

THE LONG MARCH TOWARDS IMPROVEMENT

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THE CONCEPT OF IMPROVEMENT

ISIP, the International School Improvement Project, coordinated by the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, began in 1982 and united 14 OECD-countries and their experts on the topic of school improvement. The project was formally ended in 1986, but the professional network remains intact by means of the Foundation for International Collaboration on School Improvement (FICSI).

The work done in ISIP was based on a working definition of school improvement which proved to be a productive base in the different problem areas that were identified in the conceptualization phase of the project: "School Improvement is a systematic, sustained effort at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively".¹

Without wishing to discuss this definition in detail, it seems useful to highlight a couple of elements in order to make clear the ISIP/FICSI position on the concept of improvement.

Important is the notion of a systematic approach. Of course there is a lot of non-systematic improvement going on, but ISIP/FICSI work is not really focused on that. The main reason for this is the notion of school improvement as a multilevel process and the notion of the school as the unit of change. Improvement at the classroom level, the development of individual teachers are important ingredients, but to be categorized as school improvement those improvement/development activities have to be embedded in the school as a whole, as an organization.

The problem of school improvement as a multilevel process seems to be underestimated. The process of policy development and implementation consists of a long list of different persons at different levels engaged in the process, starting with the policy makers and ending up in the classroom where teachers and pupils are struggling with the teaching/learning process. The basic message of policy makers such as 'improve the quality of our education system up to the standards of our modern

society', has to be transferred to the lower levels, from the top to the bottom of the system. It is obvious that the actors at the different levels with all their different interests, skills and languages have little possibility to understand each other, or even have the intention to co-operate to implement what was wanted somewhere at the top.

To make school improvement work it seems to be necessary that the bottom of the system also starts an improvement process. Only when those processes are aiming at similar goals is there a fair chance that school improvement according to the definition is actually taking place.

Although there is no one way at the bottom to improve, there might be a thousand configurations, there also is some basic scheme that can be recognized in any improvement process. Somehow there has to be a diagnosis, explicit or implicit, and somehow this has to lead to the setting of a goal, or more goals, and in the latter case people will set priorities as well. And after that there is work to be done, the work we define as implementation. Now if the diagnosis process does not come up with similar problems as formulated at the top, one cannot expect intelligent people to invest a lot of energy and time in an endeavour that in their understanding does not bring about any improvement at all.

School based strategies

The basic scheme as described here above was worked out as the School Based Review (SBR) strategy and turned out to be a valuable concept ². It breaks down the process of school improvement in different phases, starting with a preparation phase to get an impression of the change capacity of the school and to make clear to all participants in the improvement process what it will be about. It ends up with the institutionalization phase in which the improvement becomes part of the daily routines. And in between there is the initial review to make choices and to set priorities, there is the specific review to go in depth and set the development goals and then finally is there the phase in which the development and implementation really takes place. The important thing is, that this strategy invests time and energy in clarifying the starting position and the wanted improvement and uses available knowledge and expertise. It is a systematic and sustained effort to change the learning conditions and the other related internal conditions.

The other characteristic of the SBR strategy is its emphasis on the human resource in the change process. This is worked out by the distinction of the different roles in the improvement process. The actors are not just there, but they have to fulfil their proper roles, fit for the phase in which the process is. Their roles may change over time, but important is, that the need for certain roles in certain phases of the process is well understood and worked out. It is the strong interrelation between the process and the actors that makes the SBR strategy an effective tool for improvement.

The coupling of improvement to the school as the unit of change makes it urgent to think about the nature of the school itself. Is it just "a place called school" in

which the characteristics are determined by the nature of the teaching learning process as it is going on in a more or less similar way all over the world or are schools really different? And if so, what is the difference and even more interesting, what causes the difference?

Within the literature about the effective school we get quite a lot of arguments to believe that schools are different and we also get some of the distinctions between schools in terms of variables like the presence (or not) of educational leadership, high expectations of pupils' achievement, an orderly and safe climate, clear objectives, monitoring pupils' progress and continuity and consensus among the teachers³. Some of these characteristics can be described as organizational behaviour, but some of these belong to what is called "schoolculture", rather being in the mind of people than operational in rules and activities.

Elements of schoolculture

We might understand schoolculture as "a system of ordinary, taken-for-granted meanings and symbols with both explicit and implicit content that is, deliberately and non-deliberately, learned and shared among members of a natural bounded social group⁴. But within this concept we need to look for more specific elements to understand what it means to bring about change.

