



Vocational teachers taking the lead: VET teachers and the career services for teachers reform in Sweden

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Abstract

In 2013 the Swedish government launched a reform on career services for teachers that introduced first-teachers as a new category of teachers. Since this reform still is in the process of being rolled out, we know fairly little of its impact, especially concerning VET teachers that are appointed first-teachers. This paper explores and analyses two cases of VET first-teachers with focus on the implications on educational leadership practices in their work with school improvement where 'distributed leadership' is used as a lens for understanding the characteristic features of leadership practices. The results show that the VET first-teachers consider themselves to represent an important educational leadership being process leaders for creating a culture built on mutual trust, turning the focus of school improvement from a 'top-down' perspective to change 'from below'. They become 'brokers' and a link between school management and their colleagues, even if there are some difficulties. Moreover they visualise different practices and foster a new awareness – concerning e.g. assessment and the relationship between school and work-place – that seem to influence collegial discourse.

Keywords: vocational teachers, educational leadership, school improvement, advanced skills teachers

Introduction

Over the last 20 years transnational organisations have become increasingly important as actors and shaping forces in curriculum-making and educational reforms (Andersson-Levitt, 2008; Nordin & Sundberg, 2014). Trends of standard-based assessment, accountability and teacher professionalism for increased quality influence national educational policy and trickle down to district and school levels. In this case Sweden is no exception. The Swedish school system has undergone a number of extensive reforms during the last five years: a new school legislation and new curriculum for the compulsory school and upper secondary school. Apart from this, the Career services for teachers (CST) reform was launched by the Swedish government in 2013. The overall aim was to provide new career paths for teachers within the profession, reward skilled teachers and create conditions for school development. What makes this reform interesting is that it has introduced 'first-teachers' (förstelärare) as a category of teachers without any thorough consideration or analysis of implications for the management of schools and school improvement.

In international curriculum and educational leadership research there is an ongoing discussion on approaches to policy as leadership in terms of enacted practice and curriculum making (Uljen, 2015; Wahlström & Sivesind, 2015). This has called upon the necessity of a dialogue between educational leadership studies and curriculum studies. Even if the enactment of the CST reform itself is not the main issue here, this article in many ways positions itself within that dialogue. The aim with this article is to explore and analyse two cases of vocational education and training (VET) first-teachers with special attention to how they experience their position as first-teachers and the implications on educational leadership practices in their work with school improvement. VET teachers are rarely targeted in evaluations and studies of educational reforms, but their previous work experience and professional identity, the fact that they must handle the relationship between school and work-life and the theory – practice-relationship as immanent parts of the VET – that is dealing with a complex and multifarious context – make them particularly interesting to study from out the perspective of leadership practices. The research questions are as follows: How do the VET first-teachers characterise their leadership practices in interaction with colleagues and principals? What implications do they distinguish in terms of the organisation of collegial practices, the relationships between different agents in the local school and school improvement? Finally, how can the leadership practices of the VET first-teachers be analysed and understood from the concept of 'distributed leadership'?

Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan (1998) argue that the process of educational reform enactment is framed within a 'conditional matrix' consisting of context-specific conditions, social agents and their actions. Processes are not linear but

characterised by 'co-construction' (ibid.). This leads to different outputs which also is underlined in research on school reform and school effectiveness (Sterbinsky, Rossa & Redfield, 2006). Principals and teachers are crucial in curriculum work related to sustainable school development according to Adolfsson and Håkansson (2014), especially principals' understanding and learning of how to manage long-term school improvement, as well as principals' ability to challenge the teachers in developing teaching strategies (Adolfsson & Håkansson, 2014). A crucial point is that factors that bring about change are embedded in practice. This implies that the question of educational leadership in a local setting must be theoretically addressed. Following the argument of Uljens (2015) it can be claimed that any educational leadership theory must deal with on the one hand curricular issues such as the relationship between institutional education and economics, politics and society and on the other hand the moral and value-based aspects of professional leadership. In this article a theoretical framework and the concept of 'distributed leadership' will be used for analysing educational leadership practices of VET first-teachers.

The CST reform in context - career services and school improvement

There is a growing concern in many Western countries that the number of teachers is decreasing. For over two decades there have been quite many policy initiatives to prevent teacher turnover and increase attraction to the teaching profession through career pathways for teachers (Fisk Natale, Bassett, Gaddis & McKnight, 2013). Another dimension is the emphasis on the importance of the teacher, from both educational research (Hattie, 2009) and in international reports like *Teachers Matter* (OECD, 2005).

