

English summaries

Carl-Henrik Adolfsson and Jan Håkansson: In the Intersection between National and Local Quality Management in light of the National School Improvement Program ‘Collaboration for School Improvement’

In this paper we explore and theorize the characterization and the dynamic relationship between national and local quality management in light of the national school improvement program “Collaboration for Better Schools”(CBS) (in Swedish: “Samverkan för bästa skola”). In school systems around the world, there is an increasing focus on the quality of schools and their pupils’ academic achievements. This has resulted in extended control over pupils’ performance and in demands for school actors and decision-makers to secure schools’ quality. Consequently, school improvement and effectiveness have become a part of high politics and are important issues at all levels of school systems. In the Swedish decentralized school system, municipalities and independent school heads have considerable authority over how such quality systems should be organized and carried out. Furthermore, the construction and implementation of such quality systems and related strategies has been an important approach for local education authorities (LEA) to exert control over the schools’ processes and outcomes. In this study, these soft-governing strategies are understood and termed as “quality management”. However, the way the CBS is organized and carried out, the program can be seen as an example of a national quality management strategy. In a broader policy context, it can also be understood as part of a broader re-centralization movement, where the state aspire to enhance their control over the schools’ results.

The current study is based on interview data from four schools and a LEA office in a Swedish municipality. The current LEA have underwent the national CBS program together with the four schools. In light of the theoretical concepts ‘loosely-coupled school system’ and ‘organizational routines’, we use this LEA and these four schools as an empirical case to explore and theorize the character and the intersection between the local and the national quality management. The result of the study indicates that the local as well as the national quality management is constituted of a number

of strategies that in different ways aspire to affect the schools' organizational routines linked to their internal school development and leadership functions and organization. These quality management strategies were primarily based on ideas and methods inspired by data-based school improvement policy and aimed to strengthen the couplings between the national curriculum objectives and the schools' teaching practices.

Furthermore, some differences between the local and the national quality management can be distinguished. Above all, the CBS, through its strategies, were considerably more intensified and aspired to reach much longer in the schools' organization compared to the LEA's quality management. In terms of the study's theoretical concept, the national quality management through CBS were not only focusing on the schools' ostensive organizational routines but also the schools' teaching processes. That is, the schools' performative organizational routines.

In the final part of the article the consequences of the intersection of the national and local quality management are discussed. Although the CBS programs should be planned and carried out in close dialogue with the LEA, many of the school actors in the current municipality emphasized that the CBS to some extent took over central parts of the LEA's areas of responsibility, for example the monitoring and supporting of schools' improvement work. Consequently, even if the couplings between the schools and the national level were strengthened through the CBS, the couplings between the Schools and the LEA to some extent tended to weakened. Accordingly, the question that can be raised is if a stronger national quality management will affect the demarcation between the state and the municipalities concerning the responsibility and authority over the school. Such a change in the demarcation could in turn imply a redefinition of the meaning of the decentralized school system.

Malin Kronqvist Håard: Steering through Collaboration? A text analysis of dominant discourses in a state school improvement initiative

Introduction

The past three decades the Swedish school system has been characterized by many reforms, which largely have followed an international trend where neoliberal ideology and New Public Management (NPM) has been at its centre (Lundström, 2018). The Swedish school results has dwindled during the past decade in different international measurement such as PISA (Andersson, Blossing & Jarl, 2018). As an answer to critique raised in both

domestic and international reports the Swedish government has initiated a school improvement program called Collaboration for Better Schools (CBS). It is a program aimed at turning around low performing schools. The concepts of collaboration and school improvement have special focus in the article. Collaboration has been called the new form of work in the welfare state (Danermark & Kullberg, 1999), a political fashion word, and an educational political ideal (Dahlstedt & Hertzberg, 2011, p. 149 f.). The concept of collaboration can be seen as a part of the movement from government to governance. New forms of steering, so called 'soft governance', such as benchmarking or best practice, is a way for the state to strengthen their power over school.

The article is based on three official texts concerning CBS, the government's decision, SNAE's implementation plan and SNAE's website concerning CBS. Official documents and policy discourses are important to study as they frame what is the political motivation for a given phenomenon. Policy constructs meaning and problems are identified in education. The aim of the article is to write a possible narrative about CBS in order to highlight underlying discourses in the rhetoric surrounding CBS in the analysed documents. Both a narrative and a discursive approach have guided the analysis. A steering perspective has been established in the analysis based on governance and governmentality. Foucault's (1972, s. 49) definition of discourse has guided the article: "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak". There is no strict method to follow in a Foucauldian discourse analysis, but methodologically the article derives guidance from narrative method. The article thus combines "what" and "how", narrative and discourse. The article is not about whether collaboration and school development are good or bad, but about how truths, knowledge and subjects are formed through discourses.

