

Systematic Quality Development: A Demand at Odds with the Everyday Complexity of Teachers' Work?

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Abstract. This article aims to analyse the conditions experienced by teachers and other school staff members in their work with systematic quality development within the everyday complexity of work at school. The method consists of research circles, a form of researcher-led discussion, together with teachers, principals and other school staff, held at the schools. The research circles are part of a research- and development programme concerning newly arrived pupils, in collaboration with an institute and a municipality in Sweden. The focus of the research circles is to identify areas in need of development, make tacit knowledge visible and promote knowledge development. During the course of the programme, a number of obstacles to development work arose, which led us to an analysis of the recurring problems and demands of systematic quality development. The analysis points to the different rhythms of fast-paced everyday work on the one hand, and slow-paced development work on the other. In conclusion, we emphasise the need for time for reflection, organisational structures that support development, and finally the need to develop competence in reflective practices regarding development, an addition to the competence in reflective practice on teaching, in which the staff are already skilled.

Keywords: Reflective practice; the reflective practitioner; school development; research-and development; elementary school.

1. Introduction

In this article, we aim to analyse the conditions experienced by teachers and other school staff members during their work with systematic quality development within the everyday complexity of their work and school life. We

will present findings from an ongoing research and development programme concerning schools' work with newly arrived pupils. The core of the project consists of three groups from two schools, made up mostly of teachers but also school counsellors, study guides and principals who work with us as researchers to identify areas in need of development. According to the Swedish national curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011), it is the responsibility of all school staff to participate in systematic quality development as a means of school development. Programmes like the one described above are one way of doing that.

One of the underlying principles of the work done by schools in Sweden is the paragraph in The Swedish Education Act stating that all education should be based on scientific knowledge and proven experience (2010, p. 800, 1 chapter 5§). This is then further elaborated in the mandate that all schools are obliged to maintain a continuous, systematic approach to quality development. The national curriculum for compulsory school, preschool classes and school-age educare states that:

“School activities must be developed so that they match up to the national goals. The principal organiser has a clear responsibility for ensuring that this takes place. Both the daily pedagogical leadership of the school, as well as the professional responsibility of the teachers are necessary conditions for the qualitative development of the school. This necessitates continuous review, following up and evaluating results, as well as assessing and developing new methods. Such work has to be carried out in active co-operation between school staff and pupils, and in close contact with the home and the local community.” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011, p. 9).

The responsibility for this work being done rests on the organisers, who in Sweden are either education officials in the municipality or leaders of private school companies, depending on whether the school is private or public.

The Swedish National Agency for Education provides material and courses for schools to improve their work with systematic quality development. This material focuses on processes of development, centred on the questions *Where are we? Where are we going? How do we get there? And how did it work out?* The material states that this should be a continuous process, and that working through the questions once will not yield permanent solutions. The material also states who is responsible for what, and the main responsibility falls upon the principals who lead and organise the work and who can create practical conditions for this work to take place.

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, which is responsible for overseeing quality in all schools, also scrutinises schools' systematic quality development. In 2017, in its annual report to the Swedish government on strategies for quality and a holistic perspective, the Inspectorate concluded that Swedish schools in general do not live up to the requirements. This is due to inadequate organisational conditions (lack of educated teachers, lack of continuity, lack of cooperation within the school) and a lack of interest on the part of the schools' organisers (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2017).

2. Systematic quality development in research

As stated above, the term systematic quality development is a direct translation of a term used in the Swedish Education Act and the national curriculum. Because of this, we have not found any other studies that use this exact term but have instead looked for articles that address similar processes to the ones that are in focus here.

Several studies on professional development in school settings emphasise the conditions that need to be in place for development to be effective and valuable. For instance, it is important that the professional development offered focuses on what the teachers themselves experience as areas in need of development (Wabule, 2016). This study also shows that teachers are proud of attending development programmes, but also that the programmes tend to satisfy individual careers rather than the need to acquire skills and knowledge for improving the quality of education. In another study, the findings showed a strong correlation between teachers' expectations and experiences with regard to identified core elements of applied competence (Kruger, Van Rensburg & De Witt, 2016). Teachers were more motivated to apply new knowledge when the programme they participated in was grounded in practice. This study also highlighted the importance of teachers playing a participative role in the design of programmes for development. The voices of the teachers are important with regard to their specific professional learning needs (Kruger et al., 2016).

In terms of the relation between research and practice, studies have shown difficulties in the implementation of research results in practice. Research papers are not written with the aim of being put into practice, and the study points out the inherent difficulty in translating research into everyday practice, even when the research indicates implications. Another study (Oolbekkink-Marchand, van der Steen & Nijveldt, 2014) points out that in order for research and development to hold sway in practice, the issues addressed need to stem from the practitioners themselves.

