Steering school improvement in a democratic way: using drama for school leadership development

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In the Swedish school system there is an attempt to improve schools by encouraging them to change from bureaucratic ‘rule-steered’ to more democratic ‘goal-steered’ cultures. This paper explores the meaning and nature of this fundamental change and proposes strategies, both bottom-up and top-down, for implementing it. The education of school leaders for this type of transformed school culture can be approached through the use of educational drama that makes concrete the abstract principles and vision of the new culture. A specific course in a Swedish university that uses these techniques is described.

**The mission to change school culture to a goal-steered and democratic organisation**

According to the expert group the change for school leaders to lead and develop their schools successfully requires a democratic, learning and communicative leadership (Lärande Ledare 2001, 4).

As the expert group of school leadership put forward in the report to the Department of Education (Lärande Ledare 2001). Swedish Schools require a democratic, learning and communicative school leadership. Democratic values have to be a part of everyday life in school and the school leader has the responsibility to create an open and reflective dialogue about his or her vision of the school development. It is equally important that the dialogue takes into consideration the mission of school since all the people in school have a responsibility to jointly reach the goals. As long as the main process in school is the process of pupils’ learning, the school needs to be a learning organisation giving the opportunity to pupils, teachers and school leaders for ongoing learning. The school leader has the responsibility to lead continuous school improvement. An investigation of the school leaders’ situation
done by the National Agency for Education 2000 (Skolverket 1999),
together with a recommendation for a new education of the school
leader shows the urgent necessity for developing the role of the school
leader.

In 1994, the Swedish school system changed from a rule-steered to a
goal-steered organisation, and in this paper, I will focus on the school
leader’s role with these perspectives in mind. The recommendations of
the expert are in line with the School Improvement tradition. This tra-
dition is focused on a ‘bottom-up’ orientation where the members of
the school drive improvement. This leads to a need for ongoing studies
and improvements. The focus is on a change of the processes of the
school organisation instead of the results, and the school organisation is
seen as a dynamic institution. To understand and improve changes the
methodology of qualitative research is used (Lundberg 2001).

The school leader has a very challenging role. School organisation
and structure has a long tradition of ‘balkanisation’. Hargreaves (1998)
describes the characteristics of balkanisation as a culture of strong and
lasting boundaries. The people identify strongly with the territory in-
side the boundaries and are keen on retaining differences of power and
status. The different groups of teachers are strongly insulated from each
other both spatially and in their view of knowledge of how to work and
the mission of the school. They live in different worlds, both physical
and mental. Identity is linked to being a specialist teacher and not a
teacher of the school.

The goal-steered and learning organisation of today requires a flexi-
bility allowing the teachers to co-operate within the system, through
communication between teachers in different subjects and between te-
achers working with pupils in different age and with different educa-
tional backgrounds. As most of the teachers have many years of their
background and experience in the rule-steered system and a balkanised
organisation, it is a great challenge to have the mission to change the
school culture to a culture with a sense of unity and participation. I
suppose it is important to see it as a challenge and not as a ‘mission
impossible’.

The rule-based school system was fragmentary in the way content
and subjects were organised. The content, transferred into school books
and other educational materials and how many hours per subject the
pupils got each year in the compulsory school, were decided at state
level. The main responsibility and possibility for individual choices for
the teachers was restricted to the pupils’ learning situations or different ways of teaching. Today teachers are requested to work co-operatively in small groups (arbetslag), take responsibility for choosing the content, how to work with the pupils and to examine quality in relation to the different goal of the curricula. To change the school from a rule-steered system into a goal-steered system will consequently also involve a change of values and attitudes to learning, knowledge, co-operation and responsibility as well as a change of behaviour.

A teacher with restricted professionalism is well matched to the rule-steered school system, but today the school needs a teacher with expanded professionalism. Those concepts restricted professionalism and extended professionalism are used by Berg and the researchers around him in the study of school culture (Berg 1995; Berg, Groth, Nytell, and Söderberg 1999) to specify different attitudes and basis of evaluating the task of being a teacher. Restricted professionalism contains values of conservatism, individualism and presentism (Lortie 1975). Extended professionalism values long-term planning collaboration and flexibility.

