

A POLYPHONIC REANALYSIS INSTRUMENT FOR UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL CULTURES

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Abstract

This paper focuses on describing and discussing the existence of a new research tool for the reanalysis of school cultures. The concept of school culture refers to Berg (2003) and his school development strategy of scope for action. A central issue in organizations is how to reconcile the organization's nomothetic and idiographic aspirations and structures. At school, this problem can be understood as the dialectical interplay between institutional and organizational values. In-depth knowledge of actors' behavior and attitudes in the context of interaction increases the ability of school development for the benefit of students. Polyphonic reanalysis of a school culture makes it possible to achieve an extended understanding of the underlying patterns of a school's everyday work from a micro-oriented perspective. The new instrument has been tested in a context of pupil culture in primary school.

Key words: *School culture, scope for action, institutional and organizational values, polyphonic reanalysis*

1. INTRODUCTION

The main focus of this paper is on school cultures, with particular emphasis on the efforts to develop schools as organizations. To contribute to a deeper knowledge and understanding about this subject I will describe and explain the scope for action strategy (Berg, 1995, 2003) and the supposed need for a polyphonic instrument for the reanalysis of school cultures (Sträng, 2011). The main idea behind the new research tool is to achieve an extended ability to visualize the values and motives underlying individual micro-oriented approach and actions in daily work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Scherp, 2002). Studying complex organizations, such as schools, requires different approaches to and perspectives on how to properly address and describe the research area. Distinct groups form and express their own opinions about life in school in the ongoing public debate and discuss its power and influence, social norms, achievements and rewards. Researchers often use abstract models to explain and explore a certain research area, colored by theoretical commitments. To provide a clear picture of school development, I enlighten the area from different starting points, based on school as both an organization and an institution. In this respect, I find an ecological explanatory model useful.

The concept of an ecological model is that human behavior has multiple levels of influence, ranging from biological and psychological factors, to social, environmental and cultural means. Ecological models can provide comprehensive frameworks for understanding the multiple and interacting determinants of behavior, for example members of an organization. They can also be used to develop comprehensive intervention in order to change each level of influence. Getting closer to research problems will reveal aspects of phenomena that more distant research cannot detect. Ecological approaches have a great potential to contribute to theory and research in organization studies, as well as to practice in public policy and management (Baum and Shipilov, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that the interaction between interlapping ecosystems will have a significant effect on individuals. Understanding this interplay will provide a better understanding of which factors that lead to success or failure in a process of school development. How to define the domains of micro in the school, in relation to the other systems of meso and macro, is likely an

academic question, explained in the literature on a wide variety of ways. The common denominator is micro, regarded as small, and macro as large, with meso as an intermediate level (Smith et al. 2006).

My understanding of the micro concept is based on the unit of analysis in which values and motives of school actors are explained, and from the point which the explanatory concepts are derived (Staw and Sutton, 1993). In summary this means that micro thinking can actually be both meso and macro as a function of the level of analysis to be predicted and understood (Smith et al. 2006). In this paper I merely focus on the micro system, comprising the classroom, and the immediate environment in which pupils and their teachers are operating. The school's decision-makers renew and modify the responsibilities between the actors in changing strategies of collective user involvement and choice, based on current political ideology, competition and market orientation. I consider these systems as not always interacting towards or opposed to a scope for action, but overlapping and intertwining each other in complex dynamic and contingent relationships (Hodgkinson, 1996).

In the last decades, the assumptions underlying the traditionally structured literature on organizational studies have been profoundly challenged (Martin et al. 2006). A less conventional structure is therefore particularly appropriate for culture research. In the context of school development there are visible differences between individual culture and the more collective oriented need for change. School actors in an individualist culture can be expected to act primarily according to their own interest, with combined economic and psychological needs, while actors in a collectivist school culture rather can be perceived as volunteer members of a group, which may not always coincide with their individual interests (Hofstede, et al. 2010). School development as a process can be described through its culture, as the interaction between the defined school culture and its consequences. For real development, and not only the structuring of descriptions, an increased focus on school cultural subjects is required.

