Conditions for Local School Development In the Light of National Strategy and Organizational Theory

Proposal Information

Based on organizational theory, and within an organizing perspective (Löwstedt, Larsson, Karsten, & Van Dick, 2007; Sandberg & Targama, 1998; Weick, 1976; Weick, 1979) a vast part of all major Swedish school development projects (locally initiated as well as nationally) performed over a period of twenty-five years were evaluated and summarized by Swedish researchers (Larsson & Löwstedt, 2010). Six common main strategies used to achieve transformation through school development actions were identified. Those were; school development through Organizational Change, School Networking, ICT-Investments, Local Projects, Leadership Development, and Further Education (Larsson & Löwstedt, 2010).

Further analyses showed that none of these single strategies, per se, led to any consisting change. Critical factors identified for successful development of school organizations were instead strategy-independent variables of organizational or “organizing” nature. Six general factors of importance - features of schools which showed success in their school development effort - were identified as Organizational Learning, Organizational Identity, Visible Teachers, Genuine Learning Teams, Collective Disciplining and Organizational Leadership (Larsson & Löwstedt, 2010).

Challenging behavior is strongly correlated with increased rates of poor school achievement and school dropout among students. These youths are at high risk of later unemployment, social problems, criminality and to the development of psychiatric diagnoses (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Barriga et al., 2002; Ek, Westerlund, Furmark & Fernell, 2012; Greene, Ablon, & Goring, 2003; O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2011). Schools fail to teach these students all over Europe, a fact that strongly contributes to increased demands for exclusive solutions in education (Lindqvist, Nilholm, Almqvist, & Wetso, 2011). There is a lack of evaluated interventions towards schools´ work with challenging behavior and an extended research asks for models that extend abilities at schools to teach all students, and, that such models must incorporate an inclusive perspective (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2012; Giota, Lundborg, & Emanuellssoon, 2009; Ruijs, Van, & Peetsma, 2010).

To meet these negative trends educators claim for further education and above all for appropriate local school development aiming to build modern, learning and flexible school organizations ready to educate all students within a wide and complex diversity of conditions, which are locally different, specific and, as well, changing over time (Lindqvist et al., 2011; EUC, 2009). Anchoring, participative leadership and teacher engagement is pointed out as crucial factors in any inclusive school development ambition (Berg & Scherp, 2003; Berg, 2011; Brannick & Coghlan, 2005; Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Hutcheson, & Gallannaugh, 2007).

At the same time, mainly as an effect of the increasingly dominating international comparisons of educational achievement (i.e. IEA, PISA/OECD), many schools are set under severe national and/or municipal pressure. Political, legal, curricular and administrational reforms are to be implemented, purposed to raise the national rank in achievement. Teachers and school leaders in Sweden repeat their need for calm, less central demands and better opportunities to maintain a local focus in their teaching and school development striving.

This paper presents and discusses experiences and organizational process findings from a Swedish school development project that run over two years. The overall aim of the project is to develop teacher teams´ and schools´ abilities to approach and teach students with challenging behavior.
in an inclusive school environment. What are the actual preconditions like, to carry out such a local school development project? What may be the obstacles?

**Methodology**

Five teacher teams, one team in each of five selected project schools, run a participative school development project over two school-years, supported by an initial further education course given by the researcher at Stockholm university, and a continuous group supervision process (once every fortnight) led by external trained school supervisors. All teacher teams applied to participate in the project based on self-interest and the schools financed the external supervisor and the participating teachers’ working time spent in the project from own resources. Thereby, the schools were considered to be highly goal-oriented and motivated at start.

Before the project started all participating teachers and school leaders responded to a survey on expectations and concerns regarding the project. After one year the teachers and school leaders answered a second survey, now reformulating their expectations and concerns of the project. After two years, in a third survey, they evaluate the outcomes of their expectations, and also value the over-all impact of the project. The supervisors report, after one year and two years respectively, on the development process within the teacher teams. The teacher teams and the school leaders will finally be heard in structured focus talks during the summer 2015. Qualitative analyses of all data are to be carried out within the conceptual framework of the organizational research model and theory presented in the longitudinal school development research reported by Larsson & Löwstedt (2010).

**Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings**

Main data analyses and conclusions remain to be done in the mid of 2015 when the final data collection has ended. Some early results however are available: There are, over the limited project time of two years, noted a wide range of basic organizational impact on local conditions to run school development processes: i.e. changes of school leaders, new teachers in participating teacher teams, school buildings under re-construction, flooding (!) and room and schedule problems connected to such events.

Municipality ruled and/or nationally imposed training programs (“Maths Lift”), appreciated as compulsory by schools, were invented in all project schools during the project period. This resulted in a strong sense of lack of time, and stressed teachers, which in turn led to teacher team drop-out from the supervision process in two schools, and to structural changes of the supervision, with less participation, in another. Sustainability in the development processes seems to be higher within more stable organizations (schools with continuity among teachers and with project-participating and clearly supportive school leaders). Questions are raised if schools can meet and establish the "general factors of importance", at all, while their daily work emerge in such a, relatively, disorganized situation?

**Keywords**

Organizational theory, school development, local conditions and central demands, inclusive school development

**(Remarks )**

Since the project ends finally in June 2015 some changes will be likely to appear, in comparison to this proposal.)
References


