

Evaluations to support collegial learning and leading-from-the-middle

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In the sixteen public upper secondary and adult education schools in Malmö, Sweden, all teachers are engaged in *collegial learning*, which is a structured, focused and long-term process in which teachers together develop knowledge and skills in teaching. The collegial learning and how it is led, have been evaluated in two investigations (one survey and one interview study) and the results show that there is a need to focus on structure, communication and evaluation, so that the collegial learning is connected both to the goals in schools, and to the work with systematic quality enhancement. In this paper the results of the investigations are discussed and two different models – the feedback dialogue model and the school development triangle model – are designed, as a result of the investigations, to support the leadership of the school development processes at the sixteen schools.

Introduction

In Malmö, Sweden, all teachers in all sixteen public upper secondary and adult education schools work with *collegial learning*, which is a which is a systematic, focused and long-term collaboration between teachers in order to accomplish new knowledge and skills in their teaching. In collegial learning, cooperation is seen as essential for the school development. Harris (2014), claimed that “collaborative working can be a powerful strategy if long-term improvement is the core aim” (p. 10). Also Hattie (2008), Timperley (2011), Cordingley (2005), and the Swedish National Agency of Education (2016) have stressed the importance of teachers working together. However, the cooperation need to be structured and well organized, and hence the leaders of collegial learning play important roles. Harris (2014) stated that “*leadership* is a key driver in securing and sustaining improved outcomes” (p. 10).

So, research shows that working together with a clear leadership are important issues in school development processes, but how can schools be sure that the collegial learning processes are structured in ways that actually helps improving schools? In this paper, in order to support the leaders of the sixteen schools in Malmö, we look at how two investigations (one survey and one interview study) were carried through to support the collegial learning processes. Two models that were developed during the work with the investigations, are presented, models that can be applied to the school development work both within the different schools but also within the network. The first model is a model for feedback dialogue designed to use the results from the written reports of the investigations, to support the cooperation between those leading the school development processes within schools and in the network. The second model is a visual model developed to illustrate to how different parts of the organization need to cooperate in order to create sustainable school development. In this model, the collegial learning is closely connected to goals and systematic quality enhancement work, which the investigations showed was one of the most important issues for all sixteen schools to work with in their next step of the school development process. The model is also used to illustrate ideas on how to organize the network of schools.

Background in Malmö

Malmö is, with about 330.000 citizens, the third largest city of Sweden. In the public upper secondary schools, there are 6300 students (year 10-12), of which 49% have a foreign background (Siris Database, 2017a), compared to 32% in the country (Siris Database, 2017b). There are thirteen public upper secondary schools and three adult education schools, that differ from each other concerning size, programs, students and attitudes to school development. Some of the schools have problems with low levels of educational achievement and all of them strive to improve. The politicians in Malmö have decided that extra focus need to be paid on the areas of mathematics development, language development, ICT development and formative assessment. Therefore, the principals at the sixteen schools have decided together, that all teachers (n=824) are to be involved in *collegial learning* connected to the political decided areas. The school leaders cooperate, but are at the same time rather independent pedagogical leaders of their schools, and each school decides how to implement the collegial learning in a way that fits the school. Therefore the structure and content of the collegial learning differ depending on the needs of the schools.

In 2013, a government initiative made it possible to assign some teachers to be so-called *lead teachers*, who often get tasks connected to school development work and leading processes of collegial learning (National Agency of Education, 2015). In Malmö, 67 teachers (that is 8%) of the teachers in public upper secondary and adult education schools work as lead teachers. They connect to each other in a *professional learning network* (PLN) for the sixteen schools. The network is led by four *senior lecturers*, who are teachers with background in research. Both lead teachers and senior lecturers have time to work with school improvement (20% for lead teachers and 50% for senior lecturers), and this time is mainly devoted to the politically decided focus areas.

Within the PLN, there is a cooperation between persons working with school development processes - lead teachers, senior lecturers, school leaders and area managers from the school administration. The organization can be seen as an organisation in which the development processes are led from the middle by persons connected to the network. This kind of *leading-from-the-middle* is a relatively new concept where leadership is not top-down or bottom-up, but rather a cooperation for development amongst middle leaders or networks of education professionals (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Campbell, 2016).

Within the PLN there have earlier not been any large evaluations of the lead teachers' work with collegial learning or how it is led. The survey and interview study were conducted both from the perspective of the different schools, but also from a PLN perspective.

