Continuous Collective Development as a Road to Success in Primary School

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Abstract. In most countries today, schools are required to conduct comprehensive testing and assessment. In Norway, national tests in the fifth, eighth, and ninth grades evaluate basic skills in reading, numeracy, and English. This article presents a qualitative study of schools that have over time performed well on national tests and for whom results cannot be explained by the socio-economic profile in the school context. Interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators in four of these schools. The purpose of this study is to present these schools' own explanations and reflections about why they have performed well on these tests over time. The results show that the following issues emerged as central themes: collective understanding, the importance of school leadership, stability and long-term goals, and focus on reading. These are discussed from the point of view of theory of school development.

Keywords: Teaching; school leadership; collective knowledge development

Introduction

In today's school, there is a strong focus on quality and results. In Norway, both politicians and the media have focused on the basic skills that received a lot of attention after the "PISA – shock" in 2001, which showed Norwegian 15 year-olds, expected to rank among the best, as only average in reading and science when compared to other countries in the OECD region (Haug, 2012). In order to improve the quality of Norwegian schools, a national quality assessment system was introduced in 2004 which included national testing in grade five, eight and nine of three basic skills areas; reading, numeracy, and English. Research connected to national testing has shown that test results, as well as marks in general, can be connected to a pupils' socio-economic

status (Grøgaard, Helland & Lauglo, 2011; Huang, 2009). However, pupils' learning and school performance are also connected to the teaching they receive and the learning situations they experience. In other words, it is the learning environment of each individual school that has the greatest impact (Day, Stobart, Sammons & Kington, 2006: Hattie, 2009). This is one factor explains why some schools can get good results on national tests despite the fact that parents' socio-economic status would suggest otherwise. When these schools continue over time to get high results on national tests, the explanation could be that they have created an environment that is conducive to good learning for a diverse pupil population, or that they are 'teaching to the test'.

Since the goal of national testing is to improve the quality of schools, it is important to gain more insight into attitudes towards tests as well as the work that goes into preparing for them in the schools. It is particularly interesting to understand what characterizes particular practices in the schools that repeatedly get good results. The study referred to in this article is part of a larger study, funded by the Norwegian Research Council, of schools that have received good national test results (Langfeldt, 2015; Lyngsnes & Vestheim, 2015). This article addresses the question: 'How do teachers and school leaders explain continuous high results on national tests at their school?' As the research question reflects, the purpose of the study was to shed light on the perspectives of teachers and school leaders as to why their schools continually achieve good results on national tests. The findings will have impact as a reflection tool (Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001) for those who are concerned with and involved in training and for others who wish to improve their own teaching practice and develop learning outcomes for their pupils.
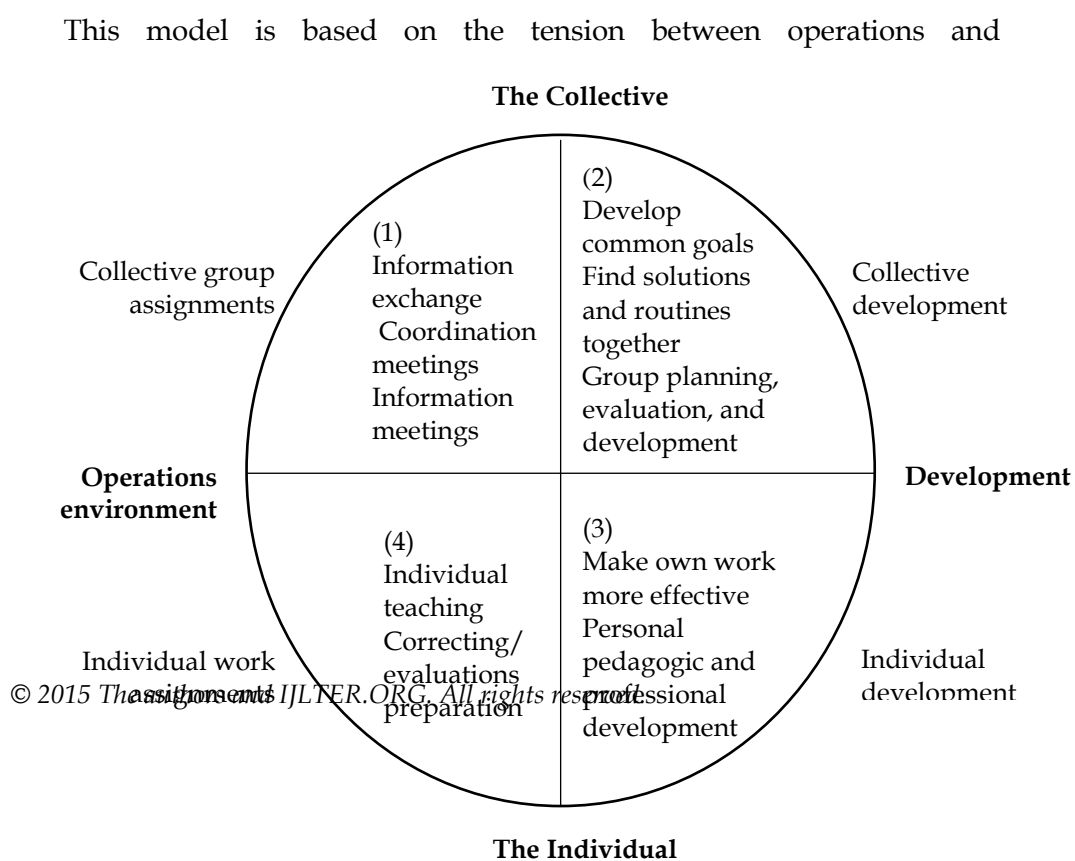
Theoretical background

