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Unni Vere Midthassel

ABSTRACT

This article draws on a Norwegian project—in one primary and one lower secondary school—that had the aim of creating a shared understanding of classroom management and that resulted in a handbook on classroom management at each of these schools. Teacher reflection and teacher sharing were vital in this project initiated from the outside yet relying on bottom-up strategies. Three topics are studied: procedures of the projects, teacher experiences with procedures and teachers' perceptions of learning opportunities in the project. Data was collected using interviews, questionnaire and log from the process. Results show that, although the main project work was carried out by the teachers the role of the principal was vital during the whole process. Furthermore, the findings of the project suggest organised work needs to continue after the project has ended.

KEYWORDS *change activity, innovation, school development, school improvement*

Introduction

Research has shown the importance of focusing on a school's core activity in order to succeed in improving schools (Fullan, 2001; Harris and Hopkins, 1999). Orderly classrooms, teachers who manage teaching as well as the social life of the class, expecting academic and social achievement of students, are signs of effective classrooms (Reynolds and Teddlie, 2000). Furthermore, studies have reported that teacher certainty makes a difference in student mastery of basic skills (Rosenholtz, 1989) and professionally certain teachers give higher priority to influencing relations between students and establishing routines for desired behaviour (Munthe, 2003). In line with the foregoing one can argue that teachers need to be aware of their role as classroom managers and to enhance their teaching skills accordingly. Moreover, research into school effectiveness has reported that consistency among teachers is an aspect of effective schools (Reynolds et al., 2000) and that collaboration among staff in addition to

feedback systems is associated with teacher certainty (Rosenholtz, 1989). However, the results of a Norwegian study showed that teacher certainty varied more within schools than between schools (Munthe and Bru, 2003). On this basis there would seem to be good reasons for initiating projects that focus on teachers' reflection on their professional role and on creating a shared understanding of the teacher's role as a classroom manager.

This article draws on a two-year Norwegian project to create a shared understanding of classroom management among school staff in one primary and one lower secondary school. More precisely, the project focused on enhancing teachers' knowledge and consciousness of their role and behaviour towards their students, and the development of more consistent practices among the teaching staff. Furthermore, the project involved resulted in agreement on a handbook to guiding teachers in their role as classroom managers. One might argue that classroom management has both academic and social aspects. The focus in this project was on the social aspect, which specifically concentrates on how to prevent disruptive behaviour, how to deal with such behaviour and how to create good social relationships and a climate that is conducive to on-task and learning behaviour.

This two-year project reported positive effects based on pre- and post-tests that assessed self-reported classroom management, shared goals and the reduction of the strain caused by disruptive students (Midthassel and Bru, 2001). It is therefore interesting to look more closely at the processes in the project from the Norwegian school context.

Three research questions will concentrate on:

- (1) What the procedures were in the project?
- (2) How the teachers experienced the project, which was intended to be bottom-up but was initiated from the outside?
- (3) How were learning opportunities perceived?

Norwegian Context

The two schools in the project were both public schools and located in a Norwegian town with 100,000 inhabitants. In Norway over 90 per cent of students attend public schools, and the compulsory schools are owned and run by the local municipalities. Since 1975 the law regarding special education in Norway has been integrated into the ordinary school law. According to which every child has the right to attend his/her local school and to be trained and educated in accordance with his/her abilities. Following the closure of special schools, students with various types of learning disabilities now attend their local school; normally in the same class as students without such problems. 'A school for all' or 'The inclusive school' is the ideology. Consequently, teachers may have to deal with a great variation in their students' learning abilities as well as in their behaviour. For many teachers this policy of integration has made their work more demanding.

Each municipality has a school psychology service (SPS) to support students with various problems and to enhance teachers' and schools' mastery of dealing with students with problems. Thus their work focuses on prevention as well as treatment. In spite of this, research has revealed the SPS's work on a systemic level to be the less frequent (Idsöe, 2003).