The most important element of schoolculture seems to be the perception that the members of the team share of the pupil. High expectations is, as shows the effective school literature, an important part of that perception, but it might as well be more subtle like the prejudice that females are not gifted for mathematics. Unhappily one often meets perceptions with the nature of a bundle prejudices: pupils are lazy, not interested in the curriculum, badly brought up by the parents, only interested in trendy outfits and sex. If a pupil belongs to an ethnic minority a few more bad characteristics can easily be added. It would be interesting to see how this element of the schoolculture comes into being. A wild guess is that most of it is accomplished while drinking coffee or making decisions about students' careers. The perception of the pupil is not a serious topic in schools which makes it difficult to influence the schoolculture.

The core of school matters is the curriculum. Without a curriculum the school would not exist. But this simple truth does not affect the schoolculture. It is rather the individual relationship between the teachers and their subjects that influences strongly the culture. In fact the importance of the subject determines the position of the teacher in the team, at least in secondary education. In primary education it seems to be the balance between cognitive goals and the more general aim at personal development that is rather decisive for schoolculture.

In quite a couple of countries education is in a bad shape and even nations are at risk because of the poor quality of education. The estimation is, that this has to do with the low morale of the teachers: not well paid, not well prepared for their jobs and

with little appreciation from the outside world. Schoolculture is strongly related to the self-esteem of the teachers. If they believe in what they are doing, they can do an awful lot, if not the school starts to disintegrate.

The importance of leadership in schools is self-evident and the influence on schoolculture as well. In fact it is most probably in the mind of the schoolleader that schoolculture finds its strongest base. While the relationship of a teacher with schoolculture might be passive and consumptive, most schoolleaders have an active relationship with schoolculture which is of great concern to them and often they actively try to influence it in a positive way. But even more important is, that their mere presence as a schoolleader is influencing the culture: by their style of leadership, their beliefs and the model they set, whether it is done by purpose or not. Improving a school without taking account of the role of the principal seems to be a waste of time and energy.

A school is on the one hand a closed system, with its own culture, that might develop itself without taking into account the demands of the society, it is on the other hand an open system that is vulnerable for scrutiny by the environment, more in particular by parents and that is also influenced by the images of the outside world as perceived by the teachers. Teachers, implicitly or explicitly, transfer their beliefs about this world and their norms and values to their pupils and by doing so they contribute to the schoolculture.

It is in a way important to realize that if expectations of students contribute to the schoolculture, that the possibility to have such expectations is based upon more general expectations about the future and having expectations about the future also is having a perception of the outside world.

For our purpose, to understand the influence of schoolculture on change and improvement, the analytical approach of schoolculture is not enough. We need to understand how schoolculture as a whole works and can be influenced. In research we need to analyze reality down to the variables, in making school improvement work we need to handle our holistic view on reality to understand how we are moving from one state of affairs to another. The variables never can be handled isolated, the reality of a school is extremely complex and interventions on one element cause effects on many others. A way to deal with this complexity is the metaphor of the story. All actors in the change process do have a perception of their own working environment, the school, that is not very analytical nor rational, but that has the nature of a story. A story does not have to be true to be convincing and miracles are not excluded. Stories can be very simple and straightforward and very complex and poetic as well. Sometimes stories of people working in the same school are very different as everybody knows who has been looking closely at people inside schools. Sometimes everybody is telling the same basic story, mostly in times of external threat. Everybody who wants to work with schools to improve their functioning, will have to start with listening to the stories that are valid in that specific school, because changing the school basically means changing the story about that school.

Role of the teacher

As the core task of a school is to implement the curriculum, then a change in aiming at curriculum reform is a major change. If this reform actually is more related to the nature of the curriculum than to the content of the curriculum, then we are looking at a very complex and difficult change process. Moving away from a rather closed curriculum to an open and flexible curriculum is, to start with, moving from one concept of another.

If the curriculum is defined and conceptualized as the planned and structured learning process, then, regardless of the content, the curriculum is perceived as basically ready and available for transfer to the students. The teacher knows about it and the student will learn about it.

But if a wider definition is used in which is included the planning and implementation process as well, then the conception moves from a rather static body of knowledge to a much more dynamic concept in which content and the planning and transfer of the content are intermingled and the focus is rather on the learning than on the teaching. The teacher still knows but now must worry about whether the student will learn or not.

