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Editorial

EDUCATION INQUIRY

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An individual learning belief and its impact on schools' improvement work
– An Individual versus a Social Learning Perspective

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Abstract

Why do some schools fail to improve even after taking knowledge-based improvement initiatives? In this article, we argue that some schools do not improve because their staff members have an individual learning belief. An individual learning approach to school improvement will disrupt development processes. Whereas, as we argue, a social learning understanding of school improvement based on the theory of Community of Practice and its application may provide schools with a theoretical understanding which enables successful implementation. The results of two major improvement projects in Norway illustrate how some schools fail to successfully implement improvement due to the voluntary nature of participation, the lack of situated activities in relation to the improvement objective, the low frequency of meetings and the absence of systematic leadership. Our advice to schools is to revisit their beliefs about and understanding of learning so they can manage change among staff and carefully monitor the situations we highlight as being critical to success.

Keywords: school improvement, community of practice, individual learning belief, social learning perspective, implementation

Introduction and aim

There is strong empirical evidence that, even when schools are motivated to improve, some still struggle to implement change or fail to sustain it (e.g. Blossing, Hagen, Nyen & Söderström, 2010; Blossing & Ekholm, 2008: Datnow, 2005; Durlak & DuPree, 2008; Ertesvåg, Roland, Vaaland, Størksen & Veland, 2010 ; Skolverket, 2009). As a result, a growing body of research on teaching and teacher education focuses on the successful implementation of improvements (see e.g. Fullan, 2007 for an overview). To understand the challenges schools face, we consider a view in which the beliefs held by teachers and school leaders concerning individual learning actually disturb the improvement process. A better understanding of this belief and its effect on school improvement may be vital for practitioners as well as researchers and teacher educators and may help with the successful implementation of improvements.

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The study is based on data from Norway. Norway has a compulsory school system, from ages six to sixteen. The systems for pre-school and upper secondary school are comprehensive and, although not compulsory, they are attended by over 90 percent of children and young people. School improvement research has been scarce. While major reforms have been evaluated, school improvement has not necessarily been a main focus. Generally, school improvement research has been more or less left to the individual researcher's interest.

The primary focus of this study is the beliefs held by teachers and school leaders concerning how learning comes about when they are organising improvement work. In this study, improvement work refers to school-wide improvement processes that include the whole school organisation; for example, how to implement student democracy or self-guided learning materials, or attempts to create a qualitative system in the school or the forming of collaborative teacher teams. Hence the content of the work may differ, even though it is all of the kind for which schools have free hands to develop practical solutions.

The study is hypothetical in its methodology. We argue that schools need to be challenged about beliefs concerning effective innovation and how it is achieved. Our starting point is the assumption that schools, teachers and school leaders have traditionally held individualistic learning beliefs about school improvement (Fullan, 2007; Blossing, 2000; Stoll, 2009). School improvement has largely been left to or has focused on the individual teacher. However, we assume that what needs to be challenged is the belief that the improvement process is first and foremost about discrete, cognitive processes which prioritise the individual's understanding. Instead, we propose that teachers and school leaders develop a social learning understanding so they can more effectively organise school improvement. Second, we question the belief that the individual teacher is the centre of improvement work (e.g. Leithwood & Jantzig 2006). This has implications for innovation leadership and a school's capacity to improve.

School Improvement

School improvement is "*a distinct approach to educational change that aims to enhance student learning outcome as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change*" (Hopkins 2001, p.139). Knowledge about improvement and institutionalisation processes has accumulated since the mid-20th century. See e.g. Miles and Seashore Louis (1987) for a reflective review. Over the last two decades school improvement research has passed through different phases focusing on both system levels and micro levels, different aspects of culture and the process of change (e.g. Reynolds, 2009; Hargreaves, 2003; Stoll, 2009). School improvement research has generally focused on how schools develop the conditions and processes that support and enhance learning. In Reynolds' (2009) words, "to develop a sustainable energy of school improvement from within organisations, rather than relying on without-the-school educational change that may implode on the impermeability of schools' organisational culture." However, Fullan

(2007) questions why schools that already possess all the knowledge concerning what it takes to improve are still unable to achieve that. It can be argued that schools have, for different reasons, not been able to take on the new knowledge provided. The moving contextual landscape of school improvement seen in the last decade brings new meaning to how we need to conceptualise school improvement and enhance capacity (Stoll, 2009). How teachers and school leaders understand innovation processes may affect their ability to implement improvement.