Theoretical Framework of the Improvement Project

Creating a shared understanding of classroom management builds on the assumption that teachers have subjective opinions concerning their role as classroom managers and that these opinions can form the basis of a shared understanding. Drawing on the classic work of Berger and Luckmann (1967), Fullan (2001) used *teachers' subjective realities* as a concept to describe their personal understanding based on daily work. Furthermore, according to Fullan these often unspoken subjective realities might form an obstacle to consistent practice in schools—which is why an objective reality is needed. However, the concept of objective reality is problematic. One might ask whether a reality can be objective. In the present study the concept of shared understanding is preferred to describing an agreed understanding based on active intentional work. This work takes the individual teacher's opinion as its starting point and reviews dialogue and discussions with colleagues in order to agree a shared understanding. Further reflection with colleagues is required to help the teachers transform this agreed understanding into practice. Additionally, practical ideas from colleagues might widen the teacher's repertoire. According to a newly published study from Iceland (Adalsteinsdottir, 2004), teachers vary in their classroom behaviour, while some were characterized as being empathic towards students, non-empathic teachers and uncommitted teachers were also observed. Moreover, the teachers studied also varied in regard to their self-understanding and reflection. This could be seen as an argument for concentrating on reflection, sharing and discussion in order to enhance teachers' awareness of their behaviour in the classroom, while at the same time developing a shared understanding of classroom management to strengthen a more consistent practice. Consequently, individual and collective teacher learning will become central to the matter.

Studies in different countries have shown that teachers face similar challenges, for instance the lack of on-task orientation and disruptive behaviour in their classrooms (Chazan et al., 1994; Kokkinos et al., 2004; Nordahl and Sörлие, 1997; Ogden, 1998; Winkley, 1996). One could therefore assume that there is a need for teachers to share their experiences and learn from each other. In fact, several researchers have emphasized the potential that colleagues represent for an individual's learning (Day, 1999; Fullan, 1992; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Marks and Seashore Louis, 1999; Rhodes and Beneicke, 2002; Seashore Louis and Kruse, 1998; Senge, 1990).

According to Argyris and Schön (1974) individuals hold *theories of actions* that comprise the values, knowledge and experiences that limit individual teachers' actions. These theories incorporate the often unconscious theories that professionals subscribe to and that can be derived from a teacher's behaviour (theories in use) and the theories teachers claim to subscribe to (espoused theories). *Mental models* (Senge, 1990) and *theories of practice* Handal (as cited in Day, 1999) are two other concepts used to describe the tacit knowledge that individuals possess about their work. According to Guskey (2002) teachers' experiences in their classroom have an impact on teachers' attitudes and beliefs about teaching. However, with no reflection on their experiences, teachers' mental models remain tacit and thus are not open to analysis and evaluation (Schön, 1983). Reflecting together with colleagues can help teachers to enhance their awareness of their behaviour as well as their attitudes and beliefs through a process that creates opportunities for learning (Midthassel and Bru, 2001).

Conversely, research has also shown that although collaboration is planned for and encouraged, teacher reflection and learning are not obvious (Hargreaves, 1994; Little, 1990). In fact, according to Eraut (2002) teachers unconsciously develop what he calls 'deceptive discourse' to avoid being criticized when talking to colleagues about work. Consequently it might be necessary to arrange for collaborative situations that call for teacher sharing and reflection in order to develop a shared understanding among the teaching staff.

Yet there might be further challenges connected to learning in colleague groups. Research into small group learning has shown that individuals steer clear of asking for information, apparently preferring to pretend to understand what they do not understand in order to avoid embarrassment (Farr et al., 2003). Thus, it seems to be important to avoid what Hargreaves (1994) called comfortable collaboration or what Senge (1990) identified as defending routines, which protect norms of privacy and exclude in depth investigation into teaching and learning. Research has suggested that interpersonal trust in and mutual respect of colleagues are of importance for honest behaviour when seeking information, which in turns makes way for learning (Edmondson cited in Farr et al., 2003). Hence, in colleague groups characterized by trust and respect, mental models and personal mastery become public when teachers attempt to unite their personal mental models with shared representations of reality essential for mutual learning among staff (Lam, 2004). This interplay between individual knowledge and the organization is central to organizational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Lam, 2004; Senge, 1990).

To ensure that new learning in the organization will be a guide to current and future actions, it has to be recorded in written records. Lam (2004) calls this memory storage and points out its importance in times of teacher or principal change. Moreover, written records symbolize decisions and solutions attained through collective learning. In line with this, the creation of a handbook on classroom management becomes relevant. Each school in the

present project developed their own handbook containing the agreed understanding of the teachers' practical advice on how to operate good classroom management as well as the principal's foreword giving the handbook the status of a management tool.

Individual and collective learning in schools presupposes teacher involvement in the process.