The efforts to strengthen teachers' skills and the status of the teaching profession are often combined with initiatives to promote school improvement through 'collegial learning'. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2013a) collegial learning can be defined as a 'concluding term for different forms of professional development where colleagues acquire knowledge through a structured co-operation in the everyday practice' (p. 25). So far there is no common definition of collegial learning in international research (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006), but there are some general aspects such as a reflective and collective way of sharing and working together in order to develop teaching and to learn about one's own practice. Altogether such actions are supposed to support the learning of the pupils and students (ibid.). Studies show that teachers develop their professional skills when working together collegially through for instance observations, analyses, networks and lesson studies, but it is essential to be aware of the significance of local and contextual factors (Sundstrom Allen & Topolka-Jorissen, 2014).

When the former government introduced the CST reform in July 2013 the ambition was to promote the status of the teacher, provide career opportunities

and to appoint skilled teachers that could be key actors in school improvement. The reform also meant to reward skilled teachers through a quite substantial salary raise (about 540 € for a first-teacher, about 1,080 € for a lecturer per month). In 2014 the reform was expanded to include about 17,000 career services, that is about one out of six teachers (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013b). Today there is about 14,000 first-teachers (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014). An important aspect is that the CST reform actually is optional for municipal and free schools and it is very open in its design. This means that there is a variation between municipalities regarding the number of first-teachers, their positions and assignments, recruitment and the organisation for first-teachers.

The CST reform is founded on the principle that the responsible authority appoints and decides the assignment for the first-teacher. To be appointed, a teacher must be certified and have a minimum of four years of documented excellence in teaching. It is required that the teacher has the ability to improve student achievement and teaching (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013b; Government grant ordinance 2013:70). The state authority allocates a number of positions for first-teachers and/or lecturers and funding is based on higher government grants (Government PM, 2013). It is also up to the municipalities and free schools to create the assignments and in this respect there are some general descriptions of what first-teachers are supposed to do: be responsible for introducing newly employed teachers, coach other teachers, initiate pedagogical discussions and lead projects aimed at improving teaching, be responsible for exams in upper secondary school or adult education, support teacher students on internship or lead a subject. As a result of this, it is hard to be specific about the formal role of the first-teachers. However, an important aspect is that first-teachers in no way are responsible for the budget, staffing or performing any formal tasks that the principals do. The principal leads the school and is responsible for the educational leadership, which also is regulated by the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800).

Compared with career programmes in Poland, Scotland, England and Australia there are many similarities to the CST reform in terms of the aspirations to strengthen the status of the teaching profession. At the same time there are differences. While the mentioned countries have two or more career steps, the CST reform only includes one step. Another difference is that the criteria for being appointed or to be promoted are far more detailed and elaborated than in the Swedish reform. Furthermore, the criteria are based on various needs and tasks for the teachers who are appointed. As described above the regulations for the appointment and the assignments are vaguely defined in the CST reform: first-teachers can work with a number of different tasks where the final decision is made by the responsible authority (Ministry of Education, 2012).

So far we know little of the impact of the CST reform in Sweden because it is so recent, but previous research has shown that first-teachers might strengthen the idea of distributed leadership in schools and at the same time also challenge, to some extent, existing leadership relations and authority – primarily that of the principal (Alvunger, 2015). There are however several international examples of similar reforms. In the USA, National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT) have existed since 1987. It is an extensive process to be certified and the tests last for almost a year. It is voluntary to take the tests and half of those who apply become certified. Regarding student achievement and learning studies indicate that NBCT teachers are more effective than non-certified teachers, especially in certain subjects (Bond, Smith, Baker & Hattie, 2000; Vandevort, Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner, 2004). Another career programme – which not is nationally recognised with certification – in the USA is the ‘Teachers Advancement Programme’ (TAP). An evaluation of the programme using a randomized mixed-method approach shows significant achievement gains on TAP-schools compared to controls. However, the magnitude of gains varied by school and fidelity of implementation. According to implementation the importance of principals and assistant principals roles and actions in high-performing TAP-schools was stressed. They were strong leaders who rigorously evaluated teacher performance, regularly monitored student achievement, recruited and selected skilled master and mentor teachers et cetera. Moreover the highest achieving TAP-school had considerable district support (cf. Schacter & Thum, 2005). Other examples are ‘Advanced Skills Teachers’ (AST) which was introduced in the early 1990s in Australia. According to Watkins (1994) a problem in the implementation of AST was that the required teaching skills rarely were controlled. The CV and the interview played the most important part in the classification process (1994). In a later study by Ingvarson and Chadbourne (1997) there were indications that AST teachers tended to be marginalised in small isolated ‘enclaves’. A common mistake when implementing was that the role and position of the AST in the leading and management structure was unclear (ibid.). More recent studies from the implementation in England show that the AST themselves see their appointment as a recognition of being skilled teachers and they experience a higher professional status. Moreover they believe that their work influence the quality of teaching and student achievement (Fuller, Goodwyn & Francis-Brophy, 2013).