Capacity and Process

Changes have increased the need for capacity-building to deal with this wider agenda. According to Harris (2001), the capacity to improve is all about creating opportunities and conditions that promote co-operation and mutual learning. Capacity represents power in the form of the skills, knowledge and behaviours required to successfully implement an improvement (Oterkiil & Ertesvåg, submitted). Schools *as teachers* have a long history of improving student learning. By contrast, schools *as organisations* have less tradition and knowledge about developing the school as an organisation to manage change. Seeing capacity as something interpersonal and organisational will obviously challenge traditional individual learning beliefs about innovation Stoll (2009, p. 125) argues that capacity is a *'habit of mind' focused on engaging in and sustaining the learning of people at all levels of the education system for the collective purpose of enhancing student learning in its broader sense*. On the basis of this, it is evident that the traditional cognitive learning perspectives of innovation, which give preference to the individual's understanding, are insufficient. When learning becomes a collective issue, the question of situatedness becomes important.

Social Learning and a Community of Practice

Situatedness is an essential feature, a cornerstone, of the social learning perspective. Professional development that simply focuses on increasing a teacher's knowledge of classroom practice is inadequate for building capacity for schools, Stringer (2009) argues. There must be elements of increasing organisational, collective and individual capacities in terms of knowledge production and use. Collaborative forms of professional development, a situated layered approach and a learning community culture not only foster collective opportunities to discuss beliefs about teaching and learning, but also give permission to be critical about practice, take risks and share in ongoing processes of knowledge acquisition and use. Park and Datnow (2008) found in a "Successful Schools for All" study a comprehensive school reform model that primarily centres on early literacy intervention that, although much of the theory, strategy and tools driving this approach to school reform was important, the deeper process of creating knowledge for school improvement was a collaborative, situated endeavour. The combination of the explicit, detailed modelling of new skills with an emphasis on understanding the theory behind the tools has proved valuable. Given

this, there is less focus on measuring the fidelity of implementation and more on helping educators think more reflectively about their practices and to use tools that are more effective in improving pupil achievement.

Yet schools may struggle even when interventions are welcomed and considered worthwhile. Situating the change process in the actual teaching and learning context where the new ideas will be implemented is an effective strategy for helping teachers to change their practices (Borko, Mayfield, Marion, Flexer & Cumbo, 1997; Blossing, Hagen, Nyen & Söderström, 2010). Some other specific issues also seem to be important. For example, Somech and Drach-Zahvy (2007) found that in teams of teachers working together to implement a new reform the frequency of meetings was crucial for ensuring that team members exchanged information, which in turn promoted team performance.

There is no activity that is not socially situated, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue. Accordingly, framing improvement work as a situated practice enables attention to be focused on the relationship between participation and context, using Lave and Wenger's conceptualising of context as communities of practice. This also addresses the issue of whether participation is voluntarily or mandatory. Although the intervention was a school-wide project involving all teachers, Midthassel and Bru (2001) found that the teachers' involvement varied. Moreover, the degree of relevance attributed by teachers to the theme of improvement to be was a main motivating factor in their involvement. These findings emphasise how important it is for participants to perceive the improvement work as relevant.

A community of practice emerges where people gather around a common mission and have the opportunity to appear as legitimate participants in a committed conversation about the nature of the mission, says Wenger (1998). These communities and conversations focus on everyday, practical work. The dialogues, or rather the negotiations, between the participating parties deal with how the work should be understood, how the visions and goals will be interpreted, how they should be translated into practical procedures, what is problematic and what needs to be resolved.

Wenger's concept of a community of practice is interesting and useful since it is theory-oriented, looks at natural phenomena, when describing its structure, agency and processes. Wenger states that a community of practice is indicated by joint work, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire. However, Wenger points out that these communities arise spontaneously and therefore need not include a professional working group at a school. What teachers talk about does not necessarily have to do with the formal body of assignments. Further, one cannot plan or manage a community of practice, Wenger adds. We can only provide for it, but cannot know the result of the conditions given.