To make the curriculum more flexible is to loosen the ties with the text and learning books/materials, which implicates a different role for the teacher. A more flexible curriculum can be understood as opening the curriculum to the outside world and taking account of the change that is going on outside the walls of the school, but it also can be understood in strengthening the relationship with the learning capacity and the interests of the students.

Looking at the teacher as the main actor in the process that should bring about a more open and flexible curriculum, it seems obvious, that changing the curriculum in this way implicates changing the teacher in the first place. Changing his role is changing his self perception, is changing the story in which his role is embedded, is changing his relationship with his students who certainly play major roles in that story and is changing the value of the curriculum itself as the basic theme of the story. Referring to what was said about schoolculture, we may easily understand that the curriculum reform towards more openness and flexibility has to deal with the need to change the schoolculture at the same time.

Changing roles

Instead of focusing on the new concept of the curriculum we might as well focus on the new role of the teacher. A more open curriculum means a much more school based curriculum which implicates the role of the teacher as a planner of the curriculum or to put it more schoolwise, of lessons. He or she needs not just the teaching skills, but has to be creative, almost becoming an artist. Within the story the

role may change from the guide who knows all the interesting places into the role of the explorer of a not well known area. As an implementer of the school based curriculum the teacher must develop much more sensitivity of what is going on in and outside the classroom. Like the explorer the teacher must be prepared for unexpected events and take interest in alien cultures. And finally, the teacher, being responsible for this school based curriculum, is bound to make the judgement about the value of that curriculum which in the end is a judgement about his own choices. A new role is the role of evaluator, not just of students' progress, but of his proper ability to manage part of the curriculum.

Describing a new role is one thing, but to change the role of the teacher into a new and basically different one is another thing. Role changing is not difficult if the role conditions can be changed, but we must realize that almost all the conditions for implementing a curriculum are controlled by the teacher himself. Teachers, in many countries not well prepared for their jobs, find ways to survive in the classroom by adopting a role that solves most of their problems. A role should be a means to improve the quality of education, but mostly is a way to protect the status quo.

Talking about teachers' roles, we should be aware of the difference between primary and secondary education. In primary education teachers have to work with one group of pupils over a rather long period of time. In secondary education teachers work with different groups during relatively short periods. Role experiments might be easier in secondary education. Besides, in secondary education, there is more emphasis on the subject and less on personal development. It is obvious, that changing roles in primary education is different from changing roles in secondary education. But in both cases: changing the role is a major intervention in the professional life of the teacher.

Given the need to change roles to be able to implement a more open and flexible curriculum, we have to think about the possibilities we have to influence or maybe to control role changing. Teachers need to be supported and encouraged during the change process. Support can be internal or external or a mix of both. To be able to support such a process of role changing means a clear conception of the wanted change in the mind of the change facilitator, whether he or she is internal or external. In case in which the change is initiated outside the school, it is almost impossible to restrict support to internal support, unless the internal change facilitator is well trained, of course outside the school.

Object of support mainly has to be the team, though in some cases individual support is inevitable. It has to be the team, because the team is or should be base of the schoolculture in which role perceptions are embedded. Yet, we should be aware of the fact that in many schools teams are purely formal organizational units with sometimes very little internal interaction, social or professional. Of course in smaller schools people know each other quite well, but this relationship does not necessarily include discussion about professional behaviour or role perceptions.

In fact, working with schools, we soon learn how heterogeneous teams are, how many different stories are running around, how different perceptions of the role of

teachers (and students!) sometimes divide teams and how little communication is going on about the basics of the profession. If the existence of a team is conditional for the implementation of almost any innovation and in particular for the implementation of an open and flexible curriculum, then the first steps in the change process will be to strengthen the team as a professional unit, to improve communication inside the team, to improve professional leadership, all with the ultimate aim to change the schoolculture in such a way that the will to develop and improve is founded in and promoted by the team.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The catchword for teambuilding is staff development. Sometimes staff development is perceived as an end in itself, just like the improvement of management seems to be something that always will have its pay-off. That is doubtful. Neither staff development nor improving management can be untied of specific aims set by the participants in an improvement process. If there are no improvement goals whatsoever, staff development will not work, if there is no professional vision, there will never be professional leadership. This assumption leads to the following consequence: though first steps in an improvement process will be to prepare the schoolculture for change and professional co-operation, changing of the schoolculture will not be feasible unless the need for change is accepted. Now in practice this problem is not as insolvable as it looks like because the impetus to change from the outside might be effective, looking very attractive, or, individuals or small groups within the team might have developed the will to change by themselves. This means that while starting to work on staff developments, mostly the seed for improvement is there and just needs good care to spread through the team. But though the problem is not insolvable, the solution will not be a simple one, in most cases.