Research into the school improvement tradition has shown that top-down strategies failed to succeed in developing schools because the ownership needed to secure a solid implementation process was hard to establish (Harris, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2000). Therefore, bottom-up strategies have been preferred. Integral to bottom-up strategies are the cases individuals' need to pursue the intended change. If they perceive the project to be relevant and it becomes important to them, then this importance will act as a motivating factor in teacher involvement (Klein, 1991; Locke and Latham, 1994; Midthassel, 2004). Furthermore, research suggests that teachers prefer in-service training courses that will benefit them in their classrooms (McMahon, 1999). This concurs with research suggesting that individuals are motivated by the prospect of personal pay-off from their involvement, for example enhanced mastery or reduced strain (Haslam, 2000). In addition, teachers' motivation for a project is vitally important considering the pressures of time and intensification reported by teachers (Hargreaves, 1992, 1994). The theme of the present project was classroom management, and classroom management is a principal task for the teacher. Although research across countries has shown that teachers' perceived challenges in the classroom are intense, there is little time for reflection with colleagues (Day, 1999; Fullan, 2001). One could therefore assume that a project focusing on classroom management and offering reflection with colleagues would be perceived as useful by most of the teachers.

Knowing that teacher motivation is important the principal may face a dilemma concerning their school attempting change since this is related to whether a majority agreement for the project can be sought beforehand (Fullan, 2001). According to the research referred to above motivated teachers will be more committed. In contrast, avoiding necessary change because of the resistance of some teachers might impede school improvement.

Furthermore, improvement activity has to be organized (Fullan, 2001). Research has acknowledged the principal's role in school improvement. For instance, a study among Norwegian compulsory schools showed that teachers were more likely to involve themselves in school development activities when the principal played an active role (Midthassel et al., 2000). This role had two dimensions: arranging for the teachers to be involved and showing an active interest in the project. Hence it is interesting to study the principals' role in the present project. Furthermore, findings from the study mentioned above suggest that principals of lower secondary schools play a more significant role and face more challenges from their staff compared to principals of primary schools. This makes it interesting to look for differences in the way the principal at the

primary school and the principal at the secondary school arrange the present project.

Method

Participants

The project was initiated by the SPS in order to increase the schools' mastery of disciplinary problems. During several years the two schools had reported a lot of behavioural problems to the SPS, and this was a reason for their invitation to participate in the project. Another reason was that both schools had principals known to have positive attitudes toward change initiatives. The principals were positive toward the project and the schools' participation was agreed upon by all staff at the two schools. The teachers numbered 33 at the primary school and 36 at the lower secondary school. Team-teaching and collaboration with their peers were well known to the teachers at both schools. They were also familiar with peer-group coaching. Two researchers from the Centre for Behavioural Research at Stavanger University College (CBR) were invited to take part in the project as consultants alongside two professionals from SPS. The project lasted two years, 1996–1998.

Each school established a project group consisting of leading teachers. During the first year of the project the external consultants visited the schools' project groups monthly to discuss their work on the handbook. During the second year the visits were more sporadic. In addition, the consultants ran three workshops with the school staff at the primary school and four at the lower secondary school during the project period.

Instruments

This article is based on notes from the consultants' log describing work in the project, interviews conducted half-way through the project and data resulting from a survey conducted at the end of the project period.

Interviews

Seventeen of the teachers (10 from the primary school and seven from the lower secondary school) were interviewed after the first year of the project. The teachers interviewed were selected from the total group of 69. The selection procedure was conducted as follows: The principals were asked to find volunteer teachers at each school. The selection involved four criteria: (1) gender (six male and eleven female); (2) seniority (0–2 years [four teachers], 3–6 years [six teachers] and more than six years [seven teachers]); (3) representation of both form teachers (10) and subject teachers (7); and (4) teachers who were team leaders (five teachers) and teachers without any such tasks (12

teachers). The two principals sent their list of teachers' names for interview to the CBR, which was responsible for the interviews. Although the criteria presented above did guide the principals in their selection, there might be a potential bias since the teachers were volunteers and in theory the principals might have been reluctant to put forward names of disillusioned or disaffected teachers. Furthermore, one might suppose that teachers with a positive attitude to the project would be more inclined to give interviews. Hence the principals were asked not to put forward only positive teachers.

The interviews lasted 35–45 minutes and were semi-structured. They were audio taped and later transcribed. Topics reported on in this article are issues relevant to the teachers' involvement in the project and their perception of learning possibilities in the project.