In a review article of a vast number of studies concerning professional development for teachers, a list of what makes such development successful is put forward (Hunzicker, 2010). Among the characteristics on this list are the importance of development being job-embedded, collaborative and ongoing. In addition, there are several studies underscoring that professional development benefits from a close relationship between practice, reflection and research (Attard, 2017; Kruger et al., 2016; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2014). Terms that are used include: continuous professional development (Wabule, 2016), practitioner research (Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2014) and personally driven professional development (Attard, 2017). What these methods have in common are: a focus on practice and practitioners as a driving force in development, an emphasis on ensuring that enough time is allotted to development, and the role of reflection in professional development.

The relation between reflection and development is investigated in several studies. Attard (2017) describes the difference between an unreflective teacher and a reflective practitioner as one of learning from experience in a conscious and systematic fashion. Being a reflective practitioner does not imply that the

teacher always knows what to do; on the contrary, uncertainty and an ongoing, never-ending process of reflection in and on action is an integral part of reflective practice (Attard, 2008). Reflection in this sense is time-consuming because it is a collaborative process as much as a personal one (Attard & Armour, 2005; Attard, 2017).

3. The reflective practitioner

Because of the close relation between systematic quality development and reflection, we view Schön's theory [1930-1997] of the reflective practitioner as a useful tool for analysis. Based on Dewey's pragmatic theory of reflection and knowledge, Schön (1991) developed his theory by studying teachers' thinking in action. The term "reflective practitioner" has been used for decades within action research regarding teachers' work. The purpose of this approach and theoretical analysis is to create new forms of knowledge and practice development, by highlighting and utilising reflection as a professional tool (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Meierdirk, 2016; Brookfield, 2017).

From a pragmatic perspective, there is no difference between thinking and acting; in interaction with one another, they create possibilities for new knowledge (see Dewey, 1933). Thinking is not a source of knowledge by necessity, nor is it necessarily a source of action. For action to lead to knowledge, reflection is needed, what Schön (1991) terms reflective thinking. Action and thinking are closely linked to experience and activity, making it more correct to talk about knowing as an active process, rather than knowledge as a thing one has or can acquire.

The reflective practitioner in Schön's terms indicates the competence of reflective thinking that teachers ought to develop, to create new knowledge; or rather knowing. Reflective thinking exists in two forms: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action refers to the tacit thought processes that relate to action, and that continuously adjust and develop practice. Reflection-in-action transforms our action and thinking while we are in the situation (Molander, 2000). Reflection-on-action is the teacher's conscious, retrospective analysis of her own actions, which transforms experiences into knowledge/knowing, and then in turn leads forward to renewed action and renewed reflection-in-action (Schön, 1991; Leitch & Day, 2000). Put differently, reflection as a professional tool is a continuous and conscious process that aims to identify and evaluate the plausibility of teachers' assumptions (Brookfield, 2017).

According to Dewey (1910), reflection also offers an ethical foundation. What defines a reflective practitioner is as much an attitude towards practice as a determination to improve that practice. Leitch and Day (2000) stress that improvement in this case does not lead to maximising gains, but rather implies a broader understanding of the self and of the moral and societal value of education.

4. Project background and method

This article is part of an ongoing research and development programme concerning elementary schools' work with newly arrived pupils. The programme was initiated and co-financed by a research institute, Ifous, which stands for *Innovation, research and development in preschool and school*, which runs a number of research and development programmes that focus on different topics. The project is also financed by the participating municipality and Mälardalen University of Sweden. The project aims to develop school practice, formulate tacit knowledge and experience, and produce practice-based research.

Methodologically, the project presented here is based on a method called research circles. The term "*forskningscirklar*" is well established in Sweden. There is no word in English for this particular method, so we have chosen to use a direct translation of the Swedish term, research circles. The method is based on a democratic model for exchanging ideas and learning (a parallel here could be a round-table discussion). Research circles add the dimension of research and researchers to the exchange.

The method is a form of collaborative process, in which practice and research build a joint foundation. The participating teachers identify problems and formulate areas for practical development, and the researchers provide input based on their expertise. This method is closely linked with the national curriculum, which states that all teaching should be based on scientific knowledge and proven experience, and has been developed and scrutinised in a school research setting (Holmstrand & Härnsten, 2003).

Persson (2008) as well as Otterup, Andersson and Wahlström (2013) underline that research circles are based on interaction, whereby all the participants, researchers and practitioners lead the development of knowledge in a mutual process. Practice is not an object of study for the researchers, but is the basis of the questions asked, and the practitioners are co-producers. Working with research circles can be described as an action research, practice-based approach, where development of the practice is key (Lahdenperä, 2011).