The community of practice concept is still being debated. Wubbels (2007), for example, asserts there is a need to distinguish between learning communities and communities of practice. His argument is that a learning community can be more

easily developed than when practice is the first concern. Cox (2005) discusses that the ambiguity of the terms community and practice leads to different applications by different researchers. Moreover, he suggests that the joint enterprise of the community in Wenger's description focuses the impact on the individual identity and he questions whether in this "heavily individualized and tightly managed work of the twenty-first century" (p. 527) there really are any communities that could have this kind of impact.

An interesting feature of Wenger's theory is his concept of learning being an integral part of practice. Like Cox, we assume that, within an organisation, individualism can be so prevalent that no community of practice arises. In fact, our hypothesis is built on the assumption that this is a main reason why improvement processes in schools fail.

Method

Using Perspectives Metaphorically

In this article we employ the individual versus the social learning perspective in a metaphorical approach to examine the assumption that an underpinning individual and cognitive learning belief disrupts improvement processes. We use "perspective" when we describe our analytical work and "belief" when we address the individual learning stances of teachers and school leaders. Likewise, we use "understanding" to address a developed and conscious stance of learning where the social dimension is integrated.

We do this by looking at situations where improvement has been disrupted and applying an individual and cognitive learning perspective to them to see if they can be understood meaningfully, to ascertain why they are disrupted and why there is no sustainable change that promotes student learning. Then we apply a social learning perspective to the same situations to see how they could be rearranged and meaningfully understood in terms of building capacity for change.

Using perspectives in research can be done in several different ways. First, the perspectives themselves could be the target of the research question, e.g. which perspectives on learning do teachers take on when organising instruction or what kind of perspectives do change agents start from when planning improvement in organisations (see e.g. Handal, Vaage & Carlgren, 1994). Second, perspectives could be used as an instrument for analysis. Morgan (1986) did this using metaphorical perspectives to create images of organisations and thus gain knowledge about how organisations could be understood. In this article we employ a version of Morgan's research design and use two epistemological perspectives; the individual versus the social learning perspectives, to examine disrupted improvement processes in schools.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have shown how metaphors in fact represent fundamental views on how the world is constituted and knowledge is created. They state that the way we choose language to express everyday life experience, through metaphors, communicates and constitutes our perception of the world and life around us. Significant for our reasoning here is their reference to Reddy (1979) and the conduit

metaphor. It says that we understand: 1) ideas or meanings as objects, 2) linguistic expressions as containers, and 3) communication as sending. This conduit or pipeline metaphor of language permeates our everyday expressions. Notice these examples (Lakoff & Johnson, p. 11):

- It's hard to *get* the idea *across to* him.
- I *gave* you that idea.
- Your reasons *came through* to us.
- It's difficult to *put* my ideas *into* words.

Likewise, we state that the individual learning perspective is fundamentally rooted in the everyday conception of the human body and especially one part of it, the head, as the container of knowledge. One can easily see that this conception is close to the conduit metaphor as Reddy explains it. To continue our bodily version of the metaphor: Knowledge is mainly expressed in language "coming out" from the mouth and body of a human being. From there it is easy to understand the conception that knowledge has its origin and is stored in the source from which it comes, behind the mouth, in the head of the human. We further suggest that the basic features of this conception are that knowledge can be stored in the brain without undergoing any changes and can also be carried to different locations where the knowledge can be taken out of storage and used. Another basic feature is that the knowledge thus stored in a human being, underneath the skin of the body and head, is hidden and unavailable to me and can only be given to me if the head of the container decides to share it.

In contrast, we would describe the social learning perspective as very much the opposite. Knowledge is mainly expressed as communication and dialogue manifested in the space between humans. A basic feature of this conception is that knowledge is under continuous creation and is hard to store because of its dynamic nature. Another feature is that it is visible in ongoing communication and that it "grows" through dialogue. For clarity, we have outlined a matrix of essential concepts where the theory of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) is illustrated (see "Analysis Matrix" and Table 1).