Questionnaires

All the teachers involved in the project answered two questionnaires anonymously, one at the start of the project and the second at the end (Midthassel and Bru, 2001). Three scales developed for the survey at the end of the project are reported on in this article: 'project utility', 'content with the handbook' and 'handbook use'. 'Project utility' consists of four items: (1) to be in this project has been instructive; (2) the work has given me worthwhile opportunities for reflection; (3) the work has made me more certain of my role as classroom manager; and (4) participating in this project has inspired me in my work. The scale's alpha was 0.89. The scale for 'content with the handbook' contains three items: (1) I am satisfied with the book; (2) I recognize my thoughts in the handbook; and (3) the handbook has essential defects (recoded). The scale's alpha was 0.78. 'Handbook use' covers four items: (1) the handbook has become an important tool for me; (2) I use the handbook to reflect over my classroom work; (3) the handbook has become an important tool for us in our collaboration; and (4) in our collaboration we use the list of references to find useful literature. The scale's alpha was 0.85. All scales had a six-point Likert scoring format (0–5).

Statistical analyses included reliability analyses, factor analyses, descriptive analyses, product-moment-correlations and independent *t*-tests. The analyses were conducted using SPSS (Norusis, 1986).

Results

The first research question concerns procedures in the present project.

Teachers' individual values, their knowledge and experience as classroom managers, and their willingness to share their values, knowledge and experiences with colleagues were all core issues. Therefore, the teachers' motivation for and commitment to the project were essential.

There was a preparation period during the spring prior to the commencement of the project when the teachers were asked to identify main themes in

their role as classroom managers. The procedures were as follows: (1) individual reflection; (2) sharing and discussion with 4–5 colleagues; and (3) agreed lists of the main themes were recorded. These lists formed the basis for one joint list from each school made by the consultants of CBR, discussed with the project groups at the two schools and agreed on by the teachers at staff meetings in the schools. The final list of the core themes for classroom management based on the teachers' experiences consisted of twelve main themes with one to several sub-themes. The themes are listed in the Appendix. In this preparation period the two principals tried to motivate their staff's interest in the project. They talked warmly of the project at staff meetings, arranged colleague groups and organized time for the work to be carried out.

At the project start in August the list was ready for further processing among the teachers. That autumn was termed a production phase; starting with a workshop at each school. The result of this phase would be a paper version of a handbook on classroom management for each school. These handbooks were to be a document describing the school's shared understanding and standards of classroom management, and thus be a guide for the teachers in their work. The principals organized colleague groups consisting of four–six teachers for this task and arranged time for the work to be carried out. Twelve meetings each lasting for 2 hours were scheduled for the process of developing the handbook. In the meetings the sub-themes were targets for analyses and reflection. The teachers employed a specific procedure to ensure individual involvement, sharing ideas with colleagues and discussion leading to a statement the group could agree upon. One of the external consultants at CBR acted as editor in this process and thus received the statements from the colleague groups. A proposed common viewpoint concerning the sub-themes based on the contributions of the colleagues groups was arrived at and returned to the schools. The suggestions were agreed on in the colleague groups or, if this proved impossible, further discussions were then needed.

To visualize the work in the colleague groups I will draw on one example: One of the sub-themes was 'The teacher is a model for the pupils' behaviour'. First, each teacher reflected on what this really meant for their behaviour in the classroom. Second, the teachers shared their personal opinions with each other in the colleague groups, while trying to understand each other's viewpoint. Third, the colleagues discussed the theme aiming to reach one shared statement. Based on the statements from the groups, the editor made one statement for the whole school, which was sent to the project group and handed out to the colleague groups. In the example mentioned the statement was: Pupils learn from the behaviour of their teachers. Therefore the teacher has to behave in a way that creates a positive adult model for their pupils. The teachers in the groups discussed whether they could accept this as a shared statement or whether changes were needed. Once agreement had been reached and reported to the project group the teachers shared concrete examples of how to behave

in line with their shared understanding. These concrete examples were placed in the handbook on classroom management.

The creation of the handbook through this conceptualization process lasted for about six months. The principals did not take part in colleague groups. However, they arranged for the work to be done and were part of their school's project group. Additionally, they wrote a foreword stating the importance of the book and ensured that a printed copy was handed to all teachers. Since the production phase was very structured the processes in the two schools ran in parallel.