Changing a school's solid cast and loosen the fixed patterns of labor relations successfully demand much work on a long-term basis. A first step can be a critical survey of the existing school cultures in relation to the school's internal governance and the degree of self-renewal capacity (Blossing, 2009). The importance of research for school improvement can be said to contribute to the deepening of the actors' overall knowledge of the school as an organization and institution, its environment, mission and conditions.

In a research review, published by the Swedish National Agency for School Development (Berg & Scherp, 2003), school development is discussed from several perspectives with different factors relevant to the process, but with common features in the emphasis on pupils' learning environment as the key to achievement in school. The researchers believe that changing of learning environments can positively contribute to children's and adolescents' learning progress. A big challenge for school development, regardless of the choice of perspectives and practices, is how to benefit from these learning processes in order to enhance sustainable development in everyday work. Prosperous schools are often characterized by the fact that educational activities in various ways are encouraged to evaluate their performance and wish to explore and identify new ways of learning (Sträng, 2011). Policy documents stress and emphasize that daily school operations must evolve towards a greater goal attainment. Educational leadership and the teachers' professional responsibility are, according to its curriculum, to take place in an active interaction between staff and pupils, and in close contact with parents and the surrounding community.

School development is intended to facilitate continuous improvement in current conditions of schoolwork, and to question the limits and rules of the organization (Olin, 2009). The struggle for dominance between representatives of the individual and the collective school culture affect the ability to succeed with the measures adopted. Another challenge is the changing nature of educational governance, within the context of self-management reforms and central control over schools. The nature of schooling is increasingly complex, with expansion of roles, responsibilities, demands and expectations on schools as institutions. New management strategies have increased the demands and speed of work among teachers and school administrators (Lindblad and Popkewitz, 2001)

2. SCHOOLS AS ORGANIZATIONS

School organizations are often described as complex institutions, with their daily work constantly influenced by the dual role of the school as an organization and as a social institution. Berg (2003) has a neo-rationalistic view on organizations, looking at schools as institutions, established within society by an interest group or “mandator” to promote its goals and interests. These interests contain a mix of ambiguous, conflicting and even contradictory rules and values. The school organization is also under pressure from the interplay between formal steering from the state and informal control mechanisms, codified and manifested in local school cultures (Vislie, 1997).

Organizations can be understood and described from many different perspectives, based on factors such as their mission, structure and composition of personnel. A common definition is the organization as a systematically set-up association of people with the aim to achieve certain goals (Abrahamsson and Andersen, 2005). An organization's propelling force is related to its basic purpose and the structures that the business is made up of. In order to highlight the current driving factors, a deeper knowledge is required of how the organization's purpose and structure has been adapted to its current activities. The link between organizational structures and how the organization works in practice is often unclear and needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis. Hodgkinson (1996) argues that the issue of values, and especially the values of the individual members, should be made a key point in the analysis of organizations. Safety issues are important for both the inner and the outer work of the organization. Within the organization, conflicts are easily generated between actors, when the organization and its members' interests do not match. Because of the difference between facts and value, observers can attribute different or divergent values to the same piece of fact. The contest between personal and common interest might lead to divergence of the individual, organizational and institutional needs.

A central theme for organizations is how to reconcile the organization's nomothetic and idiographic aspirations and structures. In schools the problem is made clear by the dialectical interaction between institutional and organizational values. Awareness of existing individual patterns of decisions and enforcement is important knowledge, due to making school organization's internal and external work more efficient. Cultural analysis of schools may help to illustrate, and in some sense to answer, pressing questions about individual schools' peer similarity and/or inequality based on each school's specific condition. Polyphonic reanalysis of school cultures has the ability to simultaneously focus on macro, meso, and micro aspects of schools as organizations and can be useful in making the motives of individual actors more visible, in relation to schools' everyday work.