Results

The analysis is based on four narrative dimensions (Pollitt, 2013, p. 903) extended with Bolander and Fejes (2015) Foucault-inspired questions. A summary of the results is presented based on the headings in the result section.

1. Dominant themes and how they are presented – Collaboration and tailor-made initiatives:

The rhetoric surrounding the dominant themes presented, collaboration and tailor-made initiatives, indicates that there is a duality in the statements around them. On the one hand, the National Agency for Education must be listening and adapt to local needs, but on the other hand, they ensure compliance with national goals and should use existing national school initiatives as to create a synergy effect.

2. Offered solutions and evidence – "Best school":

The narratives in the analysed documents concerning what the problems are in Swedish school are about lack of equality and declining knowledge outcomes. The solutions offered to these problems are systematic quality work, educational leadership and that teachers should become better teachers, which can be seen as examples of common-sense solutions that have become neutralized truths (Røvik & Pettersen, 2014; cf. Börjesson, 2016; Fairclough, 2001).

The evidence base for the solutions offered is largely self-referential, that is, the National Agency's own reports is what is most often given as support for the initiatives to be made. It can be interpreted in several ways, one way of looking at it is that it becomes a kind of evidence loop (Nolan, 2015, p. 895) where the National Agency's own reports are given as support to legitimizing the knowledge they produce. It can also be seen as a form of persuasion about the right way to do school improvement and where SNAE seeks support in its own texts.

3. Style and presentation:

The description of CBS on the website is in positive terms. Happy children and references to successful efforts reinforce the impression of a successful government initiative. The state collaborates with head-teachers and schools, but unlike the implementation plan, head-teachers and schools are portrayed as those who are the leaders in the collaboration. The National Agency for Education here positions itself as an equal party providing personal contact and support to the local actors in a collaboration. The style of the website is more of a marketing nature than the more traditional government decision and implementation plan. This can be compared to other studies of public organizations where identity and image have become increasingly important (see, for example, Rehnberg, 2019).

4. Underlying assumptions and what come in the background:

Assumptions that are in line with governance thinking and the NPM-influenced policy discourse can be seen in CBS, focusing on best practice and on knowledge outcomes (cf. Grek, 2009; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Regarding the solutions offered in CBS, they follow a few of the underlying assumptions; by changing organizational structures and processes, the effectiveness of head-teachers and schools can change. The local actors also need to develop a "self-renewal ability" which can also be attributed to the aforementioned discourses (cf. Hudson, 2007). What comes into the background, although included in both the government decision and the implementation plan, are the possible key structural reasons why head-teachers and schools are selected to participate in CBS; municipalities' lack

of compensatory resource allocation, students' socio-economic background, and segregation for example.

Discussion

Collaboration or steering is the question. Can it be both? Many statements can be found to indicate that it is the latter role that is the dominant one in the documents on CBS that have been analysed. There is a great emphasis in the documents that head-teachers and schools should take part in existing school development initiatives provided by SNAE. In this way, the state can govern through information, soft governance (Hudson, 2007; Kirsten & Wermke, 2017; Moos, 2009).

The analysis highlights different competing discourses, the tension between collaboration and governance, between decentralization and control. The study's knowledge contribution is that it critically examines an initiative that is surrounded by common-sense ideology and a reasoning about the underlying assumptions identified in the analysis. To be critical does not mean to say what things really are, but what discourse analyses of this kind can contribute is to lift the gaze from these underlying common-sense assumptions that permeate public texts and thus open up to alternative ways of thinking and actions.

Ulf Blossing: Improvement capacity as functionalist structuring or as a professional learning community culture

National and international knowledge surveys showed increased performance differences between schools. Consequently, the Ministry of Education (*Regeringsbeslut* [Government decision] U2015/3357/S) stated that strong national and municipal measures were needed to improve both knowledge results and equivalence in the school system, and this prompted the Swedish National Agency for Education's Collaboration for Better Schools (CBS) initiative. The aim of the initiative is to support dialogue to increase knowledge results and equality across schools and preschools. Based on a quality review of each local authority and its schools, CBS provides support in cooperation with universities to build improvement capacity and strengthen goal achievement.