Our objective in this article is to explore how teachers and school leaders explain their schools' good results, and their perspectives and reflections are therefore central. This study is located within a constructivist paradigm (Postholm, 2010) in which individuals are active and responsible participants, knowledge is in a constant state of improvement and change, and understanding and opinions are created through interactions with each other. Words and phrases are interpreted differently depending on the contexts people find themselves in and the environment in which they live also has an impact on perceptions and understandings. It can therefore be said that people living in similar environments and in the same context will more or less interpret things in a similar way (Postholm, 2010).

Teaching traditionally has been seen as the responsibility of each individual teacher, and something he or she does alone. Today we have a widespread understanding that collaboration between teachers and teamwork leads toward development and change in a school. When

teachers work together, exchange experiences, for example about pupils' work plans or teaching materials, the knowledge and skills of the entire teaching team improves. These colleague-based interactions are part of professional development. When teachers work together to improve the daily learning environment, this collective learning process also stimulates further reflection and the development of skills, which in turn helps influence and improve teaching in the classroom (Jenssen & Roald, 2012). In accordance with this, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) describe how high performing schools are those in which a professional group as a collective is growing. They claim that in school development the professional capital of the teachers needs to be developed. The essence of professional capital is, according to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p. 76): "[…] capability and commitment that are constantly developed, applied, and refined with colleagues within the school and beyond it". Irgens (2010) also argues that quality in a school is not just a result of what each individual teacher does on their own, but also what teachers do as a group of teachers together. He says that this collective dimension is of great importance for a number of factors, including pupils' learning outcomes. A survey conducted by Dahl, Klewen, and Skov (2003, in Irgens 2010, p. 134) supports this argument, concluding that schools that work collectively support the individual in such a way that it has a positive impact on the pupils. According to Irgens (2010) a fundamental question is how schools can achieve a balance between individual and collective performance, daily operations in the school, and development. He has developed a model called 'the Development Wheel' for a school in movement that can be used to facilitate an analytical and practical look at a school's challenges and position in areas of tension.

Figure 1. Development Wheel (Irgens, 2010, p 136)

This model is based on the tension between operations and

The Collective

Collective group assignments

(1) Information exchange Coordination meetings Information meetings

(2) Develop common goals Find solutions and routines together Group planning, evaluation, and development

Collective development

Operations environment

Development

(4) Individual teaching Correcting/ evaluations preparation

(3) Make own work more effective Personal pedagogic and professional development

Individual work assignments

Individual development

The Individual

development, that is, between the daily work that is carried out in a school and the more long-term growth and development of the school's organisation and practice. The other main dimension in the model is between individual and collective work. This type of model is, according to Irgens (2010, p. 136), a gross simplification. However, it illustrates that a school should be in all the sectors of the model, something that will challenge both the teacher's personal identity and the role of the school leaders. If the tasks in section one are prioritized, that will mean that the responsibility to create good teaching as well as a good teaching environment is in the hands of the individual. In section two teachers have the opportunity to work on their own development. However, as this is focused on the individual, it isn't conducive to creating a good learning environment that is focused on work as a team that establishes procedures and rules. Irgens (2010) argues that to create a good school, one needs good teachers who have competence in all four sections and school leaders who are able to facilitate and monitor teachers' work outside their individual classrooms.