As a first step in the school improvement process, culture-analysis may be used as a tool to describe the teachers’ attitudes to values and attitudes to their work and their view of learning, knowledge, co-operation and responsibility. The next step will be to initiate a change of attitudes, values, behaviours, roles and self-understanding with the individuals working in the organisation to make the shift possible. At the same time, the members of the staff and the school leader need to change the organisation to facilitate the new ideas. Fullan (1993) states the importance of working parallel with the change of the organisation and the view of learning as the organisation may have a restraining and a supporting effect of the changing process. The question is how to initiate a changing process of knowledge, behaviour and values in a democratic way. The main problem of school improvement is the balance between guiding and steering. To steer strongly without giving the actors free space to influence and take responsibility for the change may prevent this development.

CHANGING THE VALUES AND BEHAVIOURS OF THE STAFF IN A DEMOCRATIC WAY

The task of reforming a school into a learning organisation includes a democratic aspect. The members of the organisation have to be active in the ongoing changing process. They can no longer close the door
to the classroom and do their teaching on their own. They have to make selections to involve other teachers and also the pupils. They have to discuss the meaning of learning and how every child in the school may reach the democratic goals and goal of knowledge. The task for the school leader is to support this dialogue across the previous cultural boundaries and make the challenge a common challenge for all the members of the staff. Feldman (1966) formulates five demands for a learning organisation. In his opinion there has to be

- dialogue between individuals, groups and within the organisation
- participation of all members in the organisation as a whole and a common goal orientation where all members participate in the formulation
- a result consciousness, where all the members have knowledge of the importance of their own contribution and have the proficiency to see consequences and evaluate in the short and long term
- a problem consciousness, which means that all the members are prepared to ask questions about themselves and others about obstructions and disadvantages in the organisation.

These demands are not specifically for the school as an organisation but they correspond with the new idea of the goal-steered school and the new leadership. The Swedish National Agency for Education expresses four main criteria for the school leader (Skolverket 1999):

- the focus has to be on continuous learning
- democratic values in the curriculum have to be brought to life in school
- the organisation must be open, participative and co-operative
- quality development is a process where you follow up, evaluate the results and take measures to improve.

These criteria also correspond with the arguments of the expert group mentioned in the introduction. To make the shift from the traditional and rule-steered school to the democratic and goal-steered school possible, the school leader needs different kinds of tools. Researchers from different perspective often mention the importance of dialogue and reflection. Different kinds of dialogues are used in the process of school improvement. Berg (2000) describes ‘educational discourse’ as a dialogue where the teachers talk about everyday life in
school and reflect on the meaning of content and form in relation to the overall goal and the goal for the different subjects in the curriculum. Englund (2000) discusses the importance of ‘deliberative dialogues’. Decision-making may be fundamentally motivated and discussed among all persons who have interests in common. The deliberative dialogue gives space for disputes, tolerance and respect for different perspectives that will occur. Individuals taking part in the dialogue have to listen to the other individuals’ arguments with respect for the person. It is important to test and question traditional opinions as well as authority. The aspiration is to come to an agreement or at least a temporary agreement among the participants. These different forms of dialogue improve reflexive thinking, but in different directions. Both are important tools for the school leader in the process of guiding the staff to participate in school improvement.

Many school leaders also consider the different projects initiated by the National Agency for Education as a tool for school improvement. In the largest national project in Sweden, ITIS (Information Technology in School) during 1999–2001, more than 40% of the teachers participated. This project is implemented by the National Agency for Education and directed towards all teachers in compulsory and upper secondary school. The National Agency for Education has some special demands. The teachers have to work in small workings-groups with the same pupils, they have to co-operate with teachers in different subjects, they have to work in a pupil centred and problem-based way. They also have to write a report of their process.

The common task is to find out how to make the technology become a learning tool for all the children and to try to incorporate it in a way that suits their own school. To make this possible, the teachers are guided by facilitators in their work with the pupils. They also participate in a course with teachers from different schools and with support from the teacher training institute. In this project, the framework is well defined and at the same time, the teachers are free to solve the project in a way that suits themselves, their pupils and the school. They also have to reflect on their own learning process both in the group of teachers and the learning process of the pupils. It may be seen as a reciprocal action of top-down and bottom-up steering.