Now we must remind ourselves that these are metaphorical statements trying to conceive the everyday and bipolar understanding of the basic characteristics of knowledge creation and dissemination. They share certain common features with the scientific conceptions but diverge from them in terms of the bipolarising characteristics. When taking on a scientific perspective it could be easily argued that knowledge creation and dissemination, or learning, has both an individual as well as a social learning dimension. Vygotsky (1962/1969) assumed a cultural and historical perspective on learning and showed how the development of the individual is integrated with his or her social community and framed by the historical process. One of the more interesting and current efforts to develop an integrated model of learning where

both the individual and the social aspects are accounted for is elaborated by lIlleris (2007). He describes three dimensions of learning – the content, the incentive, and the interaction – which are all active in the learning process.

Empirical Sources

The analysis is carried out on two major research projects:

1. The Respect Programme, (e.g. Ertesvåg, 2011; Ertesvåg, 2009; Ertesvåg et al. 2010; Ertesvåg & Roland, in press; Ertesvåg & Vaaland, 2007).
2. The Evaluation of the Knowledge Promotion Reform (Blossing, Hagen, Nyen & Söderström 2010).

The Respect programme is a school-wide programme which aims to help schools prevent and reduce problem behaviour. The programme provides schools with a framework for strengthening the adult role and builds on the assumption that teachers are essential for developing and maintaining a positive learning environment. A key element is strengthening the school's capacity to improve, which is imperative for long-term results. So far, about 100 Norwegian comprehensive schools have implemented the programme.

Both the effect and implementation of the programme have been evaluated and presented through a series of publications, including an evaluation several years after the active programme period had ended. The 2.5 year programme has been found to reduce disobedience, off-task behaviour and bullying and improve teachers' support and monitoring. Although the programme has a documented effect, including in the longer term, some schools struggle to successfully implement the programme. The findings suggest that a major reason is a lack of collective effort, shared responsibility for improvement and mutual engagement combined with a struggling leadership. Some schools that are able to implement the programme and obtain results are, for the same reasons, unable to sustain the improvement. The lack of collaborative action is one of the reasons given by staff members.

The analysis in this study is mainly based on data from project group interviews at schools which were implementing a one-year pilot version of the programme (Ertesvåg, et al. 2010) and interviews with headteachers at schools implementing a revised 2.5 year programme (Ertesvåg & Midthassel, in progress). For the project groups the interviews were conducted twice, at the end of the programme and 2.5 years later. The headteachers were interviewed three times throughout the programme period. For detailed information on the interview procedures, see Ertesvåg et al. (2010).

"Knowledge promotion reform – from word to deed" was a government programme which aimed to strengthen school improvement in line with the goals of the Knowledge Promotion Reform. The main instrument in the programme is to support school improvement projects based on tripartite co-operation between schools, school

owners and external agents. The programme had a budget of 195 billion Norwegian Krone (NOK) for the 2005-2009 period, of which NOK 125 billion was awarded as direct project support.

The main research questions in the evaluation examined the degree to which and in which circumstances tripartite co-operation strengthens the ability of schools to improve their work and create a better learning environment for their pupils.

The main empirical data comprise five case studies and questionnaires. The cases consist of five improvement projects that each include one to seven schools. Sub-cases are those schools in each project where we interviewed teachers, students and school leaders to review the improvement process. Case stories of the schools' improvement capacity as well as the process were written. It is from these stories that situations with disrupted improvement processes were chosen for this study. The questionnaire was distributed to teachers, school leaders, project leaders and consultants. For a detailed description of the method and sample used in the project, we refer to the evaluation report (Blossing et al., 2010).

In the evaluation of the Knowledge Promotion Reform, one of the main findings is that the support of external agents only influenced teaching and classroom work to a modest degree. So the co-operation between the school owners, schools and external agents did not influence the most important element in the learning environment: the pattern of instruction and teaching. In most cases, judging by the frequency of contact between the teachers and external agents, the support was not very close. We thus see few examples of changes in teaching practice, apart from a few individual changes.

Analysis Matrix

In order to examine the disrupted improvement processes we developed an analysis matrix (see Table 1) where the horizontal axis consists of the social and individual learning perspective as defined above. The vertical axis is based on Wenger's (1998) three dimensions of joint work, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire, constituting a community of practice. Table 1 provides illustrations of behaviour characterising each of these categories as manifestations of a social learning perspective and an individual learning perspective, respectively. We apprehend Wenger's dimension in the sense that a community of practice could have different levels of joint working where the operationalised descriptions to the right in Table 1 show a community where no joint working could be found because of the individual responsibility for learning, voluntary participation, individual decisions about learning needs and individual work. In fact, this pole illustrates a kind of zero-point on the scale of joint working where the community itself ceases to exist.

