CULTURAL ANALYSIS AND REFLECTIVE PROCESSES IN PRESCHOOL – REFLECTIVE LEADERSHIP OR CRITICAL FRIENDS

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Abstract
The topic of this article is a minor research and development project, maintained as a collaborative research dialogue between practitioners and researchers from preschool and teacher education. The aim of the project was supporting a group of preschool leaders in order to develop a more effective leadership and increase reflective abilities among their subordinates. To achieve this aim we established a creative dialogue between practitioners and researchers, independent of professional belonging, but made up by a general view on the importance of a reflective culture in professional teams. Methodologically we used mentoring as a work tool for developing of the practioners and cultural analysis for mapping and analysis of what eventually took place at their workplace. The results and findings of the project indicate that the professional relationship between the leaders and their subordinates seems to have changed. A remaining question is whether reflective leadership is consistent with the role as critical friend?

Key words: *Collaborative research dialogue, reflective practice, culture analysis, educational leadership*

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations often look for new ways to improve their performance in order to maintain a more competitive edge (Asplund and Blacksmith, 2012). A popular way is developing new forms of leadership in order to influence the organization in a particular direction. In this article I present and discuss a minor research project, focusing on the process of creating and implementing an efficient dialogue on reflective practice between practitioners and researchers in a collaborative research relationship (Fox and Faver, 1984; Ley and Gentry, 2000). The starting point of our cooperation was shared visions of reflective practice as possible ways achieve a more efficient organization in a kindergarten. Our setting of collaborative partnership was in turn related to the concept of participatory action research, made up of a joint commitment of researchers and practitioners, who held the role as educational leaders, to contribute to a developmental and transformative agenda (Heron and Reason, 2001; Reason, 2006).

On this basis the cooperative inquiry may lead to the dissolution of boundaries between the roles of researchers and practitioners. The research is aimed to contribute to the creative action of people, rather than to propositional knowledge (Denis and Lehoux, 2009). Collaborative working relationships may help the sharing of successful practices and the provision of support (Fullan, 1991; Hargreaves and Dawe 1990; Little, 1990). Communication and joint work provide required pressure and support needed for getting things done. With our dialogue we intended to reconcile and challenge existing conditions at the educational leader´s workplace, a cooperative kindergarten.

Reflective practice has become a general term to describe a variety of activities in order to transform an organization into a learning system. A popular view on reflective activities is that they will not be successful if the participants do not view them as important enough to assimilate. Where reflective practice is being newly implemented, it is accordingly important for leaders to ensure that consideration is given to how activities are received by staff and stakeholders (Ledvinka, 2006; Burton and McNamara, 2009). The organization must learn to create effect of the transformation and diffusion of the whole system (Schön, 1973). From this starting point our dialogue focused on a constructive

orientation, with the participants making their contributions to solution more focused, future oriented and collaborative (Browning et al., 2012).

Our choice of reflective practice was based on what had been done before in the current kindergarten and what future action was desirable in the organization and among its stakeholders. Establishing a reflective practice is however complex, because the participants have to reflect, both on different aspects of daily work, and on their own cultural identity (Thorsen and DeVore, 2013). Aware of this, we tried to find an effective strategy for promoting reflection, independent of representation and authority, in different contexts. In our dialogue we looked for topics that would reassure the educational leaders to explain and understand which changes that could be considered as important in their workplace.

As researchers with somewhat limited knowledge of educational leadership in preschool, we also searched for useful approaches of compatible understanding (Sträng, 1997), to attain excellence and flow in our research relationship. Csíkszentmihályi (1997) emphasizes that flow is likely to occur when an individual is faced with a task that has some clear goals that require specific responses. It was important to keep in mind that our collaborative work should, ultimately, produce valuable and innovative results. We anyway believed that close interactions with practice settings, researchers and nonresearchers on equal terms had great potential to generate significant and intriguing findings.

2. METHOD

A challenge in our partnership was how to capture the complexity of different standpoints and experiences, and how to handle the reflective processes we were about to launch. Gjedde and Ingemann (2008) talk about the pre-reflexive experience, which has not reached the realm of conscious expression. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) states that less concentration on the collection and processing of data and more on interpretation and reflection, in relation to researchers themselves and their context, appears to be a fruitful path for qualitative research to follow.