Surveys and interviews about the collegial learning processes

Amongst others Lai and Schildkamp (2013) point out that schools need different types of data to support school development. For example King (2013) has stressed that professional development, like the collegial learning in Malmö, are complex processes. To study, understand and support such processes, a mixed method approach is often needed (King, 2013). In order to get an overview of how different groups experienced the PLN and what difference the collegial learning made, as well as the lead teachers' and school leaders' views on the processes, a survey (Grundskoleförvaltningen & Gymnasie- och vuxenutbildningsförvaltningen, 2017) and an interview study (Sjöblom & Peterson, 2017) were performed.

The survey focused on the role of the lead teachers and what difference they make in the collegial learning and school development processes. It was distributed to all teachers, lead teachers and school leaders at the sixteen schools. The survey included both quantitative questions on different aspects of the school development processes and open-ended text questions about how collegial learning was carried out and what aspects afforded and/or hindered the processes. The response rate was low for some schools. Overall approximately half of the teachers (404/824) and most lead teachers (62/76) and school leaders (40/53) responded.

In addition to the survey, an interview study was conducted with all school leaders and lead teachers. The interviews (n=33) were made schoolwise in form of semi-structured focus groups interviews (Bryman, 2008) with lead teacher-groups and school leader-groups. Questions were asked about how the collegial learning was structured, what content it had, how schools viewed their school development processes long-term, what roles lead teachers and school leaders had in the processes, and how the collegial learning was evaluated. The goal was to identify what factors contributed positively and negatively to the collegial learning and what the next step in the processes might be.

Analysis concerning collegial learning and the PLN

When looking at the results of the survey and the interview study, (that were conducted separately), the quantitative and qualitative results complemented each other and pointed towards similar conclusions. It therefore seemed to be valuable to make a joint analysis in order to find areas within the school development processes that needed improvement. In this section, we first highlight some of the results of the investigations concerning collegial learning. Thereafter, we focus on conclusions concerning suggestions for actions about collegial learning, but also what was important to think about in the PLN and for the school leaders and lead teachers when leading from the middle.

Results about the collegial learning

The evaluations showed that the collegial learning is up and running in some form or another at all sixteen schools. The results showed that the school development work, lead by the lead teachers and often carried out as a collegial learning, had a great impact in most schools. School leaders and lead teachers from all units responded that it made a significant difference for teaching, teacher development and the joint development at their school. A majority of the teachers (89%, n=360) also reported that they were involved and/or affected by the developmental work carried out by lead teachers and that this, to some extent, contributed to their school and education. Out of this group 68% (n=245) stated that the contribution was high or very high.

The ways schools organize and structure teachers' professional development differ. Some schools have meetings one hour each week, while others have fewer organized meetings, and instead rely on teachers to organize their own groups in between some common meetings connected to literature studies. The evaluations also showed that there were a lot of different ways of looking at collegial learning, and although there is a definition used within the department of upper secondary and adult education (hereafter called department of education), it is not always clearly communicated to all teachers. For instance, in one school, where all teachers are involved in language development for two hours every second week, only 42 % of the teachers claimed that they were involved in collegial learning. The differences in views on collegial learning between school leaders and lead teachers on the one

hand, and teachers on the other, suggested that the communication between different groups in schools was not clear enough.

Consequences for the collegial learning

In line with literature on collegial learning and school improvement (Timperley, 2011; Fullan, 2010; Harris, 2014), the meta-analysis revealed some important aspects to work with at many of the sixteen schools and within the PLN (for further details, see Sjöblom, Bringéus & Ideland, 2017):

- a clear structure and focus in the collegial learning
- organized time in teachers' schedules for collegial learning-meetings
- clear communication about the purpose of the collegial learning, as well as the role and mandate of the lead teachers when leading the processes
- more support on how to evaluate the results of the collegial learning, both concerning student's learning and teachers' learning.

The schools differed in which of these points (and other points as well) they needed to focus on. However, since it was possible to identify positive and negative factors contributing and hindering the collegial learning within the PLN, the individual schools could use the findings of the PLN to compare and be inspired by in their individual planning of their collegial learning.

Consequences for the PLN and leading-from-the-middle

The most important result from the investigations was about how different parts of the long-term school development work were connected to each other. The collegial learning, could not be seen as a separate method for teacher professional development. In line with Timperley (2011) and Harris (2014), it needed to be connected to, and take its point of departure in the long term goal of improving schools for the sake of the student as well as the work with systematic quality enhancement at schools. The meta analysis, showed that this overall view and connection between goals, collegial learning and systematic quality enhancement needed to be developed further.

