The developmental dialogue as an instrument for cooperation between the state and the local school district.

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Background

The seminar will discuss the relationship between the local level and the national level concerning school development with a specific focus on the question: how to build a relation where local self-government and national support is constructively combined.

The background could be described as follows. The compulsory school system has been in operation since 1962. When the grund school was introduced the school system was highly centralised. Aims for the schools and guidance on how to reach the aims were presented by the government or by national boards. Almost everything that took place in a grund school was rigorously set out in different sets of guidelines at that time. Although the schools were governed by specific boards of the local kommuns, in the early sixties these boards only had real power over housing, school-meals, teaching-materials and school transport. Money was distributed to the schools from the state on the basis of key numbers of students. These traditions have naturally still shown some signs of persistence.

The Swedish education system has undergone a number of important reforms in the past 25 years. A process of decentralisation has left the government with few policy levels at a national scale: During the 1990s, the education system was decentralised from the government to local authorities and schools. The aim was to encourage greater innovation and flexibility in the system and to stimulate local democracy; to reduce spending in the public sector; and to promote increased efficiency by introducing more market forces in education (e.g. more competition among public schools and the encouragement of free standing schools).

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1 In Sweden there are today 4 908 grund schools. From the age of seven to sixteen all children go through this comprehensive school where they stay together with the classmates in the same class for nine years. 92 percent of a year group continues for three years in the “gymnasieskola”. There are 795 gymnasie schools in the country.

2 There are 290 Swedish kommuns. Each of the kommuns is responsible for the use of taxes within several areas such as technical services (water, sanitary), elderly care, child care and schooling. The kommun has a local parliament with several boards reflecting the votes of the inhabitants.
Step by step the governance system of the grund school has changed during the latter part of the twentieth century. The central guidelines ("läroplan") were rewritten in 1969, 1980 and in 1994; the 1994 version is short and concise. The board of education of the kommun has been given much more power over and responsibility for school finance. The state distributes a lump sum of money to the kommuns. They distribute the money to the schools. At the school level the school leaders have significant power over the distribution of the money and the running of the school. The state still formulates the central aims for the schools, but the schools are responsible for the educational process, to reach the goals and for the use of the resources that have been allocated to the school. The Swedish comprehensive school system has thus changed from being a highly centralised system to become a school system were power is devolved to the local school so they can meet their specific challenges.

The developmental dialogue

The clear-cut division of responsibilities between the state and the kommuns also includes the responsibility for local development and evaluation. Of course there is a national interest in how the different kommuns deal with their need for development even if this utmost is a local responsibility. These relationships could make the cooperation between the two governmental levels need some consideration and a great deal of "Fingerspitzegefühl" from the consultant that represent the national level.

In the year of 2000 and the following years an interesting form of cooperation between the local level and the national level was developed. This form of national support was introduced as the developmental dialogue and aimed to guarantee the local autonomy and at the same time support developmental areas identified by the state. The dialogues were operated by the National Agency for Education and during the first year and thereafter the National Agency for School Improvement.

During the years 2000 and 2001 the developmental dialogue was directed towards 116 kommuns and the length of the process varied between one up to three years depending on local conditions. The identified areas of development were mainly basic skills, i.e. reading, writing, mathematics and the schools capacity to deal with their own developmental processes.

Some results of the developmental dialogue

The early experiences of the developmental dialogue showed that the factors of success that could be formulated with respect to theoretical studies of developmental processes had a great impact on the result of the dialogues and served as constructive guidelines for the personnel involved – the dialogue teams.

The dimensions of success were:
- Focus on goals and results (G&R)
- Influence and participation (I&P)
- Durable and long-term processes (D&LTP)

These three dimensions of success were composed of various factors and with these as starting point the dialogue teams together with representatives of the kommuns described the different processes of the 116³ developmental dialogues.

Beside a qualitative analysis of the different descriptions each of the three factors of success were assessed and categorized in three levels; a high, moderate and low degree of fulfilment. Some of the result could be summarized in this table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High level of fulfilment</th>
<th>Moderate level of fulfilment</th>
<th>Low level of fulfilment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on goals and results</td>
<td>approx. 70 %</td>
<td>approx. 20 %</td>
<td>approx. 10 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence and participation</td>
<td>approx. 50 %</td>
<td>approx. 20 %</td>
<td>approx. 30 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durable and long-term processes</td>
<td>approx. 50 %</td>
<td>approx. 30 %</td>
<td>approx. 20 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is shown in the table the dimension of success that has the highest level of fulfilment is “focus on goal and result”. The dimension “influence and participation” – on the other hand – is the one that seems to be most difficult to fulfill.

If the three dimensions of success get to represent the three dimensions in a cube and the three grades of fulfilment are marked on the axles, we will be able to locate the position of each developmental dialogue in the volume of the cube. The pattern of the 116 developmental dialogues can be summarized in the figure that follows.

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³ Of the 116 developmental dialogues it was possible to assess 100 according to these three dimensions. The remaining descriptions were not possible to classify with the three dimensions in mind. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that they were less effective.
The pattern of a “slanting” pyramid appears\(^4\). It is interesting to note that it is a relatively clear bottom in the pyramid. In the pyramid’s “ground floor” – where there is a low degree of influence and participation – are the dialogues are relatively spread out with an evident center of gravity in the center. This means that we here find some of the developmental dialogues that are assessed as “strong” with respect to both focus on goals and results as well as to durable and long-term processes. The higher the level of fulfilment of the dimension influence and participation the less “scattered” are the positions of the dialogues and the closer to the “effective top corner” they are.

This pattern could imply that the success dimension influence and participation – which the developmental dialogues have had most difficulties to fulfil – could be “the number one” dimension of success in this context.

The seminar will discuss some of the experiences from the work with the developmental dialogues that could help us get a deeper understanding of the concepts of influence and participation.

\(^4\) In the ”pyramid” that is described here and that comprises approx. 50% of the 27 (3x3x3) cells we will find approx. 85% of the 114 developmental dialogues. 15% do not agree with this schematic pattern.