There is a lot of easy talking about the team and about the organization and about management, not taking in consideration the very typical nature of a school. In the first place the schoolorganization is flat, there is a bit of management going on but the core of the organization is given by the teachers, all equal, though some more equal than others. Talking about important decisions (like how to implement the curriculum!) we should realize that most of them are taken by the teachers, whether they are aware of that or not. We talk nowadays about the school as a loosely coupled organization and so it is, but the entity we call team or staff sometimes can only be perceived at very rare occasions like the opening meeting of the new schoolyear or at the moment that the whole team is united to be on the yearly photo of the staff. Of course these are extremes and in small primary schools the whole team can be observed during lunchtime, but a whole team working together on a common task is a rare phenomenon in many schools.

It is not just because of the lack of experience to work together that staff development is a time consuming process, it is time consuming in itself, because a team is not a team because it is a team, but because individuals who constitute the team have to share specific norms and values that are important to them (and related to the complex task of teaching). Staff development within this perspective often means to create new visions and to set new goals that are experienced as being important and worth while by the majority of the teachers. Staff development is to overcome the old frustrating routines and to replace them by more promising ones. But again, this only will work in a context in which to change and to improve is the right thing to do.

Goal setting

The need to change often is experienced earlier and easier outside the school than inside. The impetus to change the educational system or goals often is given from the centre where political and ideological arguments feed the debate. The images of what schools really are, mostly are vague and unrealistic. Goals set by the central authorities are not always feasible. And they won't bring about any improvement unless schools will adopt them and thus will transfer outside goals into internal goals. And then again the condition for this transfer is, that somehow those goals fit into the schoolculture. And if not, schoolculture should be changed or otherwise those outside goals will fade away like many did before.

Given the assumption that a new and more open and flexible curriculum is an attractive goal for many teachers and many schools (which means for instance that it does not put aside valuable elements of current education, but adds interesting possibilities to current practice without increasing the workload too much), then the work may start. As is argued here above such a change will be based on changing the schoolculture as a first step to change the role perception of the teacher and the focus needs to be on the team as the unit of change. Having said this we need to look deeper into the nature of change which in most cases is a mixture of concepts and skills. Teachers need to have the concepts clear to know what they will have to do and they need the skills to know how to do it. The most important part of this package are the concepts, because if those are clear, they become the glue that holds the team together and they will give direction to future activities. On the other hand, teachers are inclined to do things instead of reflecting upon them. They are used to prepare themselves for the next lesson, the next day and find it difficult to postpone action just for clarifying a concept. This means that in schools we mostly have to choose for a cyclic process in which activities sometimes are the means to clarify the concepts: learning by doing. This also means that it is important to train teachers for the skills they need in an early phase, because if they fail in doing things properly, they will easily give up, because the innovation is not "practical".

If staff development is the key to improvement, we will soon discover, that in some cases this development is a tiring business and hardly will work. A way to

conceptualize this difference between schools, is to introduce the variable "change capacity". Though this variable as such does not explain very much of the problem, it is a way to recognize that indeed some schools somehow don't have the energy which is needed to improve their practice. Sometimes it is the composition of the team, sometimes it is an unhappy history of the school, sometimes it has to do with mistrust in the future and quite often: lack of competent leadership. Schools with a small capacity to change should be reviewed before staff development starts, but the problem is to recognize the indicators. Skilled change facilitators should be able to be aware of them.

Problems like the ones described here above turn up in case of large scale innovations, based on national policy. Stories about successful development and improvement often happen to be of a small scale: one school or a small number of schools well directed by a competent board. In case of large scale innovations like introducing a new curriculum, all schools are involved, the strong ones and the weak ones, the good, the bad and the ugly. The ability of schools to assimilate the current rhetoric of change and to remain the same is great and yet any large scale improvement policy is depending on the will of the individual schools to implement and, in case of a curriculum reform, even on the will of individual teachers. Thinking about reforms, we will have to think about them on the level of the single school, being the unit of change.

