School Improvement and Professional Relations in Transition? – The Case of the First Teacher Reform in Sweden

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General description (600)
Global processes are reshaping the educational systems of the Western world. Higher standards, benchmarkings and ranking lists bear witness of increasing competition (Resnik 2008). The relationship between teacher quality and student achievement is a common argument in international reports (see Barber & Mourshed 2007; Natale et al. 2013). Another aspect is that expert organisations exert a growing influence and play an important part in legitimating transnational curriculum governance and policy-making aimed at raising standards and increasing school achievements through measurement and external accountability (Ingersoll 2011; Nordin & Sundberg 2014).

Transnational trends effect national educational policy. Ideas and values on the society/ideological level influence and shape the curriculum level and in the end trickle down to district and school levels with the classroom context and the teaching (Wahlström 2009; Sundberg & Wahlström 2012). In this case Sweden is no exception (Adolfsson 2013; Englund 2012). A very recent example that I will present in this paper is an extensive reform on career services for teachers, the so-called first-teacher reform, launched by the government in 2013 (Skolverket 2013). It is unprecedented in the history of educational politics in Sweden and was part of a larger ”package” of restructuring the national curricula and school system. What makes this reform particularly interesting is that it has introduced and formalised a new category of teachers involved with school improvement without any thorough consideration or analysis of implications for the management of schools, development processes and professional relations. Furthermore, the municipalities have been given relatively free hands to design the roles of the teachers.

My paper explores and analyses the implementation and impact of the first-teacher reform in a local and municipal context with focus on school improvement and the relationships between actors on different levels in the school organisation. Since the reform is new – and in fact still in the process of being rolled out – my work is largely exploratory where I seek to answer two main questions:
• In what ways does the implementation of the reform influence and shape the structure and organisation of school improvement? On what levels do the first-teachers operate and what does this mean for the professional relationships within the organisation?
• What is the impact on the direction and content of school improvement through the introduction of first-teachers? Which issues, areas, qualities and content-related aspects are at the heart of their work?

The theoretical framework that will be used for the analysis consists of Lauren B. Resnicks (2010) concept of ”nested learning systems” and Lee Shulman & Judith Shulmans (2004) frame for conceptualising teacher learning and development with four different kinds of
"capital” as resources for school reform and improvement: moral capital, curricular capital, technical/instructional capital and venture capital. Shulman & Shulman’s (2004) framework highlights the content-related and qualitative aspects of school improvement, providing a perspective on directional strategies, principles and values but foremost allows a discussion of what forms of capital first-teachers primarily are concerned with. Resnick's (2010) model of the three intermediating layers in the school organisation – district, school and teaching level – where reforms are transferred, translated and negotiated – is helpful for charting the structure and organisation of school improvement as well as relationships and communication between different actors. On each level there are nested sub-systems – e.g. teams of teachers, the classroom, the school management team – and due to various contexts, interests and relations, these systems use different strategies and make meaning out of policy in their particular way (Resnick 2010).

**Methods and material (400)**

The study is based on material from four municipalities of different sizes (a span between 26,500 and 86,000 inhabitants). Three different methods have been used for collecting empirical data for the study: inventory and document analysis; questionnaires; and semi-structured interviews. By using a combination of methods the aim is to collect a wide range of qualitative material for the analysis of how the introduction of first-teachers effect the structure, organisation and content of school improvement in local school organisations.

As a first step documents regarding the local school organisation, policy and vision, leading and management structure, the recruitment process for first-teachers, the assignments, instructions, reports, evaluations, school improvement strategies, future plans were gathered through an inventory. The intentions, strategies and content in the documents were analysed. The purpose was to create a map of the organisation and how the first-teachers were placed within this framework.

The second step was semi-structured focus group interviews with representatives from the local school authority (8 interviews), principals (12 interviews) and first-teachers (14 interviews). The aim was a more deepened and qualitative description of the areas asked for in the inventory but foremost questions from a content-related perspective. Representatives from the local school authority and principals have answered questions about what their expectations on the first-teachers are concerning collegial work and improvement of teaching, what they think are the primary role for these teachers, the conception of structural and organisational changes and the organisation for the first-teachers, how they experience the relationship between the principal and the first-teachers and what challenges they see for first-teachers and the organisation. In interviews with first-teachers similar questions have been asked and the focus has been on how they look at the conditions for their assignment, their role in the organisation, how they have been received in the organisation, the main challenges they encounter, in what ways their position and work have an impact on their colleagues, the relationships to principals, colleagues and pupils.

Along with the interviews questionnaires with the possibility to give extensive and qualitative answers were distributed to first-teachers (n=72) and principals (n=18). The questionnaires contained questions that were similar to those asked in the interviews. The answers were summed up in general patterns and used together with the interview material.

**Expected outcomes/Results (300)**

The first-teacher reform is about facilitation and it is possible to identify main changes in the
structure and organisation of school improvement on all levels: new sub-systems, leading and management structures, relationships, functions are formed and new arenas emerge. It is complex: some first-teachers exclusively are assigned on district level while others at school or teacher/teaching level. First-teachers may take on a leading educational position in the school management, serving as important support, expertise and as a ”tool” for the principal. On teaching level they can be responsible for a teacher-team. The sub-systems of first-teachers sometimes stretch out over units/schools in the shape of networks where experiences and ideas are exchanged. An overall aspect is that first-teachers create a more sustainable, persistent and joint structure from district to classroom level, especially concerning curriculum implementation. They become links between the separate sub-systems.

The major issues for first-teachers closely relate to collegial learning, creative spaces, a readiness to change, research-based education, best practice, a new awareness and mindset. Through the first-teachers the direction and content of school improvement generally has shifted from a ”top-down” perspective towards how the teachers themselves can bring about change through methods like peer observation, learning study, co-teaching and coaching. The first-teachers really make an effort to support their colleagues e.g. by documenting, providing material for teaching and assessment, leading and planning meetings and conducting model lessons. Focus is directed towards how pupils learn, professional development, teaching and classroom practices. In terms of ”capital”, preliminary results suggest that the introduction of first-teachers mainly have an impact on ”instructional capital” and ”curricular capital” in school improvement because the classroom level is highlighted. However, it is too early to draw any definite conclusions since the reform is so new.

References (400)


Shulman, L.S. & Shulman, J.H.

Skolverket (2013), Vem är försteläraren?