Hodgkinson (1996) emphasizes the difficulty in conceptualizing a discussion of the motives and values held by members of an organization. It is all about subjective concepts, the meanings of which vary, depending on the situation and the context in which they are observed. When organizational policy is being formed and established, what really happens is that a factual scenario is represented to the policy makers with more or less logical and empirical accuracy. Berg (2011) argues that the complexity of school organizations lies in the fact that the professional roles and challenges of daily life flow into each other as a whirlpool, although the boundary between them is at the very best fluid. Complex and subtle processes, as well as simple and direct mechanisms may always conflict and interact, and thereby the purposes, aims, objectives, and goals of the organization will be formulated (Hodgkinson, 1996).

According to Hofstede (2001) the ideal study of culture should combine idiographic and nomothetic, emic and etic, as well as qualitative and quantitative elements. McGuigan (2010) expresses that cultural analysis should be multidimensional, to make sense of the ontological complexity of cultural phenomena. Hodgkinson (1996) speaks about how the nomothetic-rational ideology in organizations always is tempered by the idiographic-humanistic countervailing tendencies and their associated ideologies. An important task in every organization is to unite the formal nomothetic approach to the informal idiographic conduct of its members. Out of the organization's quest for order there is a natural effort to limit the strength of the individuals' idiographic impact. This antagonism may create a dialectical relationship between the organizational contexts of nomothetic rules and the idiographic aspirations visualized by individuals in everyday work. Any study of organizational culture must

respond to the existence of these disagreements (Martin et al. 2006). The polyphonic approach to the study of school cultures is an attempt to meet these requirements.

3. SCOPE FOR ACTION

Berg (2011) notes that school activities cannot be fully understood on their own terms and therefore must be seen in relation to the complexity and widespread confusion that characterize schools as organizations. In order to provide a holistic overview, there is a need for bringing together various elements into a coherent analytical model. One of these models is the "scope for action" school development strategy (Berg, 1995). This model constitutes a fundamentally democratic approach of idiographic and nomothetic dynamics complementing each other, with the emphasis on grassroots engagement. School development is perceived as an intrinsic aspect of operating a school through the active participation of all actors involved, from pupils to principals, and from teachers to janitors.

The essential parameters of the strategy compromise identifying the salient features of the current culture of a given school organization, as well as the limits determined by the policy documents, regulating the work of the school as an institution in the particular national or regional context (Berg, 1995, 2003). This enables those involved to discover the scope for action, within which the prevalent culture and the practices representing it can be developed and get clearer views of what is prescribed, according to the documents specifying the mandate of the school. Methodically the existing cultural features are discovered by asking all the staff or all pupils to write an open and free letter, in which they express how they experience their daily life at school.

In next step, a task force for school development, consisting of elected members of the staff or the student body, will sort and categorize the letter statements, identifying the main features reflected in them. Subsequently, the school development unit studies and analyzes the various relevant policy documents, from national to local ones. Once this stage is completed, the task force is in the position to perceive the developmental scope for action and to devise a strategic plan for what developmental goals will be pursued and how these will be implemented. The entire process is facilitated by an experienced coach. Furthermore, the support and engagement of the school principal has been found to be an important success factor (Berg et al. 2011).

Berg (2003) argues that an empirically based conceptual framework for the schools' everyday work must also clarify the meaning of the concept of school as an institution. This will show how the school as an institution sets limits for everyday work of schools, and how they will provide conceptual tools to problematize the strategy of scope for action. Consistent with a neo-rationalistic view on organizations, the activities within the individual school becomes visible in the juncture between state legality and social legitimacy. To reflect on this concept is similar to reflect on schools, both as local organizations and as a state institution. The complexity is connected to its diversity of missions of varying consistency. Institutional logics exert their effects on individuals and organizations when they identify with the collective identities of an institutionalized professional group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; March and Olsen, 1989). As collective identities become institutionalized, they may develop their own logic, which will prevail within the social group (Jackall, 1998).

A big theoretical question is how the stability of institutional logics changes by level of analysis. Is it more stable or changeable at the top or bottom or macro or micro level of analysis? (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008) A weakness with the scope for action strategy is that its main focus on schools as organizations is not sufficiently variable to capture the behavior of individual actors within an ongoing developing process. In order to solve this problem and gain a deeper understanding of organizational institutionalism in school, there is likely a need of useful tools to study templates and rules as sources of institutionalization and de-institutionalization, explicitly expressed as the antagonism between individual and collective needs (Djelic and Quack, 2008).