LARGE SCALE REFORM

Thinking about large scale reforms in the sector of primary schools we meet a series of problems that cannot easily be solved. In the first place we know that external help only can be limited. Intensive support is expensive and basically not available. Still we know that change will not occur without any facilitation. In the best of all worlds the principal, the headteacher, would have the capacity to lead his colleagues towards the new and better situation in which a new curriculum would fulfil its function in the wanted way. In the real world we notice that those headteachers are not chosen because of their capacity for educational leadership but for many other good reasons. We know that so far they are not trained to act as a change facilitator, though some of them may be gifted for such a role. But that is just part of the problem. Headteachers are or anyway have been teachers themselves. They will look at a proposed reform with the eyes of the average teacher: maybe they will like it, maybe not. In the latter case they will be by no means able to take the lead. To be able to support others one needs to be ahead of the others, not just in knowledge and skills, but in beliefs as well. Thinking about small rural schools makes the problem even more difficult, because leadership in those small organizations is mostly of another nature and anyway with less possibilities to help others move into another direction.

It is not fair to end a story about improvement with summing up the problems without pointing at the solutions, without even a glance of hope for a happy ending. As indicated here before, we are not living in the best of all worlds, so we need to accept that even the best improvement policy will lead to an imperfect result. But we might try to work for acceptable outcomes which means that in the majority of schools the reform is working to the benefit of the students (which is the ultimate touchstone). To attain this goal we need to be very realistic and we will have to accept from the beginning, that the implementation of a curriculum reform will differ from school to school. We have to accept that in lowering down our improvement goals through the educational system those goals will be adapted to local situations and if this will not happen, no change at all will occur. This means that at the higher level of the system improvement goals must be described in such a way, that on the one hand they must inform quite clearly about what is really wanted to happen and on the other hand they must not take away the professional responsibility of those who will have to implement the reform. The goals must be very clear about the direction, but not about the means to get there. The top of the system is not well equipped to say very much sensible things about that. The educational system is not an army and education is not war. The best way to raise energy is to trust people and to create favourable conditions. Trust is demonstrated by making clear that responsibility is given and demanded. Favourable conditions only can be created if at the top there is a clear view on what such a reform really means plus the will to respond to reasonable requests for support (within the given budget, but that should be reasonable as well).

To implement a policy strategic thinking is wanted, at several levels of the educational system. We have the notion of top-down strategies versus bottom-up strategies. It would be a good step forward to realize that both strategies do not exclude each other but basically are complementary. This means that a reform, initiated at the top, should aim at creating initiatives at the bottom. And in fact this pattern should be repeated right through the system and in particular within the unit of change: the single school. This may look like in the good old days of Mao: let thousand flowers blossom. Maybe, but by defining the change as an aspect of the schoolclimate and working on that, the flower will be the school as a whole. And by defining the direction of the reform and by being very clear about what is really wanted, those flowers may be different but from the same race.

This view on reform as an interplay between an initiating centre and an implementing field, interacting with each other in some form of a dialogue, implicates the acceptance of a slow pace, cyclic processes, long term development goals and a variety of outcomes, some of them unexpected. We better should realize that this is not what politicians generally like. They want to see clear outcomes before election time and being elected they want to set new goals. Which will not work. So part of the expert job is to make clear to the centre, that in case of education even politicians have to think big and unselfish.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

As the remarks about the possibilities of educational reform were made in the context of international co-operation, it seems wise to finish with some remarks about the value and benefits of international co-operation itself. Nowadays there is a trend to praise international co-operation almost without any hesitation, but it is not as simple as that. Quite a lot of elements of national educational systems are culture bound and what works in one country is not per se bound to work in another country. It is like with schools, countries are different. And it takes a long time before participants in international networks have discovered that. But from then on there is a very interesting possibility to learn. In a way international comparison offers the possibility to look into the past and into the future. Because the international scene offers pictures of situations elsewhere that are past in our own development, but also operational examples of what right here is still mere future. And what is even more important it offers the example in its complete complexity. All the elements of the future situation are there and the only thing we have to do is to explore it and take the outcomes home. Not to copy the situation, because that won't work, but to be equipped to formulate all the problems that are to be solved. International comparison makes the educational experts wise and cautious and is a great help in the designing of effective improvement strategies. Inviting international experts to look at a national, regional or even local educational problem also may have great advantages. It is by their cultural innocence, not sharing the same frame of reference, that they are able to pose the odd questions that really help to see the problem and in some cases, to find the solution. International knowledge that is build upon international experiences in the educational field and not just depending on literature can be very rich and full of unexplored possibilities to relate a very specific situation to a great number of similar situations. We all are looking for the key to improvement. Sometimes it is found in the room next door and so we need school based developments and sometimes it is found far beyond our horizon and so we need international co-operation. We simply must go on searching for it.

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