Learning teachers and learning school leaders
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Abstract
Conceptions of teachers and school leaders about school development have little in common with the conceptions expressed by central authorities. School development from an actor perspective is about finding solutions on problems they encounter. They understand the organisation more as an arena for sense making and learning than as an arena of instrumental actions in accordance with management by objectives. Key words: school development, leadership, sensemaking, learning.

1. School development

School development refers to conscious sustainable changes integrated in the everyday life of a school that encompasses the whole or at least an extensive part of the school. The focus is to enhance the quality in the learning processes of the pupils.

Local and central authorities have a great confidence that mandated objectives, plans, evaluations and inspections from central authorities make the instructional pattern coherent with the curriculum. Conceptions of teachers and school leaders about factors influencing the process of school development have little in common with the conceptions expressed by central authorities (Scherp, 2003, 2007). School development from an actor perspective is about finding solutions on problems encountered in the everyday teaching situation. School development is problem-based and needs to start in the problems teachers and school leaders encounter. According to teachers problems arise when earlier successful ways of working do not any longer give the results that teachers expect.

Teachers also claim that their own experiences are the most important factor for their way of teaching, followed by dialogues with colleagues and pupils about these experiences (Dalin, 1993; Hultman & Hörberg, 1994; Richardson, 1994; Scherp, 2003, 2007). Teachers and school leaders need to learn about and to deepen their understanding of the nature of the problems if they will be able to improve their school (Carlgren, 1986).

The research about learning organizations and especially within schools is very limited. Weick and Westley (1996) as well as Leithwood och Louis (1998) state that even if the arguments in favour of a learning organisation are compelling, the empirical foundation is very weak. Leithwood and Louis summarize the need of research: ”In sum, to bring an organizational learning perspective to life
in schools – to give it a practical face – systematic efforts are needed which: ex-
amine the meaning of OL in schools, identify the organizational conditions which
foster and inhibit it, develop specific strategies capable of moving schools in this
direction, and further clarify concepts basic to our understanding of OL.” (p. 8)

Still in 2007 the empirical studies of the schools as learning organizations
are rare. In this article some of the results from two studies in communes aiming
for schools to be learning oriented organisations are presented. Conceptions of
school leaders and teachers concerning school leadership and the importance
of the leadership for school development were studied. In one study interviews were
held with 14 school leaders and 99 teachers. Surveys were made of 323 teachers
and of 126 school leaders. In the other study surveys of 2653 teachers and of 196
school leaders were made.

1.1 From individual to shared learning

The quality of learning in an organisation depends on to what degree the organisa-
tion makes room for questioning and organised reflection, hypothesis production
and experimentation. Sarv (1997) and Sandberg & Targama (1998) stress that we
have to encourage critical thinking in the organisation and institutionalise ques-
tioning by establishing routines for this. Group processes where individuals learn
together by systematically clarifying and verbalising shared experiences need to
be created. Reflections and critical discussions support these learning processes as
the underlying assumptions are clarified.

Since 1991 the teachers in Sweden spend 13 working days every year on
school based in-service training. In problem based school development these days
are mainly spent in learning teams with about seven teachers where they focus on
issues they themselves find important when they try to raise the quality in the
learning process of the pupils. Teachers sharing the same problem participate in
the same group. In one upper secondary school the following problems were pri-
oritized:

• How to strengthen the will of the pupils to influence their learning situa-
tion?
• How to reach pupils that have lost their interest in learning?
• How can we work interdisciplinary?
• How can we organize lessons that tempt the pupils?
• How do we know that we give correct marks?
• How do you succeed to get enough time to realize your pedagogical ambi-
tions?
• How to manage the individualizing of the learning process within hetero-
geneous groups of pupils?
• How to succeed with long term planning of interdisciplinary projects?
• How can we make use of the ethnic pluralism at our school?
• How to get our pupils to take a greater responsibility when working in
more student active ways?
Each learning group has a leader of the learning process which has been trained for the mission. As teachers’ own experiences have shown to be very important for their instructional patterns the learning process of the group is structured in a way that the experiences and conclusions of their own as well as other colleagues are taken care of as a starting point. They are also supposed to visit other schools to learn from others experiences and to end up the learning process by reading relevant research results or visiting researchers within the problem domain.

In this way the teachers become the main actors in knowledge building about teaching and learning in school instead of being reduced to executors of solutions claimed by others.

The different steps in the learning process of a learning group are

- Defining and formulating the topic of learning based on an important problem
- Collecting reliable data as basis for the learning process.
- Looking for patterns in the data
- Draw conclusions and formulate learnings by trying to understand why the pattern looks like it does.
- Testing the learnings in practice.