Distributed leadership

A traditional view on leadership is that it depends on individual characteristics and qualities. Against this notion there are those who claim that leadership as practice is relational (Pierce & Newstrom, 2007) and enacted by and stretched out over the people in an organisation (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001; Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon & Yashkina, 2007). In their work on

leadership practice and its connection to the improvement of teaching and learning Spillane et al. (2001, 2004) developed a distributed perspective on leadership practice where it 'is constituted in the interaction of leaders and their social and material situations' (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 27). Leadership is something that is co-performed or 'co-produced' as Ludvigsson (2009) points at in her study on how principals and teachers understand each others thoughts and actions in every-day work. Ärlestig (2008) and Törnsén (2009) underline the importance of a leadership practice and structures that contribute to frequent communication between teachers and principals in matters concerning teaching and learning. In a study on principals in upper secondary school, Johansson, Erlandsson and Dåderman (2014) show the varying conditions and circumstances that principles are engaged in and how they seem to be caught in a 'leadership paradox'. Principals need ideals for their leadership and collegial support but in an organisation subject to changes there is limited time for reflection (ibid.).

A general observation in research is that distribution of leadership functions and roles has a positive impact on organisational development and change (Harris, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2007; Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009; Larsen & Rieckhoff, 2014). Even though the number of impact studies are limited, there are indications that what Leithwood et al. (2009) name as 'planful alignment' tends to have more positive implications on school improvement processes in both a short-term and long-term perspective in comparison to other patterns of distribution (ibid.). A similar argument is made by Hallinger and Heck (2009) who underline that sharing of leadership responsibility from the principal to teachers underpins the creation of effective professional learning communities in schools.

It is an undisputable fact that distributed leadership has been one of the most influential and contested concepts in research on educational leadership for more than over ten years (Harris, 2012). The focus on the idea of shared or multiple leadership has resulted in a great number of studies. In brief, over the last years we have seen a booming trend of the usage of distributed leadership in research. One reason for this is that the concept has paved the way for new perspectives on leadership practice (Harris, 2012, 2013). At the same time some researchers question the empirical evidence for distributed leadership (Harris, 2012; see also Jones, 2014) and the tendency to use it as a universal solution for managing organisations (Jones, 2014). Critics also argue that it is a 'rhetorical' and politically correct concept which reflects the hegemony of accountability and a neo-liberal agenda on quality in global education policy. It is currently in sway among politicians, officials and school stakeholders (Corrigan, 2013).

One of the most important features within the framework of distributed leadership is that leadership practice involves multiple agents with both formal and informal roles and rests on the interaction of people in an organisation

(Bennett, Wise, Woods & Harvey, 2003; Spillane et al., 2004). An essential aspect is mutual trust and the following quote from Harris (2013) captures both the salient features of the concept and the implications that a re-designing of an organisation according to the principles of distributed leadership may have on its agents:

Distributed leadership implies a fundamental change in the way formal leaders understand their practice and the way they view their leadership role. Distributed leadership means actively brokering, facilitating and supporting the leadership of others. It does not mean, as some would suggest, that everyone leads or that everyone is a leader /.../ Distributed leadership underlines that heads are only a part of leadership practice in any school as there are inevitably many other sources of influence and direction. (pp. 546-547)

Over the years there has been a number of leadership functions identified in leadership research. Spillane, Camburn and Stitzel Pareja (2009) have for instance provided a distinction in principals' leadership between administrative tasks (scheduling, budget, staff), curriculum and instruction tasks (planning lessons, instruction in classroom, assessment of students), professional growth and fostering relationships (ibid.). In the analysis of leadership practices in the work of the first-teachers this study will use four categories developed by Leithwood et al. (2009):

- Setting direction: this function includes the articulation and fostering of a vision and goals for the group/organisation; expectations.
- Developing people: a leader gives personal attention and presents intellectual stimulation and support for the individual that in turn becomes a way of forming practices and values for the work of the individual/group
- Redesigning the organisation: improvement can be facilitated by the creation of collaborative structures and processes. The leader has a function to promote an organisational learning culture that supports the learning of both teachers and students.
- Managing the instructional program: monitoring the progress of students' achievements and school improvement; staffing and protecting staff from external pressure that is negative; allocating resources.