Also, clearer communication was needed concerning for instance the lead teachers' assignments and important concepts (such as collegial learning or formative assessment), in order for schools to create a common language on school development. The communication and cooperation between different groups within the organization needed improvement at all levels - from the department of education, via the senior lecturers, school leaders and lead teachers to all teachers at the sixteen schools.

Designing models to support sustainable school development

When working with analysing the results of the survey and interview study, two models that can be applied to the school development work both within the different schools but also within the PLN, were developed. The first model was a practical model on how feedback can be given to those leading-from-the-middle in order to support the ongoing school development processes. The second model was a visual model developed to illustrate to how different parts of the organization need to cooperate in order to create sustainable school development.

Model 1: Feedback dialogues

After doing the meta-analysis of the survey and interview study, a model for how to present the results of the investigations was designed. First, all school leaders and lead teachers were invited to a common meeting where the aggregated results for all sixteen schools was presented and discussed. Thereafter, the senior lecturers invited schools to so-called *local feedback dialogues* to discuss the school-specific results. Each meeting, led by two of the senior lecturers, lasted 90 minutes.

Several researchers (e.g. Hultberg, 2005) have pointed out that involving informants to discuss findings can strengthen the analysis and ecological validity of results, i.e. making them “applicable to people’s everyday, natural social settings” (Bryman, 2008, p. 33), when performing qualitative studies. Rather than viewing them as facts, the senior lecturers therefore used findings from the meta-analysis as indicators and a point of departure in a coming dialogue with the schools. They formulated questions that were equally important in the following process and discussions as the meta-analysis per se. To avoid ethical tensions and dilemmas, the results, analyses and questions were summarised and put together in a presentation for each school in a way that avoided that the material was too sensitive and/or put individuals in a troublesome situation. A brief summary of the presentation was sent to the schools before the meetings to give the participants a chance to prepare for the discussions.

Each school were then invited to take part in the local feedback dialogue with the concerned school leaders, lead teachers, senior lecturers and area managers. One aim of these meetings was to start a discussion between actors at different levels in the PLN about the most important development areas identified at the school in the survey and the interview study. Another goal was that the local feedback dialogue would be the starting point of discussions that needed to continue at the school. In line with research arguing that dialogue is an advantageous form of feedback (e.g. Ajjawi & Boud, 2017), the meetings were therefore designed to be interactive, so that the school leaders and lead teachers would get as much time to talk as the senior lecturers leading the meeting.

Evaluating feedback dialogues

After the feedback dialogue-meetings, a short survey was sent to school leaders and lead teachers. In the evaluation, questions were asked concerning how productive the local feedback dialogues were, what was positive and negative about the form of the meetings, and what way school leaders and lead teachers preferred the follow-up of the feedback dialogues.

Almost 70 % of the school leaders and lead teachers that answered the survey (n=44), thought that the meetings were beneficial or very beneficial. They found it positive to get feedback in form of discussions where leaders at different levels participated. It was also positive that the discussions were structured and addressed important questions deeply. One participant wrote “We were able to capture the actual visibility of the lead teachers’ work. This will be a good starting-point of discussions”.

Negative experiences concerned that the sometimes low response rate in the first survey made it difficult to draw conclusions about the school development work, that it was too long time between the survey and the feedback dialogue, and that there sometimes was too many questions to discuss in a short time. From those schools who did not take part of the feedback dialogue, the lead teachers often reflected that they wanted a feedback seminar. (It was a decision made by the school leaders if they wanted a seminar or not and only 11 of 16 schools signed up.)

As a summary, the feedback dialogues had several benefits:

- It helped school leaders and lead teachers to understand the results in connection to their local collegial learning processes, and how their own processes related to those in the PLN.
- It facilitated a discussion between lead teachers, school leaders, senior lecturers and area managers– a discussion that could help the leading-from-the-middle processes forward.
- It strengthened the aggregated analysis based on the two investigations and contributed to a deepened understanding of the PLN.

Most, but not all, of the results from the meta-analyses put forward by the senior lecturers were confirmed by school representatives during the local feedback dialogues. School leaders and lead teachers often contributed to a better understanding of important questions for the PLN by their reflections on factors that afforded or constrained the collegial learning in and between schools.

Model 2: School development triangles

One of the clearest results of the interview study and feedback dialogues, was that although the collegial learning was up and running at all sixteen schools, almost no school had clear plans for how they could evaluate effects of the collegial learning processes on teachers' and students' learning. Schools needed support with connecting the collegial learning to the work with systematic quality enhancement and goals in schools. The systematic quality enhancement should be used to identify *what* need to be improved, the collegial learning should be about *how* it can be done, and the goals are *why* it is done. Therefore, a model on how to connect *what*, *how* and *why* within the school development work, was designed in form of a triangle, see Figure 1. The triangle was used during all feedback dialogues and questions were asked regarding how schools connected the corners of the triangle.