How these steps are accomplished will have consequences for the extent in which the resulting learnings are put into practice.

1.2 Experiential learning – a preserving or dynamic force?

Different people learn different things from one and the same event. Some people repeat the same mistake over and over again, while others very rapidly learn to behave in more appropriate ways because they have discovered that the new experiences they have gained are not compatible with previously held ideas. In particular, people seem to have a tendency to notice what already is coherent with their own cognitions. Events, facts or observations that are not consistent with their ideas are ignored, rejected or interpreted in such a way that they confirm their pre-conceived ideas. There is always a risk that learning through one’s own experiences may lead to the reinforcement of existing conceptions regardless how well they reflect reality (Argyris & Schöen, 1974).

Conscious experiential learning requires that teachers receive feedback from others about their working methods. To be effective, feedback needs to be both appropriate and challenging. Appropriate in the sense that it is related to the teacher's own frame of reference, attitudes and intentions and challenging in the sense that it creates imbalance between the present conceptions and necessitates change.

By tradition schools most often are action driven. School leaders mainly plan and organize the activities of the teachers. However, there seems to be of no use to argue with teachers about what they should or should not do. They do whatever they do as long as they have the understanding they have of the mission and the
learning they have about how to accomplish this understanding (Scherp, 2003). Most teachers act in accordance with their convictions of what is the very best possible way to teach. Instead of trying to directly demand changes in actions a school leader primarily need to direct his efforts on being a leader of the mutual learning about teaching and learning and on deepening the shared understanding of the mission.

Problem based school development (PBS) builds on the assumption that conceptions have a great impact on how different situations are handled. Changes in ways of working that are not followed or preceded by conceptions coherent with the actions tend to be very short-lived. In problem based school development sensemaking learning processes are organized in which pupils, teachers and school leaders deepen their understanding about important problems or about puzzling situations. The process of school development finds its energy in the curiosity of the teachers and the eagerness to solve the confusion emanating from puzzling situations.

Together with many other researchers (as Smircich and Stubbart (1985), Walsh and Ungson (1991), Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) and Weick (1995)) problem based school development questions the idea of an organization as a rational goal strategic arena and puts forward the idea of an organization as a sensemaking arena or even meaning making arena in which the continuous flow of ambiguous situation gets a deeper meaning.

2 Results

The patterns found in the statements expressed in the interviews and the results from the surveys are coherent. The categories based on statements about conceptions of school leadership are very much the same among teachers and school leaders. The two groups do not seem to have different conceptions of the school leader role but there are differences in judgements of how these conceptions are put into actions in everyday work where teachers perceive less of these activities compared with school leaders.

2.1 School leaders’ conceptions of successful leadership

Intrinsic motivation and bottom up perspective to accomplish lasting school development (39 statements) are the most mentioned conceptions by the school leaders together with the relationship between the whole and its parts (34 statements) and clarity (17 statements).

2.1.1 Intrinsic motivation and bottom-up perspective

The interviewed school leaders are unanimous in their conviction that the actions of the teachers mainly are influenced by their conceptions of learning and teaching. They claim that influencing the conceptions of the teachers about learning and teaching is the most important measure to take to accomplish changes in actions. In their statements they are much attuned to intrinsic motivation as a point of departure in accomplishing more lasting changes and learning.
2.1.2 The relationship between the whole and its parts
The school leaders are emphasizing the importance of a governing whole at the school. They declare that it is important to work with the fundamental values behind schooling and the understanding of the politically decided mission of the school.

2.1.3 Clarity
Clarity based on authenticity or genuineness is emphasized. The meaning of clarity is in expressing the school leaders’ own perspectives and conceptions about learning and teaching more than being clear about what actions should be taken by the teachers.

2.2 School leadership as understood by teachers
The teachers were asked to describe and elaborate the importance of school leaders for school development and how leadership ought to be formed to contribute to school development. Three categories of statements were standing out. Clarity (78 statements), good knowledge and understanding of the every day work situation (68 statements) and the use of a bottom-up perspective in management (32 statements)

2.2.1 Clarity
Teachers emphasize the importance of feed-back on their way of teaching, clarity with the pedagogical vision of the school, to get clear answers on how to handle specific conflict ridden situations, and to relate specific situations to the vision and thereby see to that the whole is influencing the everyday working situation.

The importance of clarity is conditional of the teachers’ perceptions that the school leader is knowledgeable of and has a profound understanding of the every-day activities at the school. If a school leader’s clarity is not combined with a good knowledge of everyday life at school and a bottom-up perspective, clarity is instead being described as a hindrance of school development.