In their study on patterns of distributed leadership in a large urban school district in Canada, Leithwood et al. (2007) underlined – which is similar to Harris' conclusion in the quote above – the importance of facilitation and support from the formal school and district leaders:

Distributing leadership to others does not seem to result in less demand for leadership from those in formal leadership positions. However, it does produce greater demand: to coordinate who performs which leadership functions, to build leadership capacities in others, and to monitor the leadership work of those others, providing constructive feedback to them about their efforts. (p. 63)

The principals played a key role for the teaching staff through creating conditions and an allowing culture for developing their leadership capacity (cf. Harris, 2013). In the analysis of the empirical material an interesting aspect is to

what extent first-teachers might both legitimate and strengthen the ideas of distributed leadership in schools, but at the same time also maybe challenge, to some extent, existing leadership relations.

VET Education and The Upper Secondary School System in Sweden

After having completed nine years of compulsory school (primary and secondary education) all students are allowed to study a three-year upper secondary school education. Since the early 1990s there are both public schools (lead by municipalities) and independent schools (companies, organisations, foundations) that provide educations from the national curriculum. Upper secondary education covers both upper secondary school with national programmes and upper secondary schools for learning disabilities. All in all, there are 18 national programmes (three years) which all consist of upper secondary foundation subjects, subjects common to the programme, orientations, programme specialisations and a diploma project. Six of these programmes are higher education preparatory programmes and twelve are vocational programmes. Apart from this there are five introductory programmes for pupils who are not eligible for a national programme (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012).

On national level there is a consultative programme council with stakeholders and representatives from the National Agency for Education for each of the vocational programmes, while the school and the different workplaces cooperate through a local programme council for vocational educations. The vocational programmes can be organised as school-based or apprenticeship-based educations. Regardless of which, the students study upper secondary foundation subjects like Swedish, English, Mathematics and Social sciences, subjects common to the programme and special subjects in line with the vocation and specific orientation. In order to learn vocational knowledge, understanding the vocational culture and being socialised in the vocational community and shaping a vocational identity, the students also have parts of their education in workplaces. The school-based vocational programme must include 15 weeks of workplace-based learning (WBL) as a minimum and in the apprenticeship education WBL during at least half of the education. WBL is regulated in the subject syllabuses and is very important for the students. The school – or more specifically the principal – is responsible for WBL which only under specific circumstances may be located at the school. During WBL the students have a supervisor which must have the required vocational knowledge and experience and be appropriate as supervisors. Generally, the VET teachers visit the students during their WBL and consult with the supervisor before grading. After have finished the programme the students get a vocational degree. In some cases students can continue in further studies in vocational higher education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012).

Methodological considerations and empirical material

The two cases of VET first-teachers that will be presented are 'Beatrice' and 'Albert'. They work in the same municipality, a town with 86,000 inhabitants, but in two separate public upper secondary schools for students in the ages 16–19 years old. The schools are centrally located and have both academic and vocational programmes, but differ in size: Beatrice's school has about 730 students and Albert's school has about 1250 students. Beatrice, 41 years old and with a professional background as a preschool teacher, is a teacher in subjects for the Child and Recreation Programme and Albert, 58 years old and with a previous career as construction worker, is a teacher in subjects for the Building and Construction Programme.

The VET first-teachers in this study have been selected because they started their assignments in 2013 and thus have worked for almost two years. This makes it easier to describe how they understand their position and draw conclusions on general features in their leadership practices. Another reason is that they both chose very similar assignments, that is to work with the quality of workplace-based learning (WBL) within the vocational programmes.