The opposite can be found to the left in Table 1. Here we have a community with shared responsibility for improvement where participation is required, there is the joint identification of learning needs and people working together to complete tasks. On a scale from 0 to 10 this is a 10-community where joint working is at its best.

Table 1: Examples of the three dimensions that influence the coherence of a community of practice as manifestations of a social perspectve - or an individual learning perspective.

Community of Practice	Social Learning Perspective	Individual Learning Perspective
Joint Work	– Shared responsibility for improvement – Participation required – Joint identification of learning needs – Work together to complete tasks	– Individual responsibility for learning – Voluntary participation – Individual decision on learning needs – Individual work
Mutual Engagement	– Collective effort – Experience which learning needs arise in interaction – Collective planning and problem-solving (e.g. peer counselling) – Leadership needed because activities go beyond the individual and observational situation – Soliciting each other's opinion – Checking for agreement	– Working without consulting others – Making decisions independently – Individual planning – No need for a leader because reponsibility is shared among the individuals (but no skills to organise situations for learning)
Shared repertoire (shared history of language and artefacts)	– Development of a common language (using terms familiar to the group) – The situation carries new knowledge – A shared repertoire of earlier events – Shared beliefs and assumptions rely on knowledge	– Explaining personal terms – The individual carries new knowledge – Reference to individual classroom experience – Shared beliefs and assumptions rely on simplistic or easily summarised explanations

In looking at disrupted improvement processes, we want to show how improvement activities in schools which appear to be based on a social learning understanding where teachers come together in groups to learn from each other may still 'run out of steam' due to events we believe are a result of an individual and cognitive learning belief.

For this, the interviews from the two studies were reanalysed on the basis of findings that some schools had failed to implement the school improvement efforts. Transcripts were read and reread to identify trends, patterns (Sim, 1998) and processes, or the lack thereof, which disrupted the improvement efforts. We identified aspects of joint working, mutual work and a shared repertoire in the data based on the analysis matrix outlined above and shown in table 1. Accordingly, the data wers reanalysed through the lenses, so to speak, of the social and individual learning perspective, as bipolar metaphors.

Result

Situations of Disrupted Improvement Processes

Participation Requirements

In line with Wenger (1998), an element of 'joint work' is the question of participation. In the interviews with teachers concerning their evaluation of the Knowledge Promotion programme it was revealed that participation in the various improvement activities was often voluntary. Teachers could decide for themselves whether they considered it worthwhile to participate in a reflective conversation or guidance. This was particularly characteristic of some schools which had a large number of counselling programmes based on a certain peer-counselling model (Lauvås & Handahl, 2001; Lauvås, Hofgaard & Lycke, 1997). We found that peer-counselling was an interesting choice in a social learning perspective as it gave the opportunity to situate the learning in the classroom and to immediately be able to see and learn what happens in the interaction between teachers and students and thereby foster the joint identification of learning needs and to share the responsibility for what ought to be improved. However, it appeared that participation was optional for teachers in several of the schools. According to an individual learning belief, the decision on learning needs was left to the particular teacher involved.

In the Respect programme peer-counselling was mandatory. As a consequence, some schools did not start the programme, or the activity faded soon after the start. The lack of participation and longer term activity in the Respect programme can be understood as an expression of an individual learning belief. Involvement was at a low level since there was no shared responsibility among the teachers or mutual engagement among staff members. The results show that it is not just a question of voluntariness, but also a question of the joint identification of learning needs, collective planning and leadership when implementing the action.

The Voluntariness on the Knowledge Promotion programme was justified, albeit not clearly expressed, by professional arguments. It is part of the teacher's professional skills to determine their own learning needs. We believe this is also an expression of an individual learning belief where it is possible for the teacher to make this assessment in isolation from others and from a specific situation. In an individual learning belief one assumes that the individual fully owns his or her knowledge 'in him- or herself', he or she can communicate with it and determine whether improvement activities can bring something to the already-owned knowledge. One option, in a social learning understanding, would be to include the voluntary nature later in the process and give teachers the opportunity first to experience what learning needs may arise in interaction with others in situations where they have not previously appeared together, such as the classroom. Here the starting point is that individuals are unable to own their knowledge fully, but could access it through different communities where conversations arise about the practical objects of the knowledge.