Robinson's work (2011) supports this concept. She writes that teachers in professional teaching partnerships not only feel commitment to and responsibility for their own teaching and pupils, but also for the training of all the pupils in the entire school. The leadership plays a key role in facilitating this process. Robinson points out that leadership has many dimensions that overlap each other, affecting pupils' learning. She concludes that the more leaders focus their work on developing teaching and learning, the greater impact they will have on pupils' learning outcomes.

In summary, Robinson's research and Irgens' model show the importance of both school leaders who focus on teaching and learning, and a school that balances individual and collective development. Irgens' (2010) model captures these dimensions, and we will therefore use it to discuss our results.

Method

Based on the research question, we made a strategic choice to focus on schools with a few special characteristics (Patton, 1990), namely those who had high scores on national tests but were not in areas with a high socio-economic profile. Four primary schools in three different provinces that fit the criteria were selected. Schools will be referred to here as school A, B, C, and D. All the schools were of medium size in a Norwegian context with 200-300 pupils.

Data consists of group interviews with teacher teams in lower primary, upper primary, and lower secondary schools respectively, nineteen teachers altogether. Interviews were also conducted with the four headmasters. To capture their points of view and their reflections, we

chose to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide was partially structured with most interview topics determined in advance, but room was allowed for changes and additions. The interview guide focused primarily on thoughts about teaching and learning, teamwork between teachers, school development, leadership, and adaptive teaching. School administrators and teachers were interviewed on the same themes.

Data was transcribed and analysed with the use of the constant comparative analysis method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This involved first open coding, reviewing all the material from each school and extracting all statements that dealt with reflections on or reasons for the schools' good results; these were then sorted into teacher and leader statements. In the axial coding stage, these statements were processed and compared to each other, and a pattern emerged. This formed the basis for selective coding which identified the main themes in the data; *collective understanding*, *the importance of school leadership*, *stability and long-term goals*, and *focus on reading*.

Qualitative studies are interpretative research that is unique and contextual (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Schoefield (2007) points out the significance of studying cases that are considered to be good or ideal, as in high achieving schools. Findings from such studies will have an impact well beyond their own context, as analysis and interpretation of these schools can have an impact on others who are concerned with and involved in training. The text represents, therefore, experiences that can be used as a reflection tool (Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001) for others who wish to contribute to and improve their own teaching practice.

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured by triangulation in different forms (Silverman, 2000). All interviews were conducted by two researchers, and school administrators and teachers were interviewed on the same topic. Thus, the topics were illuminated from different perspectives. Furthermore, the data was analysed and categorised by each of the researchers individually, before being discussed and given its eventual name.

Results
Collective understanding

Analysis of the data concluded that cooperation and the sharing of experiences, as well as reflection in a professional community, were prominent explanations for good test results. The headmaster in school A commented that the teachers working closely together in teams was important. They also have dedicated time each week for development work, and often have this as part of their plenary at school. Reflections from teachers at this school say the same thing. One teacher reflecting on good results says:

It has something to do with working as a team. In one subject we have at least two-three people who are responsible for teaching reading and writing, and therefore the pupils are exposed to many different perspectives […] We are not alone, we are many, and so we have the opportunity to also observe each other. We divide responsibilities and discuss them. We don't keep what we think and do to ourselves; we share these things with each other.

These teachers feel that talking about their subjects on a regular basis, discussing and dividing teaching assignments, as well as often observing each other's teaching, are significant, help them feel safer with each other, and develop a spirit of cooperation. One teacher comments: "It isn't looked down upon here to ask for advice. You share all the time. This is a 'we-school'. This is our school and these are our pupils." This underlines the comments of another teacher, who also emphasised the importance of reflection: "It is about reflection all the way. This is a culture in which we ask each other, borrow from each other and share". This collective way of thinking is also reflected in the comments from the headmaster of school B. He thinks it is important that they all work together towards a common understanding. In his opinion, the fact that they have been good at sharing experiences, expertise, and questioning why things are done a certain way is also significant. In reflecting on factors that could impair or hinder improvement in their school, both the headmaster and the teachers tell that the biggest limitation was not having enough group time for joint cooperation and collaboration. Because of this, they increased the number of hours allocated for meetings and teamwork each week. The headmaster emphasises that they want to be known as a good school, and so in his opinion it is important to focus on the school as a whole and not on each individual teacher, "because we can never all be good at the same things, but together we can be good at everything". Teachers at this school also feel that teamwork and a good division of teaching responsibilities is the key, and that one reaps great benefits when colleagues have advanced to the point that they have a common perspective and similar approaches to teaching. "You don't have your private lesson plans, you don't work in a vacuum and I think that is good for our pupils," one teacher remarks.