The study is based on a 'mixed-method' design (Cresswell, 2010). Firstly a contextual analysis has been performed focusing on the role of the VET first-teachers in the organisation as described in strategic documents, that is a document analysis. Apart from this the contextual analysis includes semi-structured interviews with Albert's and Beatrice's principals (n=4). The interviews lasted about 45 minutes and aimed at exploring the question of changes and implications more specifically. Altogether, the document analysis and interviews provides a description of the two VET contexts at Beatrice's and Albert's schools respectively. The interviews with the principals are important in order to understand how the VET first-teachers' assignments are perceived and help to make a more 'thick' description and analysis of the two VET teachers in their VET contexts.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews with the two VET first-teachers have been conducted for exploring qualities in the experiences of the first-teachers and for defining leadership practices and strategies into thematic categories (Bryman, 2004). The interviews were about two hours long and concerned questions regarding how they look upon their assignment, their strategies, how they organise management and motivate peers, their interactions and relationships with colleagues, conditions, professional development for teachers, important factors for their work like experience, knowledge and skills, their views on how the development of their colleagues, impact and implications on teaching.

In the analyses of data, thematic categories describing the general features of the leadership practices of the first-teachers have been identified from how the VET first-teachers characterise these practices in interaction with colleagues and

principals. In the discussion I will relate the thematic categories to Leithwood et al.'s (2009) categories presented earlier in this paper and present and discuss some hypotheses on what implications the work of the VET first-teachers may have on the organisation of school improvement and teaching.

Since this study builds on a case-study approach there are of course limits regarding what general conclusions that can be made on a larger scale from the description and analysis on two different cases of how VET work as first-teachers. However, it must be emphasised that the CST reform is quite new. Though this study has a somewhat limited scope is important because it takes on career pathways for teachers as a brand new field of research in Sweden and contributes to a deepened understanding of how reforms directed towards the teaching profession – such as the CST reform – have an impact at the local school level as well as teacher level. Since the CST reform is aimed at facilitating for school improvement it is necessary to evaluate the reform impacts on the core processes of teachers' collegial work. Therefore we need to learn more about the qualities and leadership practices of VET first-teachers, not least because this category of teachers in general rarely are focused on in educational reform research. In this respect the case-study approach serves as a first attempt

Results

In the following general features in the leadership practice of the two VET first-teachers and their views on how they interact with colleagues and principals will be presented. The features overlap each other and reveal the complex and inter-twined character of how they work.

Visualising and systematising

When Beatrice and Albert received their assignments they experienced them as sprawling and with various tasks, e.g. to develop assessment tools, communication between the school and the parents, improve interaction with companies, methodological development and so on. An interesting aspect is that both Beatrice and Albert decided to focus on the quality of WBL in the VET programmes but from different starting-points: Beatrice had observed great differences in how the VET programmes at her school organised WBL while Albert had experienced a lack of knowledge and understanding of the significance of WBL among the principals and the district leadership.

A key strategy chosen by the VET first-teachers was to visualise how WBL was planned and organised at their schools: the relationships to companies and workplaces, the time period for WBL in the programme and general views on the importance of WBL among teachers and principals. Their first step was to map views among colleagues and in the school management. Albert focused on the principals and the leadership of the district and came to the conclusion that

there was no coherent view on WBL from the curriculum, no common goals or visions, no general idea for evaluating and a vague understanding of the principal's responsibility for WBL in the VET programmes. By visualising the disparities, Albert was supported by his principal to create a systematic plan for continuous quality improvement and assurance.

Beatrice noticed that VET teachers at her school knew little about how WBL was organised in the other programmes. There was no consensus regarding WBL and different conditions for both teachers and students. In her eyes it was necessary to visualise the different practices, to emphasise the importance of WBL by highlighting the aims in the curriculum and to foster an awareness – concerning e.g. assessment – that would influence collegial discourse, not only between VET teachers but in relation to subject teachers. She stressed the benefits of a WBL of good quality and that sharing experiences and examples of best practice between the 'hard' (technical/industrial) and 'soft' (human-centred/caring) VETs would reveal common needs.

According to Albert the mapping of similarities and differences, the exploration of the potential for development and possible synergies has helped to trigger the interest and motivation among principals and teachers for working with WBL. Albert refers to this as a 'snowball-effect'. By putting words on what they do, the VET teachers have started to become aware of what works and what doesn't, but most of all the value of documentation and evaluation. This seems to have led to an understanding of WBL that in turn has pointed out new ideas and models. One of Albert's main achievements according to himself is the creation of 'the year-wheel', an overview of activities and tasks related to WBL. This has also been useful in contacts with the professional trainers in the companies. They know when they can expect students or meetings with the VET teachers at the school. Albert's principal emphasises the first-teacher as 'a significant agent in school improvement' and someone who 'works with measurable goals on a long-term basis'.