In a research circle, the participants' questions, in dialogue with scientific knowledge and research, guide the work. Research circles have proven to be effective in enhancing practical knowledge and competencies, while simultaneously being a basis for the development of scientific knowledge (Lahdenperä, 2011; 2014). Another way of describing the method is as a form of co-production, in which the researchers provide theoretical perspectives and relevant research as a foundation for analysing the issues formulated about the practice.

A specific dimension of methods such as this one is that the work of the researcher is not undertaken from an outsider's position, as research is traditionally done. Instead, the focus is placed on following the processes of development. The thought behind this is that the participating researchers, in cooperation with the participants, can contribute through research-based systematic documentation, analysis and compilation to both practice and

research in the field in focus (Ahnberg, Lundgren, Messing & von Schantz Lundgren 2010).

4.1 The participating schools

The participating schools are located in a municipality of about 100 000 inhabitants. School A has pupils in grades 1 to 9. This school is located in an area of the city where about 90% of the inhabitants have a foreign background and the school has taught pupils with multi-ethnic backgrounds for many years. School B also has pupils in grades 1 to 9, and the school is located in a village of 1300 inhabitants about 30 km outside the city; most of the inhabitants of the village were born in Sweden. Since 2016, approximately 30 newly arrived pupils have been studying at the school. All of them live in the municipality of 100 000 inhabitants, 30 km away. The municipality arranges a school bus service for this group of pupils. Before 2016, school B hardly had any experience of teaching students with multi-ethnic backgrounds. During the last year of the programme, a third school was formed by the municipality, at which eight of the participating staff now work.

Within the programme, the development work is done in three research circles with teachers, principals and other school staff. In total, 27 people have been active in the circles. It took a few months before the constellations were established, and during the course of the programme six of the staff and two principals have left the programme for various reasons. The core of the circles has consisted of 19 people who have been active during the whole period.

The first circle consists of five teachers working in primary and secondary school, for ages 6–12, and their principals. The second circle consists of seven teachers working in upper secondary school, for ages 13–16, and their principal. The third circle consists of four teachers working in upper secondary school, for ages 13–16, and their principal. Circles one and two were originally part of the same school, school A. But during the last year of the programme, the upper secondary school was relocated and formed a new school in the city centre. This was done in order to improve the integration of young people within the city.

4.2 The empirical material

The empirical material presented below has been extracted from research circle meetings during a full year, in total 20 meetings so far. Each meeting has been approximately 2.5 hours long. The meetings are recorded in full, with permission from the participants. The participants have the freedom to ask us to stop recording or to omit sections. In addition, we make observations and take field notes during the meetings, and we have had several discussions with each of the circles about the conditions for their work within the programme. We have chosen examples that are commonplace and that illustrate the practical difficulties involved in being part of a research and development programme.

5. When systematic quality development meets practice: empirical examples

During our visits to the participating schools for the research circle meetings, a number of issues and problems arose, issues which have directly influenced the

development processes in the programme. We have sorted the examples into three categories: organisational problems, teachers' and other staff members' participation and principals' participation.

5.1 Organisational problems

Example 1: Finding the room. At the very first meeting in the mixed research circles, no one at the school where the meeting was to take place had informed the others schools' staff members where to go, and no one had been given the task of meeting them. At this school, most of the doors are locked and require a tag or a key. This means that a person looking for something or someone might not find anyone to ask. Consequently, the research circle could not start until everyone had been located and had found the right room. At this early stage, the participants did not have phone numbers for their colleagues at the other school, which exacerbated the problem.

Example 2: There is no room. On more than one occasion, no room has been booked for the circles. This means that the participants do not know where to meet up, and the meeting begins with a search for a location. Sometimes we have had to change rooms during a circle. Once, a circle had to take place in a classroom that had not been booked, which meant that the work was interrupted by pupils knocking on the door or wanting to ask the teachers a question. To be clear, the pupils are not the problem. Rather, the problem with not having a room booked is that the staff members' focus is divided by the ongoing activities at the school.

Example 3: Organisational change. During the course of the programme, there have been several organisational changes. These range from relatively small, such as changes of principals or teachers who leave the school, to a large change when one of the circles was part of a reorganisation of the upper secondary school to form an entirely new school in the city centre. An organisational change on that scale naturally affects the teachers' focus, and it has been unclear to them what it is worth spending time on in terms of development.