"If we are going to be a dynamic and learning-rich organization we must constantly evaluate what we are doing", says the headmaster from school C. As part of meeting this objective, this school has weekly reflection groups where dialogue between teachers is given priority. He feels listening to each other and reflecting together about classroom practice is central. The teachers talk about the importance of being challenged to analyse and reflect upon their own practice and set new goals. In addition, they feel that having two teachers connected to each class, and working as a team could be one of the reasons their school has had high national test scores for many years. Even though they

each have their own individual ways of working, these teachers acknowledge that their underlying foundation is the same.

This same ideology is echoed in the reflections of the headmaster at school D. He says, "We work as a team, planning and reflecting together". He believes that when you share experiences and reflect on the experiences together you gain new understandings and insights, and that is characteristic of his school as an organization. Teachers at this school also comment that the entire staff is trained and involved in the development process, and in that way form a common way of thinking for the future. In addition, they train each other, recognizing there is a great deal of experience to share within the staff itself. They do not always need to find it elsewhere, they say, because they can share their own competence and skills within their own work environment. They point out that they are also encouraged to reflect on things they have done, and they need to justify their own practices and decisions. "It is always about reflection", one teacher comments.

The importance of school leadership
The importance of school leadership in determining how a school functions is mentioned by teachers from each school. The headmaster from school A says that she prioritizes time for what she calls 'pedagogical leadership'. She believes that one of her primary responsibilities as the school leader is to build the culture, something confirmed by the teachers who say the headmaster is of great importance for getting good results. They emphasise that the headmaster both 'nudges us towards the academic' and that she has been effective at building a high-quality working environment.

Schools B and C also link good results to good leadership. Teachers at school B highlight that the connection between teachers and headmaster is important. They work together towards common goals that enrich and empower both parties. Teachers in school C also say that they have good and straight-forward leadership that has clear expectations and demands for them. The importance of school leadership as a builder of internal culture is supported in the following statement: "I have to brag about the leadership – there has been a focus that here we will have a common culture where we work together throughout the entire school and that has been incorporated for a long, long time."

In school D the teachers recognise the importance of school leadership and a long-range development plan. They point out that the headmaster has made it a priority that the entire school staff will have development opportunities, and that things must then be implemented. "If you will go in a forward direction, it is important that everyone knows what is happening and is a part of it." Teachers at this school also say that it is important that they have a headmaster who follows up and asks questions. One teacher said: "It is she, our leader, who is

always insisting that when we have learned something new we need to use it in our teaching, and to share it, so the learning is not wasted. Then all can benefit."

Stability and long-term goals
There is also a common thread among the responses from the schools that everything they do is for the long-term, and they are more concerned with creating a stable school environment than following the latest trends. "You just have to do some things because that is what you are required to do, but other things you can skip. We do things because we think they are important, because we have discussed them," says the headmaster at school A.

The headmaster at school B says much the same, emphasizing that teachers at his school are willing to try new things, even though they aren't always the first to jump on new ideas. He emphasises that they think through what they do, keeping what works and reflecting over what to take with them into the future and what they will set aside. This way of thinking is confirmed by the teachers:
We don't hop on some of these trends before we are certain they will improve the system we already have. So we are not concerned with being the first ones out with something new, but we are not outdated because of that. We get good results because of the work we do and have done over many years.

The significance of long-term work is emphasised again in an interview with the leadership at school C where they work towards long-term goals, thinking about the bigger picture and what brings the best learning outcomes. Teachers at this school also feel they are good at finding outside ideas without feeling like they have to try everything. Stability and having clear priorities are significant, but it is also essential to have a stable group of teachers. The headmaster at school D also emphasises that systematic work over time is essential to get good results and says: "I think stability and development over time are important."