When the handbook was produced the aim was to ensure the use of it. At a workshop held individually in January at both schools the teachers were asked to reflect on their actions as classroom managers when using the handbook as a tool. They were taught a peer group coaching procedure to help the groups' work. This procedure was an adjustment of a method used in Norwegian schools (Munthe and Midthassel, 2003). Additionally, the teachers were encouraged to use the handbook individually. Progress was now to a larger extent the responsibility of the school leadership and the project group. This resulted in different processes at the two schools.

At the primary school all the teachers received a copy of the handbook soon after it was produced and the peer-coaching groups started their work early in the winter. The principal organized a two-hour meeting once a month for all of the teachers for the remainder of the school year. Additionally, all the colleague groups worked with the same themes at the same time. The colleague groups in this school were consisted of teachers who taught at different levels, that is, teachers who did not work closely together in the classroom. The members of the project group were spread over the colleague groups so helping the teachers to focus on the agreed tasks. The principal did not take part in any of the colleague groups. Her role was to organise, promote and monitor the work among the teachers. For the following school year new groups were set up; also this time across teaching levels. The school received some new teachers that year and they were welcomed into the colleague groups and guided through the handbook by colleagues. Furthermore, project members were not to be found in every colleague group this time. The project group's argument was that this was no longer important since the teachers were now familiar with the peer-coaching method.

At the lower secondary school the teachers did not receive a copy of the complete handbook until the start of the new school year. Through the winter and spring some time was spent in the project group completing minor details of the handbook and copying it. However, the teachers had received a draft and were supposed to discuss the themes in their teacher teams during the winter and spring. These teams were colleague groups established prior to the project and consisted of teachers who taught at the same level. The principal encouraged the teachers to use the method for peer coaching. However, no organizational work was undertaken to ensure the teams functioned as agreed. During

the interviews in June it transpired that the peer coaching had not yet started at the lower secondary school. This surprised the principal, and a workshop was planned for the teachers in September to give them a new start and to hand over a copy of the complete handbook. Also the second year of the project already established teacher teams were used for this project in the lower secondary school. Once again the principal encouraged the teachers to use the peer-group procedure but did not wish to control them.

The second research question of this article relates to how the teachers experienced the project which had been intended as bottom-up yet initiated from the outside.

The results of the interviews showed that 15 of the 17 teachers believed they had influenced their school's participation in the project. At both schools the principal had discussed participation at a staff meeting. At the primary school one of the teachers said: 'We discussed participation in our teaching teams and had the opportunity to express our opinions'. Nevertheless, one teacher from each school was of the opinion that they had not had any real influence because the principal and senior teachers were enthusiastic about the project and in reality had taken their decisions in advance.

The entire group of teachers interviewed believed that the topic of classroom management was an important thing to focus on. Furthermore, 14 of the 17 teachers reported that they had positive expectations for the project when they started. Some of them expected to learn practical ideas from their colleagues, while others positively looked forward to the opportunity to discuss matters with colleagues and share teaching practice with them. Three of the teachers had no or negative expectations. Time pressure and a feeling of this project coming on top of an already hectic school day were also mentioned. Although some of the teachers thought their expectations were more positive than those of their colleagues, most of them thought that their colleagues shared their attitudes.

At both schools all the teachers interviewed characterised their principal as being involved in the project. Most of them perceived that this project was important for their principal. One of the teachers at the primary school said, 'Yes, I know she is interested. She arranges for the work to be done. I know she wants the process to go well for us, yet she doesn't check on us. She relies on the team-leaders to lead the process in a good way.' Another said: 'Yes, she thinks this project is important and has clearly said so. She wanted us very much to be in this project. She thinks it is very important that all teachers have a good grasp of classroom management'. However, the principal's timetable is tight. One of the teachers at the primary school emphasizes the principal's dilemma when prioritizing: 'She thinks the project is important, but with the work pressure she has nowadays due to rehabilitation of the buildings she can't do everything. Therefore the project group has an important role'.

Also the teachers interviewed in the lower secondary school emphasized that their principal considered the project to be important because she organized time for it and expressed a positive basic attitude when the project was

discussed. However, not all the teachers in the lower secondary schools described the interest of the principal so strongly. One of them said, 'I know she is interested in the project otherwise she would not have organised time for it to be done in. But I don't know if she is interested in the process and that indicates that we don't talk much about the project. I think other matters have a higher priority for the principal nowadays.'