The results presented above illustrate that the learning beliefs of teachers in the organisation may influence school improvement processes. As demonstrated, participation, whether voluntary or mandatory, can promote or hinder opportunities to develop shared responsibility for improvement, collective effort, a shared repertoire, among other things, all characteristics of joint working, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire that Wenger (1998) argues are essential to communities of practice.

Situating

In a social learning perspective the situating of an activity becomes important, i.e. where it takes place. The situating could be understood as a strong incentive to develop a shared repertoire around the core part of the educational business. In the case descriptions of the schools from the Knowledge Promotion programme, it becomes clear how in most cases improvement activities are not situated in the situations that are the subject of the discussions and activities. If, for example, teachers need to talk about how they could better teach the percentage calculation to improve student understanding, the relevant situation is the classroom in whice the teachers teach. This separation of improvement activities from the context they are meant to improve is typical for the teaching profession (Little, 2002). In the Knowledge Promotion programme this was particularly valid for classroom and instruction activities. The shared repertoire that manifested in these schools was based on an individual learning belief, with simplistic or easily summarized explanations. References were made to individual classroom experience without putting these into an organisational perspective to see the whole "instruction-picture" throughout the school. Another type of reference were these simplistic cause-chains where e.g. school leaders explained that, if only teachers could talk things over, teaching would improve or, if only they could get the students to become more disciplined, classroom learning would be better.

Following the social learning perspective, it may of course seem unreasonable to situate a reflective conversation between teachers in a classroom while a mathematics lesson is in progress! But there are models that try to couple the conversation between teachers and the relevant situation. In study learning (Holmqvist, 2006), teachers plan together and then implement the lesson while colleagues observe and video record the lesson. This is followed by evaluation and reprogramming where corrective actions are taken and tested by another colleague in a new group of students. In another type of activity, namely, peer counselling (Lauvås & Handahl, 2001; Lauvås, Hofgaard & Lycke, 1997), a teacher carries out pre-counselling with a colleague about a lesson he or she intends to implement. The lesson is then carried out while the colleague observes, after which a post-counselling session follows. The close link to the teaching situation could also be done through what we would call a virtual link. This especially appears in peer-counselling where observation can be replaced by the teacher's own description of the educational dilemma to which he or

she wants to find a solution. The description should be as concrete and real as possible, so that it appears as an "illusion" and virtual reality for their colleagues. The learning community thereby gains access to the practical situation, without having the conversation situated in the actual classroom.

According to Lave and Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), the key mechanism for individuals' and groups' learning comprises access to observing and then participating in the practices at the core of the community. In the Respect programme, the intention is that teachers participate in both formal and informal communities of practice in order to learn both as an individual and as group(s). For example, similar to the procedures of Lauvås and Handal (2001) outlined above, novice teachers may join an informal group with more experienced teachers to get access to their colleagues' knowledge and experience to improve their classroom management skills. Also, formal groups are intended to provide reflective discussions aimed at developing a shared commitment to improvement and lay the foundations for developing a shared repertoire of strategies and actions. At some schools, they were unable to develop communities of practice in this sense during the programme period and even more schools failed in the longer term.

That the situating of an improvement activity is not addressed may be explained by an individual learning *belief*. In such a *belief* the group conversation is intended to change the teacher's cognitive understanding. The teacher could bring this changed understanding to the relevant situation in which he or she can again pick it up from the memory storage unit, and apply it. *Analysed f*rom a social learning perspective, this is not simply done because this understanding is not naturally taking place in the individual's brain, but rather manifests in the conversation between people. When the individual is in the middle of the conversation he or she can indeed understand the knowledge and experience new insights, but this does not necessarily lead to new cognitive patterns forming in the individual in such a way that they are able to activate them later in different situations.

Given the complexity of schooling, joint work and mutual engagement seem to be imperative in order to share responsibility and improve.