Focus on reading
The last common theme we have identified is that the school leaders and teachers in all the schools believe that focus on reading is an important reason for their good results. School A teachers report that they have worked hard with reading, and that they have a plan for teaching reading, but that they don't have a common method. The headmaster at school B reports that they have prioritized reading development as an area of focus for many years. They had previously had a narrow view on reading, focusing primarily on beginning readers. Now they have a plan for reading development for pupils in grades 1-10, believing that reading in all subjects is the responsibility of all the teachers. The headmaster comments, "One could say, therefore, that the national tests have given us a better focus on what the basic

skills are." Teachers at school B also say that there has been a significant focus on reading, reading skills, and reading comprehension, and that everyone is required to be up-to-date on all the latest reading research. They involve parents and have a very systematic plan for following up on reading homework. They use time for reading in parent meetings, explaining to the parents why reading is important.

School C has primarily focused on beginning readers, and has developed what they feel is a good reading concept for grades 1-4. The importance of reading skills is emphasised in school D, and all the teachers have had training in teaching reading. This school has also been involved in a national initiative for using the school library as a resource. The headmaster explains this great reading initiative was a response to previously not being good enough to read in all subjects and points out that as a result they have prioritized training and development for the entire teaching staff. However, he stresses that they are not guided by getting good results on national tests, but instead that pupils will learn.

Discussion

The four schools presented here share common practices that might explain their good results on national tests. The first is about classroom teaching. A two-teacher system, observation, and the sharing of knowledge and experience is a natural part of daily approach to teaching. If we compare our results with Irgens' model, we see that the practice he has placed in sector one, individual work assignments, also has a collective dimension at these schools. No one mentioned that individual job performance or a competent "private practice" teacher was a reason for their good results.

We also found the collective dimension along with the development dimension in sector two. Teachers at these schools were involved with both pedagogical and professional development through their teams and cooperative relationships. Teachers commented that they worked tightly together in teams, had group planning and evaluating sessions about their teaching, were present in each other's classrooms, and shared teaching responsibilities. This ongoing, daily sharing of ideas and knowledge, as well as transparency and open and honest discussions about each other's practice, were apparent in their comments. Additional training in the form of continuing education in many of the schools was prioritized for the entire teaching team and not just for individual teachers. A typical model for continuing education in the schools fits into sector 2 of Irgens' model. In the schools in this study, there is also room for individual development, but for the most part in a collective framework. Professional development in both subject matter and pedagogical approaches is primarily found in sector four, as in schools where all teachers receive continuing education in

reading. This then creates a group framework and way of thinking that creates a school focused on what is best for pupils' learning.

Teachers and school leaders comment on the sharing of knowledge, reflection, and a joint long-term educational plan that can be placed in sector four of Irgens' model. Allowing room for collective development is important for these schools. They emphasised the growth opportunities within the school, feeling that they affected all aspects of their own teaching practice. These schools demonstrate many aspects of what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) describe as professional capital in which the teachers' collective capacity and commitment are applied and refined, leading towards continual growth.

It appears that these schools, in the way that they have presented themselves, have developed a "we-culture" in which they are participants in a professional learning community that considers not only their commitment to and responsibilities for their own classrooms, but for all the students in the school. It is apparent that these schools fulfil many of the requirements for a collective oriented school, characterized by extensive teacher cooperation, shared values and visions, collective responsibility for student learning, reflection, individual and group learning, and shared leadership (Robinson, 2011).

School leaders at these schools are pedagogical leaders. According to Robinson (2011) pedagogical leaders, leaders who focus on teaching and learning will, in turn, have a direct impact on pupils' learning outcomes. This has also been emphasised by the teachers in this study that school leadership is important for the good results the pupils at their schools have. They stress that it is the leadership that creates a safe climate, where everyone feels that they are free to share experiences and reflections.

Conclusion

Based on the perspectives and reflections from teachers and school leaders in this study, we can conclude that these schools achieve good results on national tests over time because they have developed a collective reflective practice that promotes pupils learning. They do not achieve these results because they 'teach to the test'.

The findings from this study are based on results from interviews with four headmasters and nineteen teachers at four schools. The findings are thus related to a few people in a Norwegian school context. Our results can still have significance in that they can provide insight and provide a tool for reflection and development of one's own practice. The results of this study correlate well with other research in schools with good results. This includes the school administrator's importance for teachers 'professional development, and hence students' learning in

school (Hallinger, 2005, Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, Irgens, 2010, Robinson, 2011).

Our small-scale study raises new questions for further research. It would be interesting to do observational studies, where we could go into detail about how teachers work with pupils in in the classrooms, and how they reflect and share knowledge within the team.

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