4. POLYPHONIC REANALYSIS

Polyphony is a music term that derives from the Greek word for “many sounds”, and can be understood as a kind of music in which two or more tones sound simultaneously. Apart from the denotational sense, polyphony has a more specific connotation of melodic interest and rhythmic distinction between each part. In pedagogical contexts, polyphony was first spread as a concept by the Norwegian linguist Olga Dysthe (1996) who problematized the importance of polyphony in educational activities. Oral and written dialogues in multi-voice environments underpin, according to Dysthe, a more jointly developing knowledge. Another interpretation of polyphony is many voices working together in a compatible process of understanding (Sträng, 1997).

The choice of polyphony as a fundamental component of the new analysis instrument is made with the intention to explain and designate the dialogical interaction between actors, and to investigate the importance of their membership in an individual or collective embossed school culture. In this context, polyphony provides an extended ability to simultaneously focus on macro, meso and micro aspects of school cultures, according to the scope for action strategy (Berg, 1995) initially an extension of the former theory of school code (Arfwedson and Lundman, 1984). The polyphonic reanalysis instrument is intended to complement these longtime proven analytical instruments, in studies of school organizations and school development. Lehtonen (2000) states that human beings are not identical with themselves in the same way as other animate or inanimate natural creatures, but formed in creative relationships with the outside world. In the cultural analysis the dialogic interaction progresses simultaneously between texts, in the form of letter statements, and the scope for action model's concepts. In a general way the model can be understood as a dialogue within the text of letters between writers with similar voices (Sträng, 2011). This dialogue leads to a collective study of pedagogical phenomenas in everyday school life, in which different perspectives and aspects are being visualized.

Organizational research is often conducted with questions of “What is going on here?” and “What is this a case of?” (Tsoukas, 2009: 286). Without available conceptualizations, conceptual refinement will be limited. The concept of reanalysis can be explained as a “black box”, destined for better knowledge of what is going on in an educational process (Dahllöf, 1999). The varied context, framework and processes of schools in general will tell us that the cultural analysis may be complemented with a more thorough and detailed situation analysis of the daily life of schools. The result of the cultural analysis is not primarily to achieve a mutual understanding, but to maintain a broader understanding of everyday life, from the individual's point of view. The reanalysis can lead to different meanings of what actually happens, and give us important knowledge of the values and motivations among the individuals in the organization.

The polyphonic reanalysis instrument is designed to highlight the micro-oriented aspects and tensions within and between the cultures in a certain school. In the original design of cultural analysis, the interpretation of the individual aspects is hindered by focusing the ambiguity of human behavior, rather than the individual actors' motives and values. When school actors, as a result of political concepts of decentralism, become more self-reliant, the need for knowledge of school stakeholders' goals and values in their daily work, based on micro-oriented aspects, will logically increase. Hodgkinson (1996) emphasizes the difficulty in conceptualizing a nuance discussion of the motives and values held by members of an organization. It's all about subjective concepts, whose meaning varies, depending on the situation and the context in which they are observed.

When organizational policy is being formed and established, what really happens is that a factual scenario is submitted to the policy makers with different degrees of logical and empirical accuracy. The interplay between institutional and organizational efforts then becomes individual property. Knowledge of the values and motives for actions are important factors for understanding what actually happens. The nomothetic ideology is tempered by idiographic countervailing tendencies and their associated ideologies. Hodgkinson talks about inter- hierarchical conflicts between different levels, for example the common well versus selfish interest or, basically spoken, the dialectic between the idiographic and the nomothetic. Berg (2003) uses both culture analysis and document analysis to identify the organization's internal and external borders. Hodgkinson (1996) divides the organization's

decision-making into a number of different levels. Combining Berg's and Hodgkinson's methods and models is a possible step toward a higher degree of distinction in analyzing and understanding school cultures. Polyphonic reanalysis of school cultures has the potential to simultaneously focus on the macro, meso- and micro aspects of schools as organizations. When organizational and institutional aspects of school meet in everyday work, fundamental dilemmas is likely to occur, according to different understandings of management, professionalism and tradition.

