

Abstract

Dialogue and Leadership. A study of staff dialogue in compulsory school.

(Samtal och ledarskap. En studie av medarbetarsamtal i grundskolan.)

Written in