus appears to be shifting. Over 90% of principals indicated they were *satisfied*, or *very satisfied*, emphasizing improvement, and 61% indicated they were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with teachers working together on strategies and actions, indicated in the walks to improve learning. In the focus groups, school leaders discussed challenges to involve staff in using learning teams in analysis. Time to collaborate with colleagues, support from municipal leaders and learning opportunities continue to rank as important in building professional capacity. The focus groups allowed for deeper reflection. A sampling of comments from 15 principals included, “Observation is one thing, just learning what to do with what we observe” and “Looking and seeing I am knowing is different”. Principals indicated they were more aware of differences between classroom practices, “something I didn’t really notice before”. Over 70%, felt the teachers would say there was change, given as leaders they perceived they were more visible and intentional about improving learning. “I know what practices make an impact”. Principals using the practices reported, “Increased professional replenishment of teachers’ competencies”. “There is more interaction of teachers in improving outcomes.”

Respondents indicated that they used to believe, “Teachers were more responsible for improving outcomes than me”. This is changing. In the initial spring 2017 focus groups, 55% of participants

indicated they were working more collaboratively with teachers on student learning. “It is a change for me, I am listening more and thinking about what I am seeing with pupils”. In discussions in the fall of 2017, 70% of participants shared, they felt more confident working with teachers as part of a team on looking at outcomes. Many respondents shared a shift in how they were now approaching ‘school development’ planning building “learning teams” among teachers. “It’s different”. “I see more when I am in classrooms”. “Finding time in my busy day/week still is difficult”. “Feedback is still hard, but I know it helps move the school forward”.

## Reflections from the Kommunes and the Municipal Leaders

In 2015, both the school owners (School Board Members) from Faeder and Re municipalities had visited Ontario and participated in workshops through OISE/UToronto. Kongsvinger kommune participated through Hokksund kommune. The leadership was committed to providing targeted support to their school leaders. The municipal leaders and principals are participating in educational leadership training including using learning walks with increased intentional visibility using the TIDE frame. Their school leaders have participated in a variety of workshops and learning sessions. The school owners now participate in the walks and use the opportunity to review school development and have rich conversations with school leaders and their teams. Input was provided from Faeder and Re kommuner. From the perspective of the kommune school owners, the following was noted as changes they observed in their school leaders:

- Increased culture of sharing
- Improved organizational understanding
- Some changes in teachers’ practices as indicated:
  - I more often discuss the learning and progress of my pupils
  - I more often provide my pupils with open tasks
  - I am more reflective of my practice
- Created a culture of openness
- School leaders focus on the student learning
- School leaders can have constructive practical conversations with teachers
- Teachers say they are more observed and receive more feedback in 2018 than 2016 (survey from Kongsvinger)

“System (municipal) leaders relentlessly model, guide, coach, and monitor school performance, moving from walking alongside school leaders to declaring urgent nonnegotiable, always with the FACES of student improvement in view” (Sharratt, 2019: 308). Given support and direction from KS while also aligning with the national direction for improvement, this project serves as an example of cross-national partnerships working and learning together, and using evidence-based innovative practices. For the school leaders who participated in the workshops and had access to ongoing support, there were changes noted in their attitudes to educational/instructional leadership, the time/emphasis they spent on intentional visibility in classrooms with feedback and the collaboration with teachers on student data and school development. The workshops are being extended to other KS municipalities. While the offerings remain invitational and are not a component of a Norwegian ministry mandate, they align with new directions issued by the

Norwegian Ministry of Education, which mandates “joint effort to improve classroom management, numeracy, reading and writing” (NOU 2016:14).