2.2.2 Knowledgeable of every day work of the teachers
Teachers emphasize that it is important that school leaders are involved in the every day activities at the school to get a good knowledge and deep understanding of the working situation of the teachers. Some accentuate that school leaders participate in the every day life by for example visiting lessons while others primarily stress that it is important that they are mentally present when teachers describe what is urgent for them.
2.2.3 Bottom-up perspective
For school leaders to mainly have a bottom-up perspective in handling the tension between top-down governance and bottom-up initiatives are perceived as crucial when it comes to the school development process. A bottom-up perspective is characterized by dialogue in which the school leader tries to understand the point of views expressed by the teachers and takes that in consideration when acting as a leader.

2.3 Supplementing results from the quantitative studies

The results of the surveys used in the two studies support the conclusions about leadership and problem based school development drawn from the interviews. The results presented in table 1 confirm that there are differences between teachers and school leaders when it comes to their perceptions of the performed leadership of school leaders even if the conceptions of ideal leadership are very similar.

Table 1. Teachers’ and school leaders’ perceptions of the realization of different dimensions of leadership. Mean values on a scale from 1-4 where 1 means totally disagree and 4 totally agree. (N=2653 resp N=196)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean teachers</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Mean school leaders</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holistic leadership</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>.616</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue, from within</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.641</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>.475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning making leadership</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>.624</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.358</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The school leaders consider their own leadership to be more holistic and clear but less intrinsic compared to the perceptions of the teachers.

The correlations between sensemaking leadership, learning culture and some aspects of the working situation of the teachers are shown in table 2.
Table 2. Correlations between sensemaking leadership, Learning culture and some aspects of the working situation of the teachers (Spearman rang correlation, N=2653).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The working situation of teachers</th>
<th>Sensemaking leadership</th>
<th>Learning culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contented to be in my work team</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contented to be a teacher at my school</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceive the teacher work as meaningful</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good possibilities to influence important issues</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have supportive colleagues</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have confidence in the management</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school leader has influenced teachers´ conception of the mission</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of dialogues with the school leader for the instructional pattern</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing success in accomplishing the mission of the school</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.24**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All correlations are statistically significant at .01 level

The results show that when the teachers perceive their school leader as more sensemaking oriented they usually perceive their working conditions more positive. In the same way the positive perception of the teachers of their working conditions go together with a view that their school is characterized by a learning culture.

Moreover there is a positive correlation between sensemaking leadership and learning culture at the school (r=.49**).

3 How can we understand the conceptions about school leadership?

To classify, categorize and find correlations is a way to show patterns but the patterns that are found need also to be understood. Finding patterns in the variation is crucial in learning and in the sensemaking process.
3.1 A deep understanding of the everyday work

The confidence of teachers in getting help seems to be dependent on whether or not the school leader has a deep understanding of the daily work situation in which the problem has come into existence. To be well-informed means to know what happens at the school while a deep understanding is about understanding why teachers and pupils act the way they do when they handle a situation. Understanding and meaning are constructed by putting a situation into a sensemaking whole. Accordingly, the meaning is dependant upon which sensemaking whole is used to understand a situation which then influences how the situation is handled.

Weick (1995) describes the sensemaking process in the following way:

“Sensemaking is about the enlargement of small cues. It is a search for contexts within which small details fit together and make sense.” (p. 133)
“Sensemaking is an effort to tie beliefs and actions more closely together…” (p. 135)
“In each of these cases, sensemaking involves taking whatever is clearer, whether it be a belief or an action, and linking it with that which is less clear. These are fundamental operations of sensemaking.” (p. 135)

To be able to get a deeper understanding of the daily pedagogical work at the school a school leader needs to understand the sensemaking conceptions that compose the whole from which teachers understand and handle the different daily situations they encounter. It is not enough to observe the ongoing activities at the school but a school leader also have to understand the teachers’ prevailing conceptions of the mission and their learnings about how they in the best way can contribute to the learning process of the pupils.

3.2 Clarity and a sensemaking whole

Many teachers demand more clarity from the school leaders which can be seen as a need of more guidance when it comes to handle the complexities of everyday activities. Some teachers want to get clear instructions of how to handle specific situations but most of them claim the need of clarity with an overarching pedagogical principle. In both cases clarity is wanted from the school leaders but one is about a sensemaking and guiding whole and the other is clarity about specific separate parts. They also differ in the way that clarity about the whole is about conceptions and clarity about parts is about actions to be taken. Possibly these different ways of getting help to handle complex and problematic situations can also be related to top-down and bottom-up perspectives. To ask the school leader for clarity of how to handle a specific situation invites a top-down perspective while asking for another perspective can be seen as more in tune with a bottom-up perspective where the decision of how to act lies in the hand of the teacher. The wish and need of getting another perspective from the school leader is not contrary to a bottom-up perspective. Statements of teachers about having a school
leader that always is present and make decisions about how to handle specific situations can possibly be a result of a lacking guiding whole at the school. For teachers it is a tool which helps to understand and give meaning to the continuous flow of situations. If there are no sensemaking and guiding whole, teachers to a higher degree will be dependent upon others with a more overarching responsibility to get guidance of how to handle ambiguous and complex situations.

