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Ways of seeing the role of an advanced teacher in relation to school development in Sweden


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In today’s schools, the teachers’ work and professional knowledge are increasingly challenged and questioned, and politicians tend to seek quick solutions to the schools’ so-called crisis. One such solution was the implementation of a career position reform for advanced teachers in 2013.

The 2013 career position reform for advanced teachers (SKOLF 2013: 147) allows schools to apply for state funding to establish careers for teachers in primary and secondary schools. Fully developed, the reform will include 17,000 teachers in 2016/2017. The reform includes a small number of lecturers (with a doctorate degree), but the project in which this study is carried out is restricted to research on the career positions of advanced teachers.

The reform was introduced to offer support to individual teachers and their careers as well as contribute to school development. To what extent this is achievable depends on many different factors; including the conditions created for and by the teachers selected for this position, which, among others factors, is dependent on how the reform is interpreted by various actors.

Research on School Effectiveness (see for instance Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1997) has contributed to knowledge of the characteristics of effective schools, namely schools that, in comparison to other schools, achieve good results. The starting point of the research is that something can be learned from schools that have proven to be successful. When effectiveness research starting points are transferred to local school practices, it seems essential to first identify effective teachers, teachers who, compared to others, achieve particularly good results with their students. And secondly, to work to ensure that their knowledge and teaching methods will be spread throughout the school. One way to interpret the reform is by equating the advanced teacher with the effective teacher, who has access to and can transfer knowledge to their colleagues on how to achieve good results.

On the other hand, more process- and learning-oriented research about the development of schools has contributed to knowledge relevant for teachers learning in Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, 2004; Louise, 2006; Stoll & Louise, 2007; Wald & Castleberry, 2000), for teachers’ engagement in knowledge building processes based on every day practices as grounds for development (Thelin & Scherp, 2014) and for schools’ development into Learning Organizations (Leitwood & Louise, 1998). Within such theoretical frameworks, school development takes the shape of a problem-solving process (Hameyer, 2001, Scherp, 2003). The perspective of school development as an open ended sense making process opens up for other interpretations of the role and work of the advanced teacher; than those based on the efficiency perspective. Instead of being considered a consumer of knowledge, the teacher is regarded as a producer or co-creator of learning and teaching knowledge.

The aim of the study presented in this paper is to explore the ways in which the role of an advanced teacher is seen in relation to school development within Swedish educational context, by teachers selected for the position.
Methods

Qualitative research methods were used to construct and analyze the data. The data consisted of 40 responses to an open-question survey that was distributed to all advanced teachers in one Swedish municipality several months after commencing work. The municipality was chosen within my professional network through convenience sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). From a total population of 106 teachers selected for an advanced teacher position in the municipality, 40 participated in the study. Further to the appointment process, which was carried out in two steps, data needed to be collected at two different occasions. From 28 teachers selected for the position in 2013, 19 responded to the survey. In 2014, 21 out of the 78 selected teachers responded.

During the period 2013-2014 my research colleges and I conducted interviews with six advanced teachers working in different municipalities. The interviews included several semi-structured questions, which was followed up by unstructured questions (See Löfdahl Hultman, Thelin, Hjalmarsson & Westman, 2014). Thanks to the broader approach, the greater number of questions and the possibility to follow up on the answers, these interviews contributed to a richer and deeper understanding of the complexity of the reform and has thus been useful when interpreting advanced teachers’ written answers in this study.

Analysis was informed by variation theory (Marton & Tsui, 2004). Variation theory has also been used in defining ways of seeing as a research object.

Tentative results

Results suggest that variation in ways of seeing the advanced teachers’ role in relation to school development can be described by the use of four categories. In this paper these categories are labeled Role model, Educator, Developer and Learning leader.

Seeing the advanced teacher as a Role model means focusing on what has already been accomplished rather what needs to be further developed. Through the reform advanced teachers are rewarded for their good work.

Seeing the advanced teacher as an Educator means focusing on the sharing of knowledge to other teachers. Advanced teachers are considered experts on teaching and instruction. This way of seeing is typically associated with lecturing or tutoring activities.

Seeing the advanced teacher as a Developer means focusing on developing instruction. From this point of view, efforts can be directed towards on subjects such as mathematics or towards specific teaching methods like flipped classroom.

Seeing the advanced teacher as a Learning leader means focusing on collegial learning as a foundation for school development. Seen this way the advanced teacher becomes a team leader responsible for organizing developmental processes throughout the whole school.
If the variation described in this paper reflects a variation among advanced teachers in general, the effects of the reform can be expected to vary. The question then will be, not only if or to what degree it will have an impact on practice but rather what impact it will have. The results have implications for the conditions set up for the Advanced Teachers (as well as other teachers), the work carried out by the Advanced Teachers, the Advanced Teachers relationships to their teacher colleagues, the result of the carrier position reform.

Based on the results of the study, school leaders and advanced teachers are advised to learn more about the various perceptions of the reform’s intention as well as the role these teachers play in relation to school development. Different views need to be addressed and communicated.

References