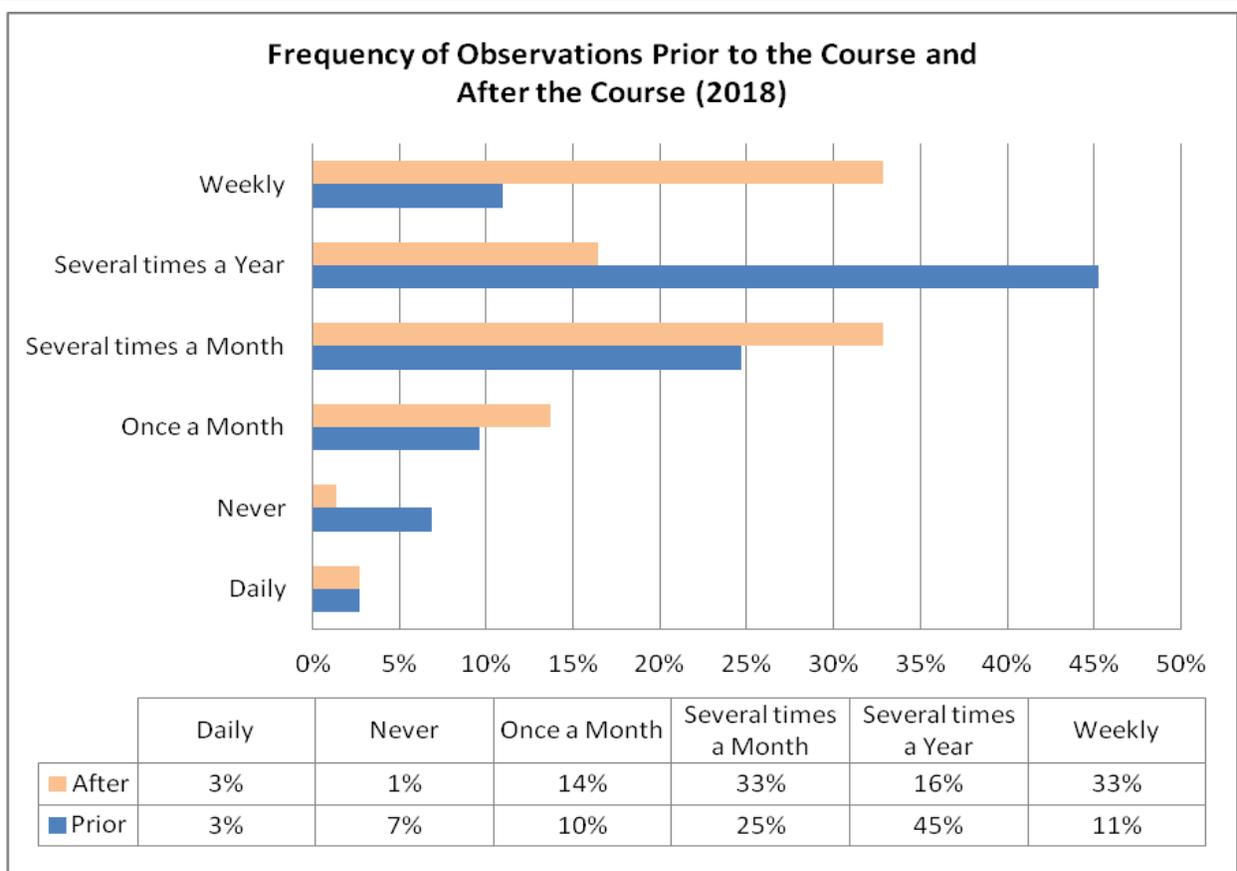
## Significance

This is an ongoing process to increase and sustain Norwegian school leaders as they incorporate instructional leadership into their practice in response to greater student diversity and increased expectations. Given that principals who acquired instructional leadership competencies through training are more engaged in instructional leadership actions in their school, KS will continue to provide support and direction. Data indicate that evidence-based practices and examining previously held assumptions, even in a post-truth era are influencing attitudes and practices. Based on the focus group feedback, there will be more intentional emphasis to address feedback, greater emphasis on issues of equity, and collaborative professional learning teams working on school development in Norwegian schools. In a globally-connected world, working in cross-national and cross-cultural settings will increase in importance, and so lessons learned from this initiative will help craft the next steps in this journey towards reframing the role of Norwegian school leaders. It indicates that evidence-based practices, even in a time of “post-truth environment” can reframe school leaders’ role towards instructional leaders.