The purpose of this study was to analyse the forms of the quality reviews by the National Agency for Education in relation to improvement capacity as functionalist structuring or as a professional learning community (PLC) culture. Underlying the key research question is the assumption that the forms are indeed functionalist and risk rendering invisible the teachers' agency,

working relationships and actions in the improvement work. As such, the question is: To what extent do the forms of the quality reviews draw attention to the working relationships between and respective actions of school leaders and teachers?

Functionalism arose around the 1920s, among other things, as a reaction to evolutionism (Macfarlane, 2018; Mooney, Knox & Schacht, 2017; Functionalism, 2020), and a functionalist interpretation of improvement capacity goes back to this understanding of society as a system of institutions and organizations in balance with each other. As a consequence, functionalism has been criticized for attributing agency to these institutions rather than people; orderliness and rationality in macro-level function, structure and process are emphasized at the expense of human interpretation and meaning-making. There is also criticism that this interest in balance and stability can lead to a conservative social attitude towards society in which the importance of change and, above all, improvement is not taken into account.

In the relevant literature, a school's capacity to improve is discussed in various terms. A review by Feldhoff, Radisch and Bischof (2016, p. 211), for example, found expressions of 'capacity for change'; 'school-wide capacity for improvement'; 'school improvement capacity'; and 'school capacity'. Thus, there are both simple models of improvement capacity that consider only limited factors or areas and complex multifactorial models that also address the relationships between each element. Over time, improvement capacity has become a richer and more multifaceted concept that emphasizes the cultural perspective, an example of which is the school as a PLC. A PLC survey instrument developed by Olivier & Hipp (2010) is used in this study's analysis.

Analysing the quality reviews was carried out in two steps. First, the outline of the forms was assessed in terms of improvement capacity either as part of a functionalist structure or as an element of a PLC in which people's working relationships or actions can emerge. In a second step, I have used the Professional Learning Communities Assessment - Revised (PLCA-R) (Olivier & Hipp, 2010, pp. 32-35) as an analysis tool. The PLCA-R scale describes the working relationships and actions of school leaders and teachers in school improvement work, and in this way improvement capacity emerges as it is expressed in the social work environment at the micro level rather than at a structural macro level.

For each area in the PLCA-R, I have assessed whether the review forms pay attention to these in the grades 'not at all', 'indirectly' or 'directly'. Direct attention was defined as the identification of descriptions that corresponded to the PLC area, for example 'a distributed and democratic leadership organized in different groups' or 'teachers use different data to collectively analyse and assess the effectiveness of different teaching methods'. As such, direct descriptions were those that made the working relationships and actions of school leaders and teachers clear as a quality of the PLC. By indirect

attention, I mean an assessment where the writings aim at the areas in the PLCA-R, but not in a concrete way so that relationships and actions become clear as a quality in the professional learning community.

The results indicate that the forms of the quality reviews indirectly draw attention to the relationships and actions of school leaders and teachers in all five areas specified by the PLCA-R with some aspects of Area 2, which relates to having a clear focus on children and students, given direct attention. The analysis of the form's overall outline showed a more functionalist structuring of improvement capacity, and so the original assumption that this approach to quality assessment risks making the agency of school leaders and teachers invisible, and the building of improvement capacity more complicated, can thus be largely verified. Continued research is needed to supplement the results of this study with investigations of how the National Agency for Education supports the review process as well the university involvement with the schools.

Mats Lundgren, Eva-Lena Embretsen, Ulf Nyttell and Stefan Weinholz:
Transformation of a master plan to local staging plans in Swedish schools –
A qualitative exploratory case study of Collaboration for better schools (CBS)

Collaboration for better schools (CBS) is a national master plan with the aim of providing targeted support to schools that are having difficulties improving their performance and meeting the goals of the curriculum. The purpose of the study is to describe and discuss how current state analyzes and action plans emerge in the staging of CBS at the local level. Master plans, such as CBS, are an example of the tension that exists between implementing large-scale efforts use decision rationality, while staging these at local level action rationality.

The result are based on a qualitative explorative case study exploring the impact of CBS on one primary (ages 6 – 12) and three secondary schools (ages 13 – 15) in one municipality in Sweden. The empirical material consists of documents that were collected during 2018 and 2019.

This study shows that the staging of CBS initiates collective sense-making processes that also creates uncertainty, despite process support from external parties. It draws new conclusions about how actors interpret and create meaning (sense-making) about how a national master plan is transformed into operational plans in schools. It shows also that the different phases of the staging process run the risk to be loosely coupled when a master plan, based on decision logic, is transformed to a local action logic-based plan. Found on

the results, we discuss whether and how the study can offer new insights for staging national master plans.