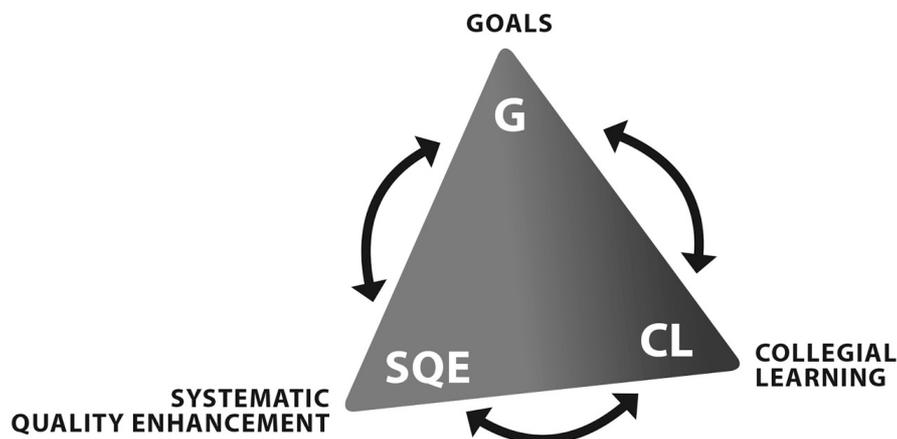


Figure 1. School development triangle

The triangle can be used for different professions within schools. For instance, teachers are responsible for analyzing/evaluating the needs of the students, developing new methods in their teaching and help students reach their learning goals. Lead teachers and school leaders are responsible for analyzing/evaluating needs of students and teachers, plan and implement the collegial learning and reach the goals of the collegial learning (which also are connected to students' learning goals). At the department of education level, the triangle is about using results from the central unit for systematic quality enhancement, so that the senior lecturers

can create and support collegial learning for school leaders and lead teachers within the PLN, and connecting this to the political goals for the schools. In line with Timperley (2011) and Harris (2014), all professions within PLN need to have students' learning opportunities as the long-term focus and justification of their work. There are also other professions working in schools, such as librarians, special education teachers, and student health personnel that are important in the process, and that work together with the other professions depending on where their competence is most needed.

However, in order for different professions to manage to connect the corners of their triangle, there is also a need for a cooperation between different professions. During the feedback dialogues, one conclusion was that different parts of the organisation need to be communicate and cooperate better in order to create sustainable school development. This resulted in an extended model of the school development triangle, see Figure 2. In the extended model, different professions within the PLN are named, and arrows show how cooperation is needed between the triangles.