Brokering

The two VET first-teachers can to a great extent be described as 'brokers': both internally in the school organisation and in relation to external agents. They take on – and are given a mandate from their principals – a leading role for communicating and interpreting information. Sometimes they negotiate between conflicting views and interests and act as a link between school management and their colleagues. A corresponding notion and expectation that Beatrice's principal had on her as first-teacher was that 'the consultative work in general will increase at the school with the help and support from the first-teacher's assignment'.

Beatrice describes her first assignment as a 'top-down' project that was necessary to anchor 'from below'. It was essential to make others follow. One im-

portant factor for this according to her was that the colleagues had to see that changes could lead to time savings and reduce the work-load. Beatrice also argued that the principal had to explicitly allocate time for the teachers to plan and work with WBL issues. Once these changes were made, she experienced that complaints about lack of time among VET teachers abated. Furthermore her colleagues became more focused on the qualitative dimensions of WBL rather than checking that the students had spent the correct amount of hours during internship. On his behalf, Albert describes a similar development in the relationship to his colleagues and principal. He also managed to get support from the principal concerning time for joint meetings between VET teachers from different programmes. His argument was that it could be possible to work more concentrated on subject integration, something that the principals had desired for a long time.

'Brokering' as a main feature does not exclusively apply to how the VET first-teachers describe themselves in relation to the principals and the teaching staff. To a great extent they consider themselves to be central for subject integration. In this respect Beatrice and Albert express that subject teachers have become interested in how their subjects may motivate and appear as relevant for the students. Furthermore, they experience that the subject teachers are more flexible and likely to adjust their plans according to WBL and specific topics in the vocational subjects. The following quote from Albert is illustrative:

The subject teachers are extremely important to integrate in this. This brings us back to the curriculum. If the WBL is placed in year three and the Swedish, Maths and English courses are in year one, then you might be able to work with Social Studies instead. This is different depending on which programme it concerns /.../ This is where we currently are working. Now we have brought up the issue of the service plans for subject teachers. How engaged are they supposed to be in WBL? How engaged are they supposed to be in the writing of reflective log books? Because there are loads that they can take part of what is written.

Albert and Beatrice state that it has taken a lot of effort to include both VET and subject teachers, but they believe that the number of subject teachers dedicated to WBL have increased. They also mention examples of teachers that visit their students in the workplaces. Beatrice exemplifies with two subject teachers: A teacher in Swedish works with report writing connected to WBL and a teacher in Maths assigns the students to collect data during WBL that later is used in lessons concerning geometry. According to Beatrice this leads to a more goal-focused teaching for the VET degree and the future working life of the students. The students can more easily see the significance of the general subjects.

Finally, the VET first-teachers can be characterised as brokers in the communication between the school and the workplaces. An example of this comes from Beatrice who during one semester experienced clashes between VET teachers and professional trainers in the Electricity and Energy Programme regarding assessment and different views on the purpose of WBL for the stu-

dents. It was a hard situation according to her, because she had had troubles to reach the VET teachers on this programme. Her strategy was to more closely involve the professional trainers in developing assessment criteria. After some time Beatrice noticed that the trainers gradually changed their approach towards WBL and the conflict was 'defused'. Another example from Albert is that he created 'clusters' of persons from different enterprises and vocations that may represent more than just one vocation/line of business (e.g. a construction worker is familiar with other trades like excavator operator, bricklayer, plumber). According to him this reduced the number of agents involved and it has eased both for VET teachers and principals in planning WBL periods.

Fostering a culture built on mutual trust

When the two VET first-teachers talk about the relationship with their colleagues they often refer to their task as to motivate, challenge and change the approach towards learning during WBL. Both Albert and Beatrice express that it is not an easy task and that they too are challenged by their colleagues. The fact that first-teachers get a quite substantial raise of the salary has complicated the relationship to the teacher team. The title 'first-teacher' is also seen as a bit provoking in the traditionally 'flat' character of the Swedish school system. Together with the appointment to first-teacher comes a variety of expectations that Beatrice and Albert have to respond to.

In the beginning of their assignments Beatrice and Albert encountered suspicion, jealousy and expressions of *Jantelagen* ('the tall poppy syndrome'). Beatrice describes how two colleagues who were at odds with the school management were especially reluctant to her ideas because they thought she ran errands for the principals. For the first-teachers it has been important to work with attitudes and to be aware of that some teachers actually are scared, or as Beatrice puts it: 'I can think that they entirely are afraid of changes /.../ Sometimes I can almost guess it is about insecurity, a fear of being exposed in the open or so. Or I must take a stand'. Beatrice also says that she knows that it takes a lot of courage to spell issues and troubles out in the open. Therefore Beatrice and Albert try to establish confidence and create a collegial culture built on mutual trust.