The presumed impact of preschool as a learning system made us ask ourselves how our research dialogue could be designed to facilitate educational leaders implementing reflective practice as method for communication (Bell and Mladenovic, 2013). Research indicates that time and opportunities to reflect and the ensuring access to a mentor, for continuing professional development, may be important steps for promoting reflective practice. The mentor will challenge the thinking of educational leaders and encourage them to look at things from multiple perspectives, instead of repeating old standpoints and habits (Colmer, 2008, Kinsella, 2009). We assumed that our relationship had the ability to engage the educational leaders in effective communication, emphatic listening, personal learning and self-reflection (Kram and Ragins, 2007). Relational mentoring characterized of members influence and influenced by each other was a possible move forward to reflective practice.

A well-functioning cooperation between researchers and practitioners invites all actors to participate through available modes of relating. If the relationship feels safe and interesting, mutual exchanges of new ideas may lead to new modes of relations and motivations for change. A high-quality mentoring relationship is predicted by individual, relational and organizational factors (Hall and Las Heras, 2012). We considered that the frequency and depth of mentoring episodes with reflecting teams would strengthen the relational trust and pave the way for a high-quality work relationship (Pratt and Dirks, 2007; Wieselquist et al., 1999)

With this in mind we chose mentoring with reflecting teams (Andersen, 1991) as work tool, manifested by a series of internal mentoring episodes for the educational leaders. The context of reflecting teams is originally developed within the therapeutic field. The idea and approach of reflecting teams has spread from the original therapeutic field and is nowadays applied in a wider organizational context. Reflecting teams has been a common method in connection with team mentoring and team appraisals (Hornstrup and Loehr-Petersen, 2003). The implicit value of a reflecting team is to provide new information. Andersen (1987) notices that reflecting teams allow an increased exchange of pictures and explanations. By sharing their views, each participant receives

different interpretations of reality. These differences will add new perspectives to each person's picture, as ecology of ideas. In this process all participants must respect that everyone has the right to remain the same, without having to change their approach. This applies as well to the relationship between and within groups, where every member must acknowledge other members need to retain their patterns.

Besides coaching the educational leaders, we strove to maintain our ongoing collaborative research dialogue. Andersen (1987) concludes that each new way might come from not being able to continue any longer in the same way, and the notion that it is better being a participant, than remaining an observer. This convinced us of the potential of our strategy, despite its complexity. Nonetheless we discovered rather soon that mentoring was not enough for the educational leaders to change their everyday work. Skills and knowledge had to be distributed to all personnel. The emphasis was that staff needed mentoring from their leaders who consequently would have to mentor their staff. All personnel would thus benefit from leadership mentoring and supposedly learn mentoring skills for developing their own team and work more effectively (Tolhurst, 2006). To launch these extended activities we needed a clearer view of what was going on in the kindergarten, from another perspective than the educational leaders. In order to get deeper knowledge of what was going on, we supplemented our dialogue and coaching with a series of cultural analyses, for all staff members. Our analytic tools were taken from the "scope for action" school development strategy (Berg, 2003). Methodically the existing cultural features were to be discovered by asking the subordinates of kindergarten to write an open letter, expressing how they experienced their everyday work. The essential parameters of the scope for action strategy compromise identifying the salient features of the current culture of a given organization, as well as the limits determined by the policy documents, regulating the work of the school or preschool as an institution, in a broader perspective (Berg, 2003). This enables those involved to discover the scope for action, within which the prevalent culture and the practices representing it can be developed or prescribed, according to the structure and policy of the organization.

3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

After participating in a series of mentoring sessions, the educational leaders were at last ready to mentor their subordinates and continue the reflective processes that, according to the cultural analysis, obviously had started. We designed a model of reflecting groups to embrace a mentoring leadership as an outcome of our research dialogue. The first months with this "new" kind of leadership were non-problematical, but occasionally things started to go wrong. Intensive mentoring from the educational leaders, aiming at reflection rather than traditional leadership, brought to confusion and anger. Staff members experienced how their scope for action decreased whilst the distance between staff and leaders once again was increased. To examine this alarming tendency we decided to perform a third round of letter writing. This time the letters told us stories of an almost farcical leadership, without neither goals nor methods for developing. The overall wish of educational leaders as persons with abilities of exerting influence over others and inspire, motivate and direct their personnel to reach organizational goals was far away. The new mentoring leadership proved largely as a contra productive obstacle to prosperity and development.

In the project we performed three rounds of cultural analyses among preschool staff. The results were perceptibly different. The initial analysis gave us a shattered impression of the culture, with opposite views of relations between leaders and staff. Some informants were saying that their leaders wanted everyone to be happy and took a motherly care of all staff members. Others were openly critical and mentioned that there was a big distance between the two groups. When we discussed our findings with the practitioners they were astonished and critical to the relevance of our analysis. This discussion was a crucial moment of our research relation, where our mutual understanding of a collaborative dialogue was threatened. One year later we launched a second round of letter writing. In most of these letters one could find proposals of critical but constructive ways of how to strengthen the relations between leaders and staff, in order to adopt the available scope for action. The previous dialectic polarity had almost vanished.