Frequency of Meetings

Group conversation and counselling appeared with a relatively high frequency at the beginning of the schools' improvement efforts in the Knowledge promoting programme. This fostered mutual engagement and a collective effort to improve. Teachers met in groups once a week or perhape once a fortnight to have discussions. Counselling took place a couple of times a month. In the group meetings, teachers could solicit each others' opinions and check for agreement and, at times, managed collective planning and problem-solving. However, over time, the meetings and counselling seemed to happen less and less often and only occurred a few times a year. This could be because the expert agents who were hired to manage the conversations

and counselling could not meet more often. In some cases, schools arranged their own meetings in between, but not always. The result of the less frequent meetings is that the teachers tried to carry out the programme in line with an individual learning belief without consulting the others, and hence ended up making decisions and planning independently.

In some schools in the Respect programme, a lack of meetings in the project group responsible for planning and organising the day-to-day activity in the programme, as well as the unpredictable timing of meetings was found to be a problem for some of the schools participating in the Respect programme (Ertesvåg et al. 2010). As a result, the infrastructure which was meant to foster and encourage learning among staff members suffered, resulting in no or little improvement. Even though there was quite a strong mutual engagement in the project group, the responsibility for learning and improvement was not shared. These findings are interesting since Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2007) found that the input of the frequency of meetings was crucial for the extent to which teacher team members engaged in exchanging information, which in turn enhanced team performance. It is reasonable to assume that the frequency of meetings may be crucial to other types of teacher groups as the success of such groups, at least partly, depends on the members' ability and willingness to share information.

The low frequency of meetings is understandable from the point of view of an individual learning belief. If one believes that what an individual expresses in conversation is more or less an exact image of the individual's cognitive patterns, and that new insights which arise in conversation form identical cognitive patterns in the individual that he or she can store and carry around, then frequent meetings would not appear to be necessary. It would appear sufficient to meet and talk occasionally, get new insights and store these for later use. From a social learning perspective, the view is that it is the situation and not the individuals which carry the new knowledge. When the situation, such as a conversation in a group of teachers, dissolves, the knowledge produced in the conversation also dissolves. For lasting cognitive changes to occur in the individual, conversations need to take place continuosly, so the individuals involved can process the new knowledge from many different angles and eventually integrate it with their existing cognitive patterns and social behaviour. Fullan (2007) emphasises the need for infrastructure to support the implementation of change. Although Wenger argues that you cannot entirely manage a community of practice, we assert from research as well as experience that much indeed could be done to promote a social learning perspective e.g. planning activities which enable the promotion of new knowledge through ongoing conversations. This could develop a shared repertoire with a common language and shared beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning which will, besides the individual, "carry" the knowledge.

Leadership

The absence of leadership in the groups explains why several of the improvement activities in schools ran out of steam. From a social learning perspective, leadership is a prerequisite for upholding mutual engagement and developing a shared repertoire. Since the social perspective asserts that learning goes beyond the individual and directly observational, the focus of leadership is to manage the learning process on a systemic level. In the Knowledge Promotion projects a project manager at each school was responsible for the overall direction of the development projects at the schools. The hired expert agents also exerted leadership in the discussion groups and counselling interventions. In the daily work when teams of teachers were to follow up the improvement work, in many cases there was no leadership. Where a formal leader existed, he or she lacked the skills to organize situations for mutual engagement between the colleagues that could develop a shared repertoire. Instead, a community was fostered in which each individual made reference to their own classroom experiences and explained them in their own personal and non-scientific terms.

Although external change agents supported the project group in the Respect programme through seminars and guidance, the main responsibility was at the school level. As for the Knowledge Promotion programme, at some schools this led to no or weak leadership with a lack of skills on how to organise for learning. On the other hand, schools that were successful in implementing the programme seemed to develop leadership skills throughout the school (Ertesvåg et al. 2010). A main challenge seems to be as, Hatch (2007) argues: capacity is needed to build capacity.

Leadership in teacher teams is a burning issue. It has often been argued that no leadership is needed for teachers while responsibility is shared in the team. We see this as a manifestation of an individual learning belief. With such a belief, there is no need for a leader to co-ordinate and organize situations where teachers can meet and where dialogues can proceed in a coherent way. With an individual learning belief, the individual has the responsibility to put his or her own coherent cognitive pattern together. We believe it is necessary to provide leadership for social learning since it reaches beyond the individual and the directly observable situation to a system-level understanding of how different situations are related and can be arranged to foster learning in the school organization. If not, schools might be faced with a dilemma where the needs and wants of individuals differ from the needs of the organization as a whole.