In order to explain and understand the underlying causes of these dilemmas we may need a certain explanatory model. Models of this kind can differ depending on their purpose and application. Some models are focused on generally valid relations between individual events and observations (inductive). Others are based on specified rules or assumptions as a basis for interpreting empirical results (deductive). Both kinds of models have limited abilities to visualize the underlying patterns and trends from the empirical material in cultural analysis

A third model, which combines inductive and deductive models, and simultaneously adds new knowledge, is the abductive explanatory model (Sköldbberg, 1991; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2008). In this model, individual observations are interpreted and described using a hypothetical overall pattern, explaining the phenomena from another perspective. Abduction is a consequential form of reasoning, because it originates new ways of possible explanations. The given interpretation is followed and strengthened by other varieties of data, not as a mixture of inductive and deductive observations, but as new and specific elements. Langley (2009) describes the abductive approach as a useful tool for researchers who aim to reach beyond the detection of common surface patterns, to develop plausible explanations for temporal dynamics. Ackroyd (2009) speaks of abduction as a way of identify and understand the underlying mechanisms of existing phenomenas.

5. EMPIRICAL TESTING

The empirical testing of the polyphonic reanalysis instrument was conducted on a series of cultural analyzes of students in primary schools, in three municipalities and municipal districts of a medium-sized Swedish city. Blossing (2003) emphasizes the importance of engaging pupils in school development. If pupils are denied to participate in an ongoing developing process it will reduce their ability to feel involved, and may probably lead to passivity and resistance of various types. In a historic perspective, pupils in elementary school are often been routinely perceived as passive participants outside their classroom. Berg (2003) argues, however, for the notion of a diversity of pupils' roles as involved, participants and spectators. To get a closer look on these roles in the cultural analysis is however a somewhat methodological problem; with the scope for action model's origin in research on teachers' professional standards. A feasible way could be to conduct an analysis of pupils' cultures in relation to teachers' cultures.

The initial cultural analyzes to be reanalyzed were based on the pupils' own experiences of everyday life in school, and brought an overall picture of the current school cultures from a micro perspective. These images were now re-examined, in order to achieve a deeper explanation. Hodgkinson (1991) argues that the school's operational philosophy is characterized by "the interaction of role and personality in the context of value" (p. 43). Reanalysis of school cultures is a simultaneous consideration of individual, organizational and institutional factors in a school culture. The reanalysis is expected to provide empirically-based information and knowledge for the continuing debate on schools' peer similarity and/or inequality. Organizations do not necessarily have to be studied or assessed against its members' values, but these essentially primitive forces can also contribute to the organization's effectiveness.

To overcome these conflicts and/or use the forces that appear to develop school as an organization, requires deeper understanding of actors at different levels, combined with the accessibility to powerful tools of logical and critical analysis and the depth of understanding of human nature (Hodgkinson, 1991). Knowledge of the underlying patterns that affect daily work for school stakeholders can make the organization more transparent and malleable. The relationship between decision-making and executive will thus no longer be unpredictable and event-driven, but explained and understood by each

school's specific situation. The driving force in the collective action clarifies the relationship between the organization and its members' goals, actualizing the question of collective identities (Jackall, 1998). In-depth knowledge of behavior and attitudes adjacent to this interaction will increase the possibility of real development of schools on pedagogic conditions, to the benefit of pupils.

A brief glance at the empirical data from the reanalysis, show that the youngest pupils focus on weaknesses in the school's internal and external work, concerning facilities, equipment and educational applicability. There is a consensus on how schools may succeed in developing, but also dissatisfaction that most pupils had not been consulted or informed about long-term plans for change and development. Hodgkinson (1996) recalls that people's first experience of an organization usually is the family. To influence the youngest pupils, the intended direction requires a pragmatic approach to the group's needs and circumstances. The behavior that has been established in a child's consciousness, while growing up in a family, is further developed and reinforced at school, and clearly visible in classroom behavior (Hofstede et al. 2010).