4.   ANALYZIS

Educational leaders engage in reflective practice for distinct purposes. One reason is the desire to adjust their methods of leadership in order to find better ways of understanding the needs of their staff and stakeholders. Within their sphere of influence on how to affect change and development, they can pursue areas of great impact and better communicate up, down and sideways (Gore and Zeichner, 1991; LaBoskey, 1994; Thorsen and DeVore, 2013; Van Manen, 1977). An important dimension of educational leadership is participating in everyday work-activities, rather than seen as distinct from these (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). Organizational learning requires strategies for systematic analysis and reflection more likely throughout different levels of the organization. The leaders must learn to effect the transformation and diffusion of the system in applying knowledge to practice, while at the same time being mentored by professionals. Bascia and Hargreaves (2000) emphasizes that traditional hierarchical notions of leadership will no longer succeed, because the understanding and commitment of everyone involved is fundamental to what happens, regardless of policies and plans. Reflective practice as a communication process also means that organizational members will need increased dialogic skills (Levin and Riffel, 2000).

A theme of our dialogue was how the educational leaders would confront the different views of their staff in how their leadership should be maintained. We focused on leadership legacy as a way of increasing the relational and communicative skills among leaders and staff. We also had to increase our knowledge of cultural understanding both in theory and practice. Our initial belief in the importance of reflective practice remained, but we noticed there were more difficulties of implementing a new leadership in a preschool culture than we had presumed there would be. Schein (2006) concludes that leadership and culture must be looked at collectively; neither can be understood by itself. Leaders must be conscious of culture, otherwise it will manage them. Cultural understanding is essential if leaders are to lead. In our project we discovered that the initial discourse of learning from experience was primarily transformed into learning about experience (Williams, 2013).

After the final round of letters, our dialogue turned into a discussion of how educational leaders can attach to a mentoring leadership, without losing their identity as leaders. Sundström and colleagues (1990) argue that when boundaries become too lose, teams get overwhelmed and might even lose their identity. Movement across boundaries and traditions create challenges as the need to redefine one´s identity. A particular problem is when one´s skills become less relevant or salient to the actual needs of collaboration (Dibble and Gibson, 2012). In recent years there has been a growing understanding of the importance of the relationship between the leader and follower (Kark, 2012). The focuses on relationships in leadership theories have become more explicit. Tolhurst (2006) speaks of a distributed and mentoring leadership structure, with many leaders at different levels and a flatter leadership, with leadership as a function of everyone´s job rather than the actual role.

In the end of the project we tried to define the reality of implementing mentoring leadership in preschool. According to Tolhurst (2006) we had succeeded in involving all staff from the beginning and how to investigate their knowledge of mentoring in organizations. At the same time we had failed to proper explain the aim of our project to all actors. Within our research dialogue we had also failed in creating a shared definition of mentoring.

5.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Cultures are basically made up of individuals who share common practices, but each individual actor will most likely influence a culture based on perceptions of their own environment. By trying to understand the individuals in a certain culture, leaders can make better decisions and determine how these decisions will affect the whole group (Sträng and Sørmo, 2012). In the project our understanding of culture contained learned and shared values, beliefs and behaviors of a group of interacting people (Bennett, 1998).

Professional groups seldom have similar cultures, although the official organizational culture can be a cohesive element. Developing staff and leaders from a cultural perspective can be hazardous activities.

Schein (2006) tell us that attempts to change organizational culture from the inside can be harmful, especially in a context where cultural aspects are taken for granted. Emotional investments make people defensive or aggressive. In our project we realized that the factors of structure and function among differing cultures of staff members were specular to executive stress and moral dilemmas among the leaders (Hodgkinson 1996). In our dialogue we started somewhat uncritically from a holistic view on staff and leaders in preschool, not as isolated parts, but as equal members of the same organizational context. A closer look on the real interplay between formal control and informal influences would most likely have given us a deeper cultural understanding (Sträng, 2011) and a better position to achieve our goals of an increasing reflective practice.

Most organizations depend on clear communication. Communication skills allow leaders to perform their role more effectively, but prospective and current employees do not always meet the expected standards of communication within the organization (Buhler and Worden, 2013). Integrative communication is positive but will maybe not lead to improve the activities of the system. A challenge for leaders is the ability of how to create an effective dialogue about the need for constant change adaptation and flexibility, whilst remaining faithful to the overall goals and everyday planning. A way of facing this challenge is to develop leadership skills built on regular and purposeful reflective practice (Bell and Mladenovic, 2013).