In the questionnaire at the end of the project period the teachers reported to what degree they perceived their participation in this project to be useful to them. The results are shown in Table 1.

As shown in the table the teachers reported moderate to strong utility. The mean was 3.2. Furthermore, the results of an independent *t*-test showed that teachers at the primary school were more positive than those at the lower secondary school ($t = 3.24; p = 0.002$).

The handbook on classroom management was vital in this project. The production phase itself resulted in the documentation of the standards the staff had agreed upon. How content were the teachers with the handbook they had developed through this joint activity? Table 2 illustrates their opinions at the end of the project period. As shown in Table 2, the majority of the teachers claimed to be more than moderately content with the handbook. With the scale's ranking from 0–5 the mean was 3.6. The results from an independent *t*-test showed no differences between the two schools.

The third research question is concerned with the learning opportunities offered by the project.

Nine of the 17 teachers interviewed reported they had been very active in their colleague group, whereas seven teachers characterised themselves as moderately active and one teacher described herself as passive, attending meetings yet mostly only listening to the others. One of the active teachers described her role: 'I am prepared when I attend the meetings and contribute to the dialogues and discussions'. One of the moderately active teachers said: 'My motivation has always been the same, but I feel that the implementation

Table 1 Frequencies of the variable project utility ($N = 61$)

	Not at all					To a large degree
Project utility (%)	0	9.2	21.6	63.1	23	4.6

Table 2 Frequencies of the variable content with the handbook ($N = 62$)

	Not at all					To a large degree
Content with the handbook (%)	0	4.8	11.3	33.9	50.1	0

of the handbook has been slightly more difficult than the development of the handbook'. This teacher's expression was shared by some of the other teachers who felt that the peer coaching procedure was difficult. However, yet other teachers stated that, although this method was challenging, it offer possibilities for learning if they dared to be personal and honest. The teacher who characterized herself as being passive said that she attended meetings and mostly listened to her colleagues.

All the teachers interviewed stated that their experiences in this project characterized by reflection, sharing and discussion in colleague groups would have an impact on teacher collaboration after the project period. As one said: 'The way we have been working in the group, will, I think, be of significance for collaboration'. Another said: 'Yes, because we now have a shared understanding of certain concepts. The foundations have been built on the teachers' competence. Our competence acquired through experience has been taken seriously'. Additionally, the younger teachers expressed their satisfaction with the possibilities of learning from more experienced colleagues. However, not only the novice teachers mentioned learning opportunities. One of the more experienced teachers reported: 'Although I manage well, I think it's good to reflect over it again and bring in new aspects and colleagues' contributions. I think this is very exciting'. Although these citations show that some of the teachers had mentioned learning opportunities, there were also examples indicating that the learning climate within the colleague groups varied. For instance one teacher said: 'In our colleague group we talk with our heads and not with our stomach', meaning that the group dialogue never challenged them or made it possible for teachers to be personal. Another teacher told an opposite story: 'I have been told that my voice and body language may be too controlling and make the students passive'.

The agreed handbook was supposed to be a guide for the teachers in their work, since they had all been involved in it during the project. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to find out whether the handbook was in use at the end of the project. Table 3 shows the results of the relevant frequency analysis.

The results presented in Table 3 indicate a moderate use of the handbook at the end of the project period. The computed mean was 2.4 on a scale ranging from 0–5. The results of an independent *t*-test showed no differences between schools.

Furthermore, results of bivariate correlations analyses showed that teachers who ranked project utility high were more likely to be content with the

Table 3 Frequencies for the variable handbook use (*N* = 65)

	Not at all					To a large degree
Handbook use	15.4	16.9	29.2	26	12.2	0

handbook ($r = 0.50$; $p = 0.000$) and tended to use the handbook more often compared to teachers who claimed to be less content with the project ($r = 0.54$; $p = 0.000$).

Discussion

One of the main purposes of the present article was to describe the work of this Norwegian project aimed at creating a shared understanding of classroom management through the teachers' development and the implementation of a handbook describing agreed standards for classroom management. Previously reported findings suggest that teachers at both schools perceived enhanced skills as classroom managers, reduced strain due to disruptive students and increased perception of shared teaching goals, and, one might assume, the two-year process involving discussions, reflections and sharing of ideas had all been of importance (Midthassel and Bru, 2001). Teachers had the opportunity to challenge their theories in use and learn from their colleagues' mental models through the structured meetings of the colleague groups.