Everyday work for pupils of the sixth grade appears to be even more complex than for the comrades in the lower ages. Group feeling is still strong, but within the confines of culture has now been added a personal scope for action. It is perhaps too early to speak about emancipation from the family of the sixth grade, but it portends a future break-up. The structural changes that twelve year olds want to have, start to affect even other parts of the school organization. Hodgkinson (1996) emphasizes that a culture like this is about to be distanced from purely individualistic aspirations. In eighth grade, the "family" has now largely been replaced by a subculture of small groups, with different opinions about the purpose of education, depending on whether the group is individually or collectively oriented. Students from different ethnic or clan backgrounds often form subgroups in the classroom (Hofstede et al. 2010) which was clearly shown in the reanalysis.

A common pattern seems to be that pupil culture in a micro perspective cannot simply be regarded as analogous to teaching culture. With its content of direct and indirect impact on the educational activities, it can rather be seen as an underlying pattern of combined cultures. Knowledge of pupil culture can increase our understanding of what is really going (Tsoukas, 2009) in a social arena of young people, where adults do not have an obvious and immediate access. The findings from a polyphonic reanalysis of this kind, can provide nuanced knowledge of the organizational and institutional interplay in school on a micro level.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In order to achieve successful school development, all actors involved need to have opportunities to contribute to the school's ideological dimension, in terms of its value bases. Reflections on school activities from different perspectives, and at different times, will hamper the ability to create a general overview of the relation between the school's organizational and institutional efforts. Cultural analysis as an explanatory model may otherwise risk to be reduced to a mechanical application of a particular case, more than an active quest for knowledge. The underlying patterns of school culture needs to be visualized and described to get a clearer view. School's fragmented conception is partly explained by its pedagogical heritage and self-understanding.

An intractable problem is that the complexities of values may be characterized by civil inequality and lack of alignment with other phenomena inside and outside the school. If the emphasis is placed on teaching, to what organizational principles in the outside world do this content correspond? Schools as institutions are originally based on values of social structure and feudally governed principles of organization. To study institutional values must consequently enlighten and clarify the actual mission of schools as organizations. The fundamental values in public institutions are often vague and conflict-ridden. To illuminate these ambiguous values is an important issue. If we strive to understand schools and school development at a more basic level, we have to conduct studies in both an organizational and an institutional context and on different levels.

Hodgkinson (1983: 209) introduces "the Analysis of Affect" as a tool for understanding an organization's stakeholders at micro level. To find out what is really going on in a process of change should be central, not least for decision-makers, because the underlying patterns act as control devices, in a combined context of micro, meso and macro, thus concerning the whole organization. Hofstede et al. (2010) concludes that understanding the differences between people is a condition for bringing about solutions to work. Culture is just another term for the mental software that every human being carries within their patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting. Anderson and Schlunke (2008) have an interesting view on cultural studies. They note that commonly described ideas and qualities are sometimes accultured, that is, produced by a nexus of social and cultural ideas and practices, and appear to be changing most of the time. This is an important remark, because it justifies to take a closer look on the basic and consisting values of culture. By viewing a culture from various perspectives also produces critical reflection about the culture's role and value in practice.

Hodgkinson (1983) points out the importance of the management's commitment to act and decide according to the organization's basic values. The polyphonic reanalysis can help solve institutional and organizational dilemmas, by clarifying where (at what level) conflicts are located, and which actors that are involved. Other issues can be about the nature of conflicts, and what principles or strategies for resolution that are most fitted to the case. To manage a school organization from a culturalist perspective requires a somewhat different approach than the traditional instrumental or pragmatic way of governance and management. Alvesson (2001) notes that much of the research in this area is still limited to manageable meanings and ideas, directly or indirectly related to questions of efficiency and performance. The analytic instruments of school culture have, like other tools, certain limitations in the practical performance. Without adequate preparedness for development and change throughout the school as an organization, there is anyway a risk that programs of school development will be watered down to slogans without real content. An important question is whether all changes in school can be considered as school development? To find the right answer we need continual supply of information and knowledge of school culture on different levels. We also need to know more about the values and motives of the individual school's formal and informal structure and procedures in organizational and an institutional contexts.

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