"Perrow (1986) has suggested that organizations operate with three forms of control: first-order control by direct supervision, second-order control by programs and routines, and third-order control consisting of assumptions and definitions that are taken as given. Third-order control is called ‘premise controls’ because they influence the premises people use when they diagnose situations and make decisions. (Weick, 1995, p. 113)

According to Weick (1995) third order control “is more pervasive when organizational technology is more nonroutine.” (p. 114) and school is a good example of a nonroutine organisation. The school is an organisation with a very complex and interwoven mission that cannot be fragmented without loosing important qualities in the mission. Weick (2001) underlines this point of view by arguing that

"Either culture or standard operating procedures can impose order and serve as substitutes for centralization. But only culture also adds in latitude for interpretation, improvisation, and unique action. Before you can decentralize, you first have to centralize so that people are socialized to use similar decision premises and assumptions so that when they operate their own units, those decentralized operations are equivalent and coordinated. … This is in sharp contrast to centralization by rules and regulations or centralization by standardization and hierarchy, both of which require high surveillance. Furthermore, neither rules nor standardization are well equipped to deal with emergencies for which there is no precedent.” (Weick, 2001, p. 340-341)

3.3 School development as a problem solving process

If school development is understood as a problem solving process, the main arena for development consists of situations and places where everyday problems are discussed. You need to be careful not to waste the problems but rely on them and use them as a prime force in the school development process in which puzzling situations get meaning by being related to sensemaking and guiding wholes of the school.

Leithwood et al (1999) find that school leaders handle the problemsolving process in different ways: "Our evidence suggests that, as compared with their less productive peers, transformational leaders:
• develop a relatively clearer understanding of the problem before attempting to solve it;
• devote more time and effort to the initial formulation of ill structured problems;
• are more inclined to view the immediate problem in its relation to the broader mission and problems of the organization.” (p. 102)

These findings are similar to the patterns and conclusions in our research project. Everyday problems can be handled in different ways by school leaders. Most often the main thing is to get rid of the problem as fast as possible or to keep small problems from becoming big ones and more seldom problems are used as good point of departure for learning.

3.3 Handling everyday problems

Everyday problems can be handled in different ways by school leaders. Most often the main thing is to get rid of the problem as fast as possible or to keep small problems from becoming big ones and more seldom problems are used as good point of departure for learning and school development.

Transmitting the problem to someone else, being a sounding board and just return the problem to the teacher owning the problem or giving advises or instructions of how to do in specific problematic situations are ways of handling problems that do not contribute to learning that can be of use in the process of school development.

From a learning perspective of school development these ways of handling problem have their shortcomings as the problem solving process does not contend a more profound learning about the character of the problem as a basis for further actions. If these problem solving strategies are dominating, a culture of doing instead of a learning-culture is reinforced which will undermine the professionalism of teachers and school leader. From a learning perspective on school development, teachers and school leaders are expected to be the main actors in the knowledge building process about learning and teaching instead of carrying out what others tell them to do.

Besides these non-learning strategies of problem solving there are also some ways in which problems can be used to enhance deep learning. The school leader can contribute by organizing learning groups among the teachers and by relating problems to a sensemaking and guiding whole to handle a puzzling situation.

3.3.1 Organizing learning groups

The prime aim with learning groups is not to find a solution as fast as possible but use the problem as a way to get a deeper understanding of the problem and the teaching situation which will help to find other solutions than those already tried.

The task of the school leader is to organize sense making learning environments for teachers that help them to a more profound understanding of the com-
plex and puzzling everyday problems. To take part in the learning processes and to take care of the learnings from the groups is at the same time a way to deepen their own understanding of the pedagogical work of the teachers at the school.

3.3.2 Relating the problem to a sensmaking whole

According to the learning perspective, a deepened understanding of the nature of the problem that underlies new ways to handle a problematic situation is central. Deep learning requires that the problematic situation is related to a sensemaking whole. There are at least three difficulties associated with this process. To begin with it presupposes that a relevant wholeness is at hand. Secondly, it presupposes a consciousness of the whole and thirdly, it requires an ability to relate a specific problem to the whole and see what consequences the whole leads to in handling the problem. Instead of being an advisor of how to handle a problem, a school leader would contribute to the problem solving by helping teachers to relate the problem to a guiding whole that has been collectively decided upon at the school.

References