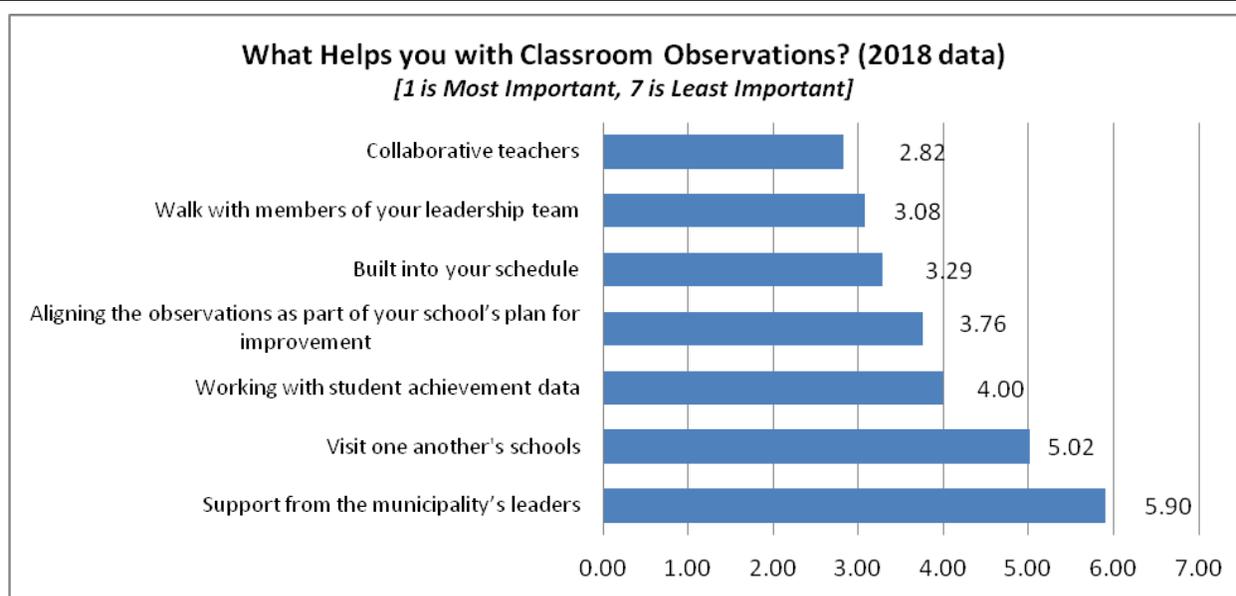
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## Appendices

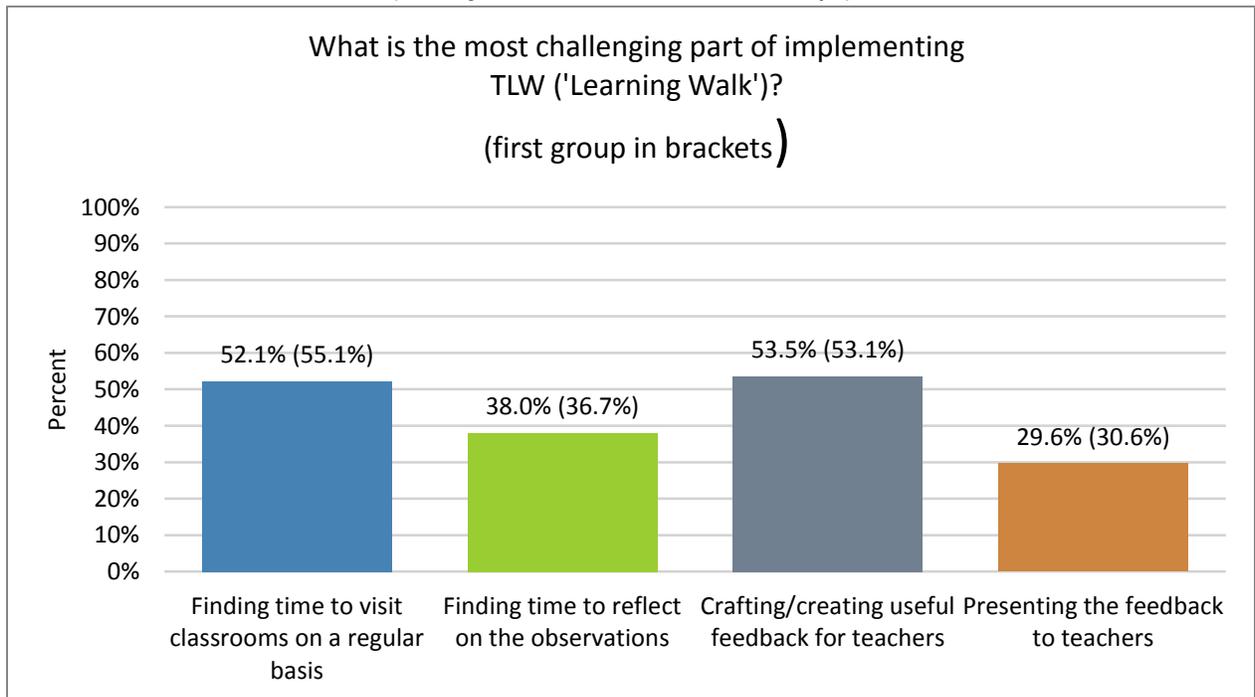
**Figure One.** Frequency of Observations Prior to the Course and After the Course  
*(Data from 2018 Surveys)*