An essential aspect in order to gain trust is availability according to Albert. His colleagues must be confident that he takes time to listen and is reachable. He has also marked the time dedicated for the assignment in the schedule. If he shouldn't meet up to expectations and commitments, the colleagues would be disappointed and question him. In this respect his experience as a construction worker plays an important role. By recognising that they share the same problems and that solutions can be worked out through collaboration, Albert has experienced that the VET teachers are more closely knit together as a group. In this respect he believes that the systematic work through the 'year-wheel' helps

the teachers because they must be confident in that everyone do their part of the work.

The VET first-teachers have no formal leader responsibilities and thus cannot make decisions over their colleagues like the principal can. Neither Albert nor Beatrice say that they want to be able to do this, but still they have to deal with situations that requires leadership abilities. Beatrice describes this in the following way:

You must show a firm leadership. Teachers are individualists /.../ You must be pretty tough. You must be clear, you must be good at explaining the purpose with a change and a development so you manage to get the others to follow you. Then you probably need to have an ability to be patient as well, that you need to meet someone several times /.../ I must say it is good to have worked as a preschool teacher.

For Beatrice, showing a strong leadership is not the same as being authoritarian, telling others what they ought to do. A strategy for her has been to invite colleagues to attend her classes and ask for feedback on her teaching. By doing this she hopes that the colleagues will become curious about her teaching. In turn she feels that it becomes easier to ask if she can attend one of her colleagues' classes. She claims that her work with WBL has made the subject teachers interested in subject integration and the vocational subjects and that this commitment is appreciated by the VET teachers. In Beatrice's eyes the work on subject integration thus provides a platform for reciprocity and creating mutual trust. Albert on his behalf emphasises the significance of clear expectations, roles and responsibilities, which he believes prevents many of the usual misunderstandings between VET teachers and professional trainers.

Facilitating management and capacity-building

Many of the fore-mentioned features concern structure, organisation, relationships and interaction. Facilitation of management and promotion of capacity-building as a general feature is in many ways related to these, and as we have seen Albert describes the process of working with quality assurance of WBL as creating a 'snowball effect'. One of the main areas where the two VET first-teachers experience that they facilitate management for the principals is their leading role for planning and organising joint meetings. A strategy for Beatrice in this respect is to mark in the schedule that 'Now we exclusively are discussing workplace-based learning'.

Both Albert and Beatrice - which also is underlined by their principals - emphasise that there is a tendency that school improvement is founded on short-term solutions and there is a need for combining 'top-down' and change 'from below'. Preparing the ground for a more systematic way of working not least paves the way for collaboration, which Albert describes in the following way:

If you visualise and point at these time savings and where you in the year-wheel maybe can split up and share the questions then it becomes much more fun. You are suddenly working together for pursuing the goal of a better quality on WBL. And then you increase the motivation of the teachers to work with it. Just working together with an issue, to form groups, project groups. It can be that we are looking at formative assessment for example, and the other group will look into writing log books. How can you later connect your issues? /.../ Suddenly a teacher on the Vehicle and Transport Programme is working with a teacher in Handicraft and Hairdressing on the same topic.

Besides from creating conditions for 'crossing over' VET programme borders, the VET first-teachers experience that they help their colleagues to connect to VET teachers in other schools. An important arena and network is provided through a WBL-developer education provided by a university in their region. In his plan for working with WBL, Albert has formulated an aim that at least one of the VET teachers in each VET programme teacher team ought to have gone through an education in WBL provided by the Swedish National Agency for Education.

In many ways the VET first-teachers can be characterised as process leaders and in this respect their leadership practice concerns to sustain development work, or as Albert's principal puts it: 'He is a tremendous support for them. You can instantly tell when he's not present. Then they start to complain a little: "Where is Albert? Where is Albert?" So, he really contributes to their development.' Another dimension of facilitating is that Beatrice and Albert engage in planning the services for VET teachers and even sometimes the subject teachers. By being in direct contact with the teachers, the first-teachers have insight in the work-load and specific needs of the teachers. As described before, the VET first-teachers play an important role in co-ordinating activities during the school year, not least promoting subject integration which seem to strengthen the collaborative bonds between teachers. This is of course helpful for the principals.