Lundgren (2001) has been involved as a researcher in different projects of school improvement in Sweden and discusses the importance of a reciprocal action between a bottom-up and top-down process.
The top-down initiative is where the actors of the school take over the ideas and carry on the project by themselves. Then the project will be bottom-up steered. His assumption is that if development work is to be successful it has to be established and supported with the teachers. They have to change the world of the school by their own understanding.

But it is not easy for the teachers to change the world of school if they have no experience of the new kind of school. To change your understanding of the world you need to have knowledge of how you want the world to become and why you need this change for yourself and for the pupils. It is not enough for the individuals to know that it is important to be a part of a learning organisation. You need to have a vision of what this means. You need to imagine a school that does not exist today and the members of the organisation have to share the same vision. One part of the work for the democratic, learning and a communicative school leader is to communicate her/his vision of the school to the members of the staff, and then make them share it. How can this be done?

In the art-oriented perspective of educational drama, the answer would be to create a play where you visualise in a concrete way your idea of the future school (Sternudd 2000). People participating in doing the play and also the spectators will reflect on the content that will take place in a complex art form ‘as if’ it is the real world. The concepts and written vision by the school leader take on a human shape and are given a concrete form. It will be an opportunity for all the members of the staff to reflect and discuss the concrete form of the vision instead of using words that may have different meaning for the staff members. They also have the opportunity to discuss their values in relation to the attitudes and behaviours shown in the play. In the sphere of imagination, it is also possibly to create a new reality as well as examine various aspects of reality or different concepts, as democracy or problem-based learning.

According to Bolton and Heathcote (1995) and the holistic learning perspective of educational drama, it is important to create a learning situation that make it possible for the individual to understand the world in a total way, with feelings, attitudes and thoughts. The fictive experience creates a pedagogical tool to investigate and reflect of a concept or situation from within the fiction together with other persons. It is possible to act and feel as of you were actually part of the situation, for instance the vision of the future school, both in the role of someone else
and as yourself. A vision is an abstraction of someone’s thoughts. The school leader has the possibility to clarify this vision as well as share and discuss with others through the role-play, play or process drama. As a leader of the learning situation, you make sure the members get space to reflect on the situation in these roles, which makes it possibly to develop a deep understanding of the situation. To use the tool of educational drama as well as different kind of verbal dialogues will probably create a space for reflection on the existing school and the new (non existing?) democratic school.

**TO WORK WITH SCHOOL LEADER EDUCATION**

Dalarna University has long experience with education for school leadership. Today the above methods are used in one of the courses (Pedagogik C med inriktning mot utbildningsledning, Delkurs 1 Styrning och ledning 11). The contents are focused on investigating the challenging leadership as well as a democratic, learning and communicative leadership. You may say that the students acquire tools with which to understand different aspects of school improvement.

In the course, the students become part of a collective and communicative process, in which knowledge and various aspects of reality are studied on a basis of collective reflections and experiences. Learning based on experience is one part of the education, mostly as a background to the challenge of school improvement. The process of experiential and reflective thinking as Dewey (1985) states is using the observation of reality, reflection and analysis that will be evaluated and generalised. But in this case, it is also important to reflect and evaluate the vision of the future. It is also important to make unconscious thoughts visible because these thoughts are often an important part of people’s attitude of life. This is one reason why Dewey recommended art studies for the process of reflective thinking. Therefore, role-play is used as well as different fictive situation to investigate what kind of situation you might experience in the future.

We rarely recognise the extent in which our conscious estimates of what is worthwhile and what is not, are due to standards of which we are not conscious at all. But in general it may be said that the things that we take for granted without inquiry or reflection are just the things that determined our conscious thinking and decide our conclusions.
And these habits which lie below the level of reflection are just those which have been formed in the constant give and take of relationship with others (1985, 22).

The students also make observations of different situations and dialogues in school. These situations are brought to life in short role plays and a co-operative reflection is achieved from different perspectives. Research studies and theories are also used to deepen the understanding of school leadership. A form of meta-thinking is in this way evolved based on both emotional and intellectual understanding.

REFERENCES