**Figure 2** What Helps you with Classroom Observations?  
*(Data from 2018 Surveys)*

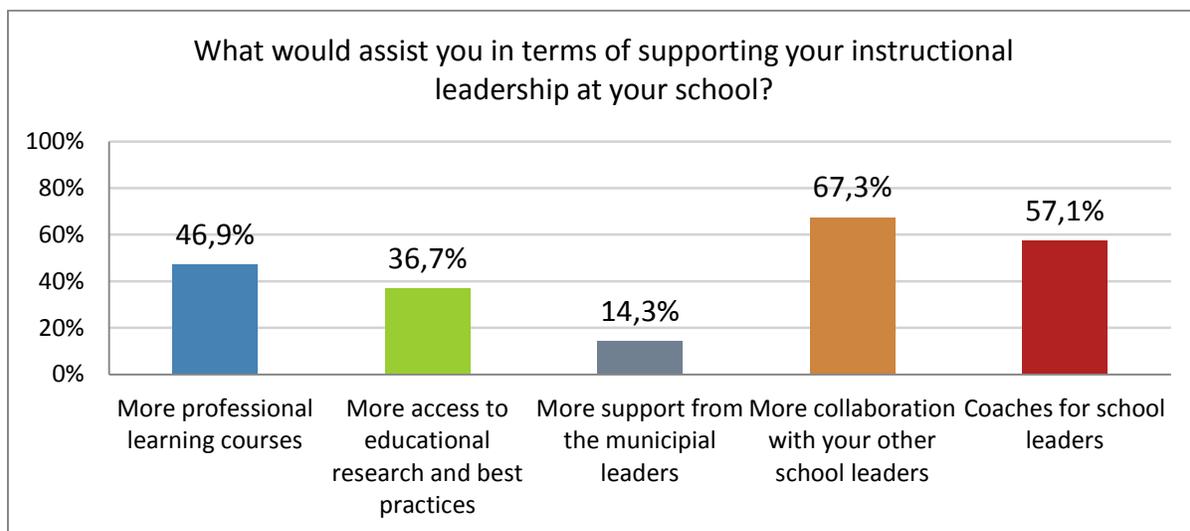


**Figure 3.** What are the most challenging parts of implementing Learning Walks with Feedback?  
(Data from 2017 and 2018 Surveys)



**Figure 4.** What would assist you in terms of supporting your instructional leadership at your school?

(Data from 2018 surveys)



Regarding Focus Groups with Leaders  
Survey Link

<https://response.questback.com/isa/qbv.dll/ShowQuest?QuestID=4916321&sid=7BMHP3v6ty>

#### Focus Group Questions

1. What are the current school development/improvement planning initiatives in your school? How do you measure if they are influencing student learning?
2. What was your practice in terms of instructional leadership and visibility in classrooms before the training?
3. What is similar and/or different now after the workshop and practice sessions?
4. What are the challenges/barriers and enablers/advantages of a more intentional focus on instructional leadership to you in your school?
5. If I asked your teachers, what do you think they would say the change has been?
6. Are you connecting with other school leaders/peers in learning walks and other types of school development/improvement? If so can you elaborate?
7. What should KS consider changing/revising about the training for Rektors?
8. What other types of training should be considered and why?
9. What should be our next steps or what advice would you give or messages to take away?
10. Anything I should have asked about but didn't?

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