Although the processes were different at the two schools for the second year of the project, this did not affect the results (Midthassel and Bru, 2001). A more complex and perhaps more individualistic organization in the lower secondary school became apparent through its administrative routines and communication processes. At the lower secondary school, for instance, teachers received the copy of the handbook several months after the teachers at the primary school. Another example is that while the principal at the primary school organized the colleague groups, timetabled their meetings and decided that all the groups were to work on the same themes at the same time during the second year in the project, this could not be done at the lower secondary school. On the contrary, the principal at the lower secondary school encouraged the teacher teams to use the peer-coaching model that had been introduced, although she would not order her teachers to use this method or monitor their use of the handbook. She knew that all the teachers were involved in the project and had contributed to the handbook and thus trusted that they would use this experience in the teacher teams. The differences between the processes at the primary and lower secondary schools can be interpreted in light of a previous Norwegian study conducted among a representative sample of teachers where innovation culture was reported to be higher at primary schools than at lower secondary schools. Consequently it was suggested that principals at lower secondary schools were more crucial for teacher involvement in school development activities. However, when principals at lower secondary schools were perceived to be insisting too strongly on school development activities the teachers perceived them as less supportive (Midthassel et al., 2000). In line with these findings it is possible that when the teachers at the primary school perceived their principal's organizing arrangements as a necessary activity, the teachers at the lower

secondary school would perceive a similar approach as improper interference.

This article's second research question concerns the teachers' experiences of this project with the intention of following bottom-up strategies although these had been externally initiated. The results of the interviews showed that although the majority of the teachers perceived they had some influence on whether their school would participate in the project, some teachers did not feel they had really influenced on the decision. This indicates that the principals' might have been faced with one of the dilemmas raised by Fullan (2001) with regard to entering change. However, both principals chose to go on with the project although not all their teachers were enthusiastic about it.

While the majority of the teachers interviewed said that they had positive expectations at the start of the project, three teachers had no or negative expectations. Time pressure and a hectic school day were seen as hindrances by some of the teachers. This was not unexpected and was in line with reports from other countries (Hargreaves, 1992, 1994). The perception of utility was therefore of importance, and all the teachers interviewed considered the topic of classroom management to be relevant for them. However, the results from the survey conducted at the end of the project period revealed that although the teachers reported a moderate to strong level of utility, opinion varied among the staff. Furthermore, the teachers at the primary school tended to perceive more utility than those at the lower secondary school.

At least two explanations for the difference between the staffs can be outlined. First, one of the explanations might be related to the work of the colleague groups. In light of the differences concerning organizing and following-up in the two schools, one may assume that more teachers at the primary school have run their group meetings in line with the procedures and thus have experienced more utility. Furthermore, since it has been suggested that the culture at lower secondary schools is more individualistic and less change oriented (Midthassel et al., 2000) teachers at the lower secondary school might have been even more dependent on the method prescribed than the teachers at the primary school. Observations made in the colleague groups could have revealed qualitative differences between the groups. Another explanation might be that teachers at the lower secondary school were more subject-oriented and thus less interested in classroom management.

Although all teachers contributed to sharing and discussions that constituted the basis of the handbook, the handbook could easily have become a compromise consisting of different understandings. However, as the results show, most of the teachers reported being satisfied with the handbook. This may express that their mental models did not differ completely, and that most of them thus could agree on statements. This could be explained by the fact that teachers socialize through their teacher-training courses and their work in their school.

As shown in Table 2, the results presented variations in handbook use at the end of the project period. Actually, the results suggest that teachers who were

content with the handbook reported using it more often. This might represent an expression of the opinion of those teachers who considered the handbook to be in line with their own action theories. Consequently they felt more committed to it. Without any arrangements for handbook use and teacher reflection among staff, this could cause diversity rather than shared understanding among teacher groups in the long run.

The third research question concerned the learning opportunities offered by the project. The colleague groups—as stated in the reports of the interviews—possessed the potential for reflecting on the teachers' own practices in the light of colleagues' opinions; they could thus develop their personal mental models and the collective mind of the organization in line with Senge's (1990) theories of the learning organization. However, the interviews also revealed some of the problems connected with learning in small groups. As reported by Edmondson (cited in Farr et al., 2003) and Senge (1990) learning in small groups depends on psychological security within the team. The teachers have to experience a climate of caring and challenge. As shown in the results, one of the interviewers gave an example of such a climate, while another teacher described a climate of insecurity. As this was a project involving all the teachers, any negatively disposed teachers could not withdraw from the project. However, they could express resistance by being more passive in the colleague groups.