Concluding Reflections

We have reasoned that processes may soon come to a halt where teachers and school leaders embrace an individual learning belief and put the individual teacher in the centre of improvement work. The individual learning belief is reflected in how the requirement to participate in improvement activities is formulated, how they are situated, the meeting frequency of the activities, and the leadership of it. The voluntary

nature of participation, the failure to situate activities in relation to the improvement objective, the low frequency of meetings and the absence of leadership can all be understood as an expression of an individual learning belief as opposed to a social learning understanding characterised by joint work, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire.

The social learning understanding involves a system-theory and organizational perspective rather than an individual and cognitive one. In the individual belief, a single teacher holds responsibility for the continuity of learning. When the individual activates its "new" or modified cognitive patterns in different situations, the new knowledge will appear in different parts of the organization and thus be applied and developed. The central dilemma in this organisation becomes how to fulfil the individual teacher's right to formulate his or her own learning requirements and to keep up a dialogue on how this can be manifested throughout the daily work.

In the school organisation where teachers and school leaders embrace a social learning understanding, it becomes more important to review the system the school organization consists of and arrange the system parts in a way that provides teachers as a collective an opportunity to organize themselves and discuss and negotiate what the focus of improvement efforts should be. For example, it could be a matter of the grouping system and how teachers are assembled in teams and how different types of team-building make up the school organization. It could also be a matter of the responsibility system and the related decision-making system. What a teacher in a team is able to be responsible for and to decide on will affect the dialogue in the school organisation.

Where an individual learning belief prevails, the hunt for the single, magnificent improvement idea can appear overwhelming. In this kind of school organisation, improvement ideas appear as qualitatively different products that could be considered, valued and "bought" by individuals after which they will be incorporated into the individual's brain and carried along with other ideas of a similar nature. When such an improvement idea does not work, it will be rejected and the hunt for a new idea begins.

Where, on the other hand, a social understanding forms the basis for the school organisation, ideas do not appear as products to the same degree. Here, ideas are more or less stable constructions out of the dialogues between teachers in the organisation, for example, in the team when planning an instruction period. When an improvement idea does not work, it is not immediately rejected, but the teachers return to the dialogue to try to understand and clarify the situation in which it has been implemented.

Finally, we believe that in meetings with schools and their improvement work, it may be relevant to penetrate the belief of learning and to challenge it. It will be difficult to disseminate knowledge about improvement work and how this can be implemented if the knowledge is received and processed from an individual belief perspective. Before you know it, it may have been rejected as a bad product that did

not fit. In this context, change agents must act as role models in leadership for a social learning understanding and have meta-conversations with teachers about their belief of learning.

School improvement is difficul, and, following Stolls' (2009) perspective, developing school capacity to improve requires the involvement, skills and knowledge of many people throughout the educatiol system. This may require a broader perspective than this study, which is confined to social processes in local schools and uses a bipolar approach differentiating between individual and social learning. Given this, factors at the individual, organisational and broader levels must be considered. Organisations, such as school, must be seen as complex and dynamic, where an intervention should be understood in the context of a larger interrelationship instead of just one more activity in a linear chain of causes and effects. Hence, when taking on a school improvement effort it is important to take a holistic view of the school as an organisation, and acknowledge that, in order to create change, one has to understand the complexity of the various factors that influence internal capacity. The social learning understanding addresses the staff members' collective learning as a condition for improving schools. We need to acknowledge the dynamics that exist within the school and become aware of how both internal and external parts of the system influence and becomt influenced by each other. In order to make positive and lasting changes within a school, it will therefore be important to work on several levels, with the aim of developing the school in its entirety. It is reasonable to assume that the individual alone as the focus or learning and change may not be able to promote such development.

Since this investigation is hypothetical in nature, we suggest further research on the prevailing beliefs of learning among teachers and school leaders when it comes to school improvement. For example, the situations where there were disrupted improvement processes could form the basis for an interview guide to establish how teachers see these situations and how they understand the inherent learning process. Those descriptions could then be compared to our hypothetical reasoning of how to understand them with the individual contra the social learning metaphor.

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