

GENERATIVE MECHANISM IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT – A PROCESS STUDY

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Abstract

This study aims to identify how planned organisational change processes can be combined with unpredictable emergent change processes and be used in the organisation to manage organisational change in school. A process study was conducted to understand better how two schools struggle with improvement work using a specific strategy for school improvement and leadership. The data consisted of interviews, observations, and documents, with 13 sequences of events and 46 episodes identified in the empirical material, analysed according to Van de Ven and Poole's four ideal types of process studies, each with different generative mechanisms driving the process. Narrative strategy, episodes, and graphic representation were used in the analysis process. The result shows that the various motors, seen as driving forces that support or challenge each other, operate in planned and emergent processes and create two different forms of result: development and change. The study concludes that with more knowledge about what hinders and supports different mechanisms—that stimulate different actions—improvement processes can be more controlled, underpinning the process constructively. Practical implications: Leaders and pedagogues can use the tools presented in the study to understand, stimulate, and steer improvement work in their organisations. The theoretical presentation of generative mechanisms and their practical impact on improvement work explains how actions and behaviour influence the change process

Keywords: *Change process, emergent change, generative mechanisms, planned change, school improvement.*

1. Introduction

In the study of organisational change, there has been a growing interest in studying and understanding processes for improvement work in organisations, including schools. The interest has been focused on the process that the organisation undergoes and why and how events evolve in the way they do (Czarniawska, 2006). Schools are intended to promote student learning; however, schools are not traditionally designed to facilitate professional learning for those in systems change; they are not built for continuous improvement (Resnick & Kazemi, 2019). However, schools are nowadays continuously confronted with various forms of change. The past decades have seen a tidal wave of proposals to improve educational organisations (Ball & Cohen, 1999). It is essential to understand the organisation's processes when working with improvement in schools, and school systems across the globe face challenges in their improvement work (Hopkins & Woulfin, 2015).

School improvement can thus be understood through theories that are based on knowledge of systematic mechanisms that lead to effective schooling in combination with knowledge of context in local school improvement journeys. As an organisational process, school improvement is aimed at influencing the collective school capacity to change, which also includes the skills of the members of the organisation and the student's learning and outcomes (Hopkins, 2001). Greany and Waterhouse (2016) argue that continual reform and change have become elements of daily school work, and there are constant pressures to change and innovate.

2. Theoretical framework

A theory cannot be used directly in a study - a model is needed as an intermediary between theory and data (Morgan & Morrison, 1999). If a process perspective is used, the organisation is constituted by the different interaction processes of its members (Cooren et al., 2006; Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Process studies that identify and show how changes in practices are implemented and how

their impact spreads and interacts with existing organisational contexts gives a closer dynamic understanding of how to improve the organisation (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). The process model is event-driven, and explanations are built from observed events to some form of result. The model needs a detailed narrative that describes how the course of events proceeds and changes over time. The model looks for patterns and causal relationships, and the explanations are based on the course of events (Poole & Van de Ven, 2004). Two types of definitions of change are often used in organisational studies: 1) observed difference over time in an organisational unit on selected dimensions or 2) a narrative that describes a sequence of events about how development and change unfold (Poole, Scott, Van de Ven, Dooley & Holmes, 2000). The first definition can relate to a change that is studied with a variance theory methodology. The change is represented as a dependent variable explained by a set of independent variables that statistically explain variations in the dependent variable of change. The second form of change takes an event-driven approach where change events occur based on a narrative. Process theories can have several effects on their explanations, including critical events and turning points, influences from context, and causal factors that affect the sequencing of events (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). The design can 1) identify and test temporal links between activities and also overall temporal patterns (Poole et al., 2000) and 2) handle the multiple time scales that arise in processes, where some events linger for years, other activities may be embedded in a run for shorter periods (Langley, 1999). The most influential work in organisational studies uses narrative history, which tells a detailed story with a process in detail (Bartunek, 1984; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Van de Ven (1992), Langley (1999) and Poole et al. (2000) identified different types of change and innovation studies that follow the process approach. These theories provide fundamentally different accounts of the sequence of events that explain the change process in an organisational entity. Within each process theory: 1) a process is viewed as a different cycle of change events, 2) it is driven by a different "motor" or generating mechanism that 3) operates on a different unit of analysis and 4) represents a different mode of change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, pp. 519-520). *Life cycle* - which is based on the regulated change by, for example, a strategy for improvement; 2) *Teleological process* - that shows development as a cycle when there is some form of dissatisfaction, and the entity finds consensus in new goals. 3) *Dialectical theory* - when there is a conflict between in the organisation, and at last, 4) *Evolutionary theory* when competition arises in the entity.

3. Data sources and analysis

The empirical material includes observation notes, interviews and documents and it was analysed according to Van de Ven's and Poole's (1995) four ideal types for process studies. Narrative strategy, episodes, and graphic representations were used since they provide partly different perspectives of the material. The narrative approach gives a chronological and rich story, making it possible to compare various events. The episodes have precise timing, and the graphical representation is a way to visually show patterns. Pentland's (1999) structural levels based on narrative theory inspired the theoretically interpreted narratives. The course of events, constructed to enable the analysis, contains one or more episodes, where defined activities are carried out according to an intention worded at the beginning of each episode (Jacobsson, 2017). The events that were analysed were shown by events that contained one or more episodes that were stated with an intention followed by resistance or support. Different activities lead the processes forward and identify changes or improvements in the chain of activities, actions, and statements over time. In this study, change is understood as a change within the existing framework (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 2011). Change is a difference in an organisational unit's form, quality, or state. Development is, in this study, defined in this study as something that has created some form of improvement in relation to an intention and that is something new for the organisation or is carried out in a new way, that is, doing in addition to the existing.

4. Result and conclusions

All four ideal types (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995) are present during the improvement work, and the result shows that only the teleological motor was able to create development in the school organisations. The episodes driven by this motor are based on emergent initiatives to reach intentions. However, the result also shows that planned improvement governed by the life cycle theory and the evolutionary theory seems to be a fundamental condition that inspires constructive theories to carry on the process. Sequences of events that contain dialectical theories where a conflict has arisen in the improvement work can contribute to the sequence of events ending in a development. This means that both prescribed and constructive processes have a useful function in the improvement work, which confirms Van de Ven and Poole's (1995) result. The analysis shows that the events were driven by different motors, both single-, double-, triple- and quadruple motors. The various combinations of motors mean that they have relationships with each other

and influence each other. As an example, a sequence of events that ends in change shows that the improvement work is initially driven by a teleological motor that is replaced by an evolutionary motor that complicates the process; stop it and forces the organisation to choose an action alternative that is currently judged to be the most beneficial. This occurs when there is competition for time, resources, and knowledge, and this whole sequence of events it ends with an episode of development.

There are also motors that challenge each other, which happens when conflicts arise in the workplace. This can stop the process, but it can continue as the engines can also replace each other. This happened at one of the schools, where the theological process was driven but disrupted by a conflict and replaced by the dialectical engine. This could have ended the course of events, but when the staff reached a unanimous decision, the teleological motor again took over and drove the process forward towards an evolution. The use of motors can be an indicator of implementation errors that may be actual in the practical work with school improvement, and knowledge about the theories and their driving motors can be helpful to understand why a process stops or continues. The study is based on empirical data and the use of theoretical explanations in the implementation process could guide teachers and leaders working with improvement processes and don't be afraid of conflicts and competition thinking in the working team – both these situations among the staff can bring the process forward, instead of breaking it down!

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