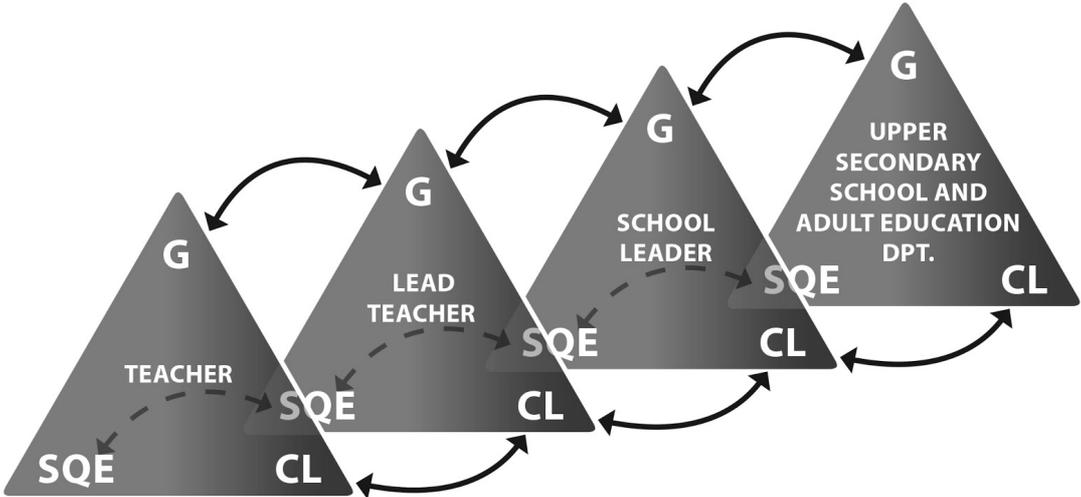


Figure 2. School development triangles

In order to clarify the extended model, here is an example connected to the language development work within the PLN. Because of the high number of students with foreign background (Siris Database, 2017a), language development is a focus area for all sixteen schools. The school leaders have agreed to work with a politically decided language policy (Department of upper secondary and adult education, 2015), which has goals for students, teachers, lead teachers and school leaders. The goals are connected to each other (and hence the arrows connecting the upper corners of the triangles are connected). In order to reach the goals, different persons in the PLN needs to develop different methods or structures in order to support teachers developing new strategies for language development in their classrooms. For instance the school leaders need to enable collegial learning by giving teachers and lead teachers time to work with language development, the lead teachers need to plan and carry through collegial learning processes with the teachers, and the teachers have to try new ways of teaching in their classrooms. In this process, senior lecturers in language development and collegial learning support the school leaders and lead teachers, and hence the lower right corners of the triangles are connected. In the same manner, when all persons within the PLN cooperate on following up on the results on classroom level, school level or department of education level, the systematic quality enhancement corners are connected.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have looked at how different types of evaluations can be presented to support the work of a PLN for sustainable school development using two models developed in Malmö.

The model of feedback dialogues builds on e.g. Fullan's (2010) argument that it is important to learn about implementation during implementation, and e.g. Lai and Schildkamp's (2013) view that schools need to use different kinds of investigations and data to keep on the right track in their improvement work. Our experience is that if results from different evaluations and surveys are presented separately and/or at an aggregated level, it is often hard, and requires much work from middle leaders within the PLN, to learn from differences between schools and get a full picture of their own unit. Earlier on, this has often been the case in the PLN of sixteen schools in Malmö, which risked to conceal the complexity of the processes. In this case, by combining findings from two different investigations, viewing each school as a mixed method-case (Bryman, 2008, King, 2013) and develop a new visual model, the analyses could better describe the complexity, progression and conditions of the collegial learning and professional development at different schools.

A clear and shared vision has been pointed out as a key factor when developing schools (Fullan, 2010; Harris, 2014) and Fullan (2010) claimed that "communication during implementation is far more important than communication prior to implementation" (p. 26). Findings from the investigations in Malmö revealed that the communication and shared view of collegial learning, as well as the role of different participants, were not clear enough. To use feedback dialogues when presenting results is, in line with Fullan's (2010) arguments above, one way to learn from the process and start to deal with this kind of problems during the process. In line with Timperley's argument that leaders at different levels need to work to support the learning and development in their "class" (Timperley, 2011), the *feedback dialogues* were designed as joint learning opportunities for key drivers in school improvement (Harris, 2014). By presenting results and analyses to lead teachers, school leaders and area managers, the senior lecturers worked to support and facilitate a dialogue and collaboration between leaders at different levels within the PLN. Because the collegial learning and PLN are evolving in many ways, it is hard to show what difference the feedback dialogues made. The model was, however, well received and is now introduced and used when reporting and discussing other evaluations in the department of education.

The second model, the school development triangles, illustrate how goals, systematic quality enhancement and collegial learning must be viewed as a unit. The model can be seen as a support structure and psychological tool facilitating the communication and reasoning about school development work, and is now used and referred to in almost all conversations the senior lecturers have with school leaders and lead teachers. The model has been central in discussions leading to that the department of education is about to start up *research learning communities* (Brown, 2017) at some schools in order to systematically connect the corners of the triangles.

However, although the school leaders and lead teachers have not protested against any of the models, both the model with feedback dialogues and the model with the school development triangles are not unproblematic. For instance, one issue to think more about is who is invited to the dialogues. If we want teachers to work and develop their teaching together in line with Hattie (2008), Timperley (2011), Cordingley (2005), and the Swedish National Agency of

Education (2016), how do we include them more in the process and utilise their experience and expertise when learning from implementation during implementation?

Also, if the triangles become an important psychological tool used to think about school development and the communication between different parts of the organization, how can we interact about it? For instance, is it problematic that the librarians and special needs teachers that work within the different triangles are not visible in the model? And even though the model has the overall goal to improve and support students' learning in line with Timperley (2011) and Harris (2014), how can we connect students' learning to all corners in the triangles and make it visible in the model? It is, in other words, important not only to build models for improving dialogue and cooperation, but also to think about how we communicate, use and develop them, so that they do not just become models in a long row of school development models. Instead, the models need to be designed to support the leaders of school development processes that are leading-from-the-middle, so that they can reflect and discuss both local and central needs. This can create possibilities for a shared ownership of the school development processes within the PLN.

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