5.2 Teachers' and other staff members' participation

Example 1: No substitute teachers. The participation of teachers and other school staff members has been disrupted on a number of occasions because there are no substitute teachers available. At the beginning of the project, this was partly an organisational oversight, but it was quickly remedied by the principals. Still, the problem lingered. If there are several teachers off sick or on leave, there are not enough substitutes. Sometimes substitutes are booked but cancel at the last minute.

Example 2: No time scheduled. At every circle meeting, the participating staff have defined and agreed on work to be done between the circle meetings to move the development project forward. For example, reading a chapter in a book or an article, conducting interviews with pupils, observations of each other's teaching. As the project has progressed, the analysis of gathered material and the writing of documents have become part of the work. For the duration of the project,

however, finding time to work with these issues between circle meetings has proved difficult for all three groups. This has to do with the everyday work at school, which makes it difficult to find times when all participants are available.

Example 3: Conflicting professional missions. Early on, it became clear that having the circle meetings at the schools created a conflict of interest for the participating staff. During the meetings, staff have been distracted by pupils knocking on the door or looking through the windows, sometimes because they want to talk to their teachers, sometimes simply because they are curious and want to know what is going on. As a result, the teachers' different missions have collided; on the one hand, they want to be there for their pupils, but on the other hand they need to focus on the development work of the circle.

5.3 Principals' participation

Example 1: Coming and going. More often than not, the principals have been called away during the circle meetings. Often, the phone rings, and the principal leaves the room to take the call. These calls are almost always about the pupils. Sometimes it is parents wanting to discuss their children, sometimes it is the social services who need to talk to the principals about a specific case. At other times, the principal has to leave to talk to construction workers because of reconstructions at the school, or because a teacher who is not part of the project needs help. And on more than one occasion, the principal has had to welcome newly arrived pupils and their parents instead of attending the circle meeting.

Example 2: Urgent events. On some occasions, the principals have cancelled their participation in a circle meeting due to events that they have viewed as more urgent. These events range from instances such as the ones listed above, i.e. practical, pedagogical or social events that are a part of everyday life at school, to threats of violence at the school with police involvement, accidents, or visits from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate which require the principal's presence.

Example 3: In and out of sync with the project. As a result of their coming and going, or not participating at all, the principals have at times been out of sync with their staff and the work done in the circles. When the principals do participate, time has to be spent in explaining and informing them about the work that has been done. Since the principals are also the pedagogical leaders of their schools and the projects defined by the circles, their uneven participation creates uncertainty among the staff about whether the work they have done is in line with what the principal sees as important or will sanction.

6. Discussion: Reflection, time and organisation

The problems outlined in the empirical examples above might seem trivial when seen by themselves, but taken together these problems amount to real obstacles to the work that is meant to take place during the programme. This has led to participating staff feeling a need to apologise to us, and expressing their embarrassment at the problems that have arisen. On a number of occasions, we have had to emphasise that this is not a problem for us as researchers but rather a problem for the work that the participants want to do and are committed to

doing. The accumulation of seemingly trivial problems was what initially drew our attention to the need to analyse specific difficulties of systematic quality development in this research and development project.

The fact that systematic quality development brings practical problems with it is not new per se, nor are we surprised to find that teachers' everyday work is complex. Neither it is new to the participating staff and principals, who have grappled with these problems during the programme. We cannot emphasise enough that the participating staff are highly competent, driven, skilled professionals, and are deeply committed to offering newly arrived pupils the best schooling possible.

The research and development programme, of which these research circles are a part, is based on principles that have strong support from previous research on professional development. Studies have shown that teachers find development work more rewarding and valuable when the issues addressed are closely connected to their work (Wabule, 2016), when issues stem directly from their practice (Attard, 2016) and when teachers play a participative role in the design of a programme for development (Kruger et al., 2016). The programme has a clear and well-worked-through system of steering, and representatives from all levels in the participating municipalities are active in it. The institute that runs the programme, Ifous, has a research-based model for school development and research that aims to support and alleviate the problems that are known to arise, and its support has been consistent throughout the programme. In addition, there are clear requirements for quality development in the Education Act and ample support material on how to conduct such work from the Swedish National Agency for Education.

Despite all of this, as described, the research circles have encountered several problems. This is in line with the report from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, which concludes that Swedish schools in general do not live up to the requirements for systematic quality development.

Our interpretation of the findings outlined above is that systematic quality development is a different form of practice than the everyday work that teachers and other school staff do. By everyday work, we are referring to the heart of school life, i.e. teaching, planning, evaluating pupils' knowledge and reflection on one's own teaching. The terms reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action describe the process by which professional knowledge is developed and renewed actions are made possible, and we see ample evidence that the staff engage in both forms in relation to their everyday work. However, systematic quality development is not a common place part of everyday work, but is rather an activity set apart from that. The everyday work has its own fast-paced rhythm, which requires teachers who can think on their feet, switch quickly between different tasks and divide their attention between many different people. The organisation of the schools is also attuned to this rhythm.