Nevertheless, most of the teachers interviewed stated they had been active in the colleague groups and were satisfied with the length of time earmarked for reflecting on their work in the classroom. Furthermore, results reported previously (Midthassel and Bru, 2001) suggest that this project had an effect on personal mastery and shared knowledge. However, whether the shared learning will last has been assumed to depend on the staffs' management of the shared knowledge. No further arrangements for handbook use could create diversity between teachers who were content with the handbook and use it and those who do not.

Conclusion

By employing a concrete set of procedures this project aimed to involve all staff in the creation of a shared understanding of how to carry out their role as classroom managers. The purpose was to enhance teachers' knowledge and consciousness of their role and behaviour towards their students and to develop more consistent practices among the teaching staff by using reflection and sharing in small teacher groups. Procedures to ensure individual reflection and sharing as well as discussions intended to achieve agreements were implemented. Furthermore, the handbook was both a product of the process and a tool for further reflection. The principals maintained a balanced management style as they were fully aware of the necessity of the teachers' sense of motivation to share with and learn from colleagues on the one hand and the requirement for more consistent practices on the other. They both arranged for

the work to be done and advocated its significance. This was achieved via the project group as well as directly with the teachers. One might call it a pressuring and supporting role. In addition, the nature and strength of the pressure and support varied depending on any differences in management style and school culture. However, there is reason to believe that closer monitoring on the part of the principals could have revealed the existence of learning—impoverished colleague groups as well as colleague groups that were not following the instructions provided. One implication for principals wanting to create shared understanding through using such procedures might be to plan how to monitor work quality in colleague groups. Moreover, experience gained from the present project suggests that although this two-year project involving all teaching staff had produced positive effects there were signs indicating the necessity of continuing organized work after the project had ended, which implies that the principal should institute concrete initiatives as well as monitor developments.

The study suggests that procedures involving colleague groups in reflecting, sharing and discussing can be valuable for creating a document stating a shared understanding of classroom management. In turn this can act as a tool for guiding the teachers in their role as classroom managers. However, the study does have its limitations. Observation and conducting in-depth interviews could have provided greater knowledge of the processes within the colleague groups. This could present principals with information that would enhance their opportunity to compose and follow up colleague groups in order to improve the learning opportunities within the groups.

Appendix

The main themes with sub-themes, based on the teachers' experience:

- (1) Clear classroom management: (a) the teacher is a model for the pupils' behaviour.
- (2) Relationship between teacher and pupils: (a) have high expectations for all pupils; (b) have confidence in the pupils; (c) have positive contact with all pupils; and (d) allow humour in the classroom.
- (3) Relationships between the pupils: (a) stimulate positive contact between the pupils; (b) teach both disruptive and depressed pupils the social skills needed; and (c) teach the pupils responsibility for one another.
- (4) Adjusted training: (a) gives all pupils beneficial tasks and training.
- (5) Adjusted physical environment: (a) organizes the environment to stimulate both concentration and the desired social contact.
- (6) Flow: (a) continuous flow as the main focus of the lecture.
- (7) Rules and routines: (a) use the time needed to establish rules and routines concerning life in class at the start of each school year;

- (b) start each day creating a positive atmosphere; (c) define clearly the beginning and the ending of each lecture; (d) establish good routines for transitions; and (e) establish rules regarding various activities in the classroom.
- (8) Predictability: (a) be predictable; and (b) make sure that pupils who break rules receive a consistent response.
- (9) Evaluation: (a) continuous evaluation of the pupils' work as well as their behaviour; and (b) from time to time allow pupils to participate in the evaluation.
- (10) Disciplinary problems: (a) choose reactions in accordance with the situation and the pupils involved; (b) avoid confrontations inside the classroom; and (c) focus on the concrete situation.
- (11) Parental involvement: (a) continuous contact with the parents; (b) see the school from the parents' point of view; and (c) ask parents for information that might help you deal with their son/daughter.
- (12) The teachers in class: (a) there should be collaboration and shared understanding among the teachers who teach in the class.

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