In literature there is an agreement of reflective practice as a good measure of development, however there are different ideas of how this should be undertaken. Schön (1973) argues that social systems must learn to become capable of transforming themselves, without intolerable threat to the essential functions, but with steady focus on their ability to support the self-identity of those who belong to them. As defined by Schön (1983), reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice, while being mentored by professionals in the discipline. Managers and subordinates can engage in reflective practice by affirming and connecting to each other, highlighting situated judgments, rather than expert opinions and thus provide opportunities for all actors to evaluate their experiences together (Hawes, 1999; Barge, 2004).

Developing leadership is a question of reciprocity, including the important obligation of sharing knowledge. In our dialogue we did share knowledge and experience, but we failed to create a mutual understanding of the complex process of change. Fullan (2004) says that if knowledge is not mutually shared, it will not be adequately developed and thus not fully available to the organization. Inspite of our failings we ended up with a continuing will to create an adequate strategy for mentoring leadership. We did not primarily search for an expandable scope for action (Berg, 2003), only how to find and create new ways of including all staff members in a collaborative dialogue. The use of reflecting teams was intended to support us with understanding the possible dilemma of both-and and neither-nor (Andersen, 1987).

6. REFLECTIVE LEADERSHIP OR CRITICAL FRIENDS

The practitioners in our partnership are located in a culture of change, facing all its challenges. A possible clue to success is the establishment of a reciprocal, collaborative and fluid relationship between the leader and follower (Fletcher, 2007; Kark, 2012). According to Fletcher (2007) relational leaderships may result in outcomes of positive learning and growth for the people involved, as well as the organization. Research on reflective practice has shown that effective practice is connected to critical thinking and reflection that is beneficial for professional development (Blaik Hourani, 2013). 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 interests might lead to divergence of the individual, organizational and institutional needs. An important question is what really happens when leadership changes in a major way?

The relation between leadership and culture is complex, dealing with meanings, thinking and feeling, more than a narrow behavioral focus. Subordinates often have a strong impact of how leadership is shaped and may react in different ways when the framework and content changes. Leadership is much

more than leader acting and a group of followers responding in a mechanical way. A cultural understanding of leadership calls for the nuanced interpretation of the relationship and interaction between superior and subordinate (Alvesson, 2011). At the same time, both leaders and subordinates must understand the core values and beliefs that provide direction and stability in the organization. Changing from a reflective leadership to leaders as critical friends can be a difficult task. Behavior change does not automatically produce culture change because of the process of justification.

A critical friend is defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined from another perspective, and offers critique as a friend, more than a controller. Rooted in critical pedagogy, it is a role often employed in an educational context, similar to mentoring and coaching (Costa and Kallick, 1993) although there are certain similarities these roles all offer a different approach to supporting individuals and groups. A critical friend oriented leadership is a challenge in itself, because it differs from well-known and widespread opinions of leaders as coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting and coaching (Goleman, 2000).

The concept of critical friend has been introduced in many systems that see themselves as learning organizations and know that learning requires assessment feedback (Senge, 2006). A critical friend, as the name suggests, is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. Behavioral compliance does however not always mean cultural commitment. Weeding out misfits in the system might be desirable, but it should be done after weighing the costs and benefits of undesirable imbalance in the organization (Sathe, 1983). Organizational change in any form require a variety of accepted ways of doing things and maintain existing relationships. Caught between internal demands of themselves and the needs of the subordinates leaders have a difficult role to fulfill (Sims and Sims, 2004). In our study the reactions from the staff became openly critical against the changed performance of their leaders, from a traditional educational leadership to the roles of coaches and critical friends.

Collaborative research intends and aims to contribute to the maintenance of a more cooperative world. In order to succeed there are challenges to face and questions to be answered. Denis and Lehoux (2009) have formulated two important questions of how reflexivity can be introduced into practice and who is best suited to lead a process of change. A third question is how to strike a balance between scientific and practical relevance. In a research work there is a need to establish effective deliberate processes in order to avoid the discrediting of research by powerful interest groups as in our case the subordinates of the kindergarten. As researchers we must deeper investigate the operationalization of our concepts and the reasonableness of our theories. We must also find a feasible way of training, developing, coaching and advise people how to lead effectively (Brown, 2013).

A remaining question is whether reflective leadership is consistent with the role as critical friend? Our results and findings tend to move in the opposite direction. To fully answer this question we have to continue our research dialogue, focusing on how to create and re-establish the organizational balance that was interrupted, while our collaborative research dialogue was intensely concentrated on implementing a critical friend-based mentoring leadership as a success factor a reflective practice in preschool.

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