When it comes to systematic quality development, the rhythm is different. It is slow-paced and takes a long-term perspective, which is not always in accord with everyday work. The reflection required in this type of work is different from the reflections on everyday work. During the circle meetings, the staff have

been engaged in reflection-in-action in relation to development work and the issues they have chosen to address. But between meetings, reflection-on-action regarding the development work does not take place, at least not in a structured fashion and not collectively. Systematic quality development, as already stated, is a collegial process and demands cooperation, which has proven difficult to bring about in practice. In addition, the organisation of the schools is not attuned to the rhythm and demands of systematic quality development.

Our interpretation is that, although the programme has been carefully structured, the participating staff did not have the competencies for reflection-on-action in this sense. The reflective practitioner in Schön's (1991) terms indicates the competence of reflective thinking that teachers ought to develop in order to create new knowledge. Reflection as a professional tool is a continuous and conscious process that aims to identify and evaluate the plausibility of teachers' assumptions (Brookfield, 2017). In relation to this, we want to make some further analytical points about the conditions for systematic quality development.

Reflection takes time. Our research shows that reflection is a time-consuming process, which is in line with previous research on this issue (Attard & Armour, 2005; Attard, 2017). Everyday life in schools offers insufficient time for reflection regarding the long-term, slow processes of development. For action to lead to knowledge, reflection is needed. Action and thinking are closely linked to experience and activity, making it more correct to talk about knowing as an active process (Schön, 1991). Reflection-on-action has to happen after the fact, it cannot be rushed and the necessary conditions for a collective process need to be in place.

The importance of organisational support and structure. Reflection-on-action is not contingent on time alone. It requires different competencies at several levels. School organisers need to know how to utilise the work and give support and guidelines for the principals to lead the processes. Principals in turn need to know how to lead the work, and understand the requirements for systematic quality development and their own crucial role in the process. The staff in their turn need to develop a competence in reflection-on-action regarding long-term development, so that their professional needs are at the centre of the work, and constitute the driving force behind the development. Reflection-on-action is the teachers' conscious, retrospective analysis, which transforms experience into knowledge. This in turn leads forward to renewed action and renewed reflection-in-action (Schön, 1991; Leitch & Day, 2000). Previous research indicates that supporting teachers as reflective practitioners is a valuable and effective form of professional, systematic development. Reflection also offers an ethical grounding (Dewey, 1910). What defines a reflective practitioner is as much an attitude towards practice as a desire to improve that practice (Leitch & Day, 2000). In systematic quality development, the self is always part of a collective, long-term process, which implies a broader understanding of the self and of the value of education.

Systematic quality development as a "long game". In this article, we have demonstrated and analysed what can be seen as a discrepancy between the

requirements set by laws and policy for systematic quality development, and the actual conditions that are offered; a discrepancy that appears even in a programme that has been carefully designed to avoid problems like these. The policy documents and documents aimed at supporting quality development do not take into account this discrepancy. Rather, they seem to assume that all the necessary conditions are in place, and that it is simply a matter of following the right method. Little or no attention is given to what happens when school staff take on the task of development in the midst of everyday life at school.

The programme in which the participating staff are working makes demands upon them, which for the reasons stated in this article they have difficulties meeting. The fast-paced, operative, in-your-face reality of everyday life in schools seems to make long-term, slow processes difficult. Systematic quality development takes place in the midst of a virtual maelstrom of activities, conflicts and unforeseen events that all tug at the attention of the staff. The fast-paced, urgent events are always given priority over the long-term processes; the long-term can always wait because it does not seem to carry significance in the immediate present. Hence, the collective reflection-on-action about development risks taking a back seat.

6.1 Conclusions

While the research presented in this article consists of a qualitative study performed at three schools, we maintain that the results are useful and relevant for systematic quality development in general in schools. The participating schools in this study may be seen as well prepared for systematic quality development because they have professional, committed staff who are competent in reflection about their everyday work. There is also knowledge in terms of policy documents and previous research about how to structure development work. Our research makes a contribution by pointing out that, in order for development to take place, this is not enough. Structures for slow processes and long-term reflection-on-action need to be made visible, verbalised and activated within everyday work at school. This has implications for practice, in that planning for time isn't enough, but rather there needs to be a preparedness for handling the coexistence of slow and fast processes.

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