Discussion

In this closing section the main results will be related to Leithwood et al.'s (2009) categories presented earlier in this paper: Setting direction, Developing people, Redesigning the organisation and Managing the instructional program. In addition to this a number of hypotheses on what implications the leadership practices of the VET first-teachers may have on the organisation of school improvement and teaching will be presented and discussed.

'Visualising and Systematising' as a general feature in the leadership practices of the VET first-teachers can be related to key aspects within Setting direction and Redesigning the organisation (Leithwood et al., 2009). One example is Albert's 'year-wheel' which has opened up for synchronising periods of WBL between the programmes and made it clear for both VET teachers and subject teachers when and what to focus on certain themes, topics and aims in the cur-

riculum. When Beatrice talks about how her and her colleagues work has changed teaching and the organisation of WBL she stresses that it has become more quality-oriented and focused on the goals in the curriculum. She has experienced a shift: from asking the question 'how many?' in terms of the amount of hours spent on WBL teachers focus on the 'what?' and 'how?' Parallel to this development Beatrice claims that relationships between the professional trainers and VET teachers have improved, not least due to that the expectations and roles are more clearly defined and assessment criteria more thoroughly elaborated. What both VET first-teachers describe – and which the principals underline as the purpose with the assignment to work with the quality of WBL – something that can be referred to as the emergence of a new 'quality awareness'.

'Brokering' and 'Facilitating management and capacity-building' both stand out as general features that relate to what Leithwood et al. (2009) call Developing people, Redesigning the organisation and Managing the instructional program. When these functions are distributed into the hands of the VET first-teachers they lead to what can be referred to as 'closing the gap(s)'. In terms of being like brokers, the VET first-teachers act in the interface between the various sub-systems that are present in the school organisation: VET teachers, subject teachers, special education teachers, school management and so on. The two cases of VET first-teachers and their work with WBL illustrate how the collaboration and interaction is strengthened, something Beatrice exemplifies in the following way:

It is conducive for the idea of working together as a team, that you can use it in a cross-subject way of teaching. When it is time for the students to present experiences from the internship, then the Swedish teacher of course must be there because it is about oral presentations. You don't need a 'make-believe-topic' because they can talk about something they feel familiar with. So exactly this, it is motivating – we can co-ordinate and it can result in some time savings for different courses.

The work of the two VET first-teachers seems to influence collegial discourse in a positive direction through the formation of a common platform of subject integration. 'Closing the gap' as a description thus not only apply to the first-teachers in terms of being like brokers between the colleagues and the principal (cf. Alvunger, 2015). A final remark concerning 'gaps' – which however must be examined more thoroughly before any conclusions can be made – is examples of how the VET first-teachers experience an improved relationship between the school and the work places/companies. A hypothesis for future studies could be that the gap between professional trainers and VET teachers might be bridged through the leading role of the first-teachers.

The general feature 'Fostering a culture built on mutual trust' relate to Developing people and Setting direction. Subject integration is important and sig-

nals a positive value for the relationship between VET teachers and subject teachers. A central aspect and implication described by the VET first-teachers is that we can speak of the emergence of 'authenticity and a coherent view'. When teaching becomes more focused on the goals in the curriculum together with subject integration it seems like this can lead to a more holistic and authentic teaching. By relating to the work-life and build on experiences and activities from WBL in the tasks and exams in general theoretical subjects, subject teachers more likely can ask authentic questions. Moreover, when questions are conceived as genuine and related to the future occupation, Swedish, English and Maths may in general be considered more relevant and significant for the students. It is hardly controversial to suggest that a VET that endorses themes and tasks that cut across the curriculum is more likely to transcend the theory - practice dichotomy.

Since the CST reform actually still is being rolled out it is not yet possible to see the full impact of it. Still it can be argued that the reform has opened up for changes in the way educational leadership is practiced. The VET first-teachers in this study consider themselves to represent an important educational leadership in terms of being process leaders for creating a culture built on mutual trust, turning the focus of school improvement from a 'top-down' perspective to change 'from below'. This is not a totally smoothly running process but has presented challenges to existing collegial structures. However, according to the principals aspects like envy and suspicion gradually have decreased. The VET first-teachers in this study can nonetheless be characterised as 'facilitators' for capacity-building. Whether Albert's 'snowball-effect' will create an avalanche is yet to be seen.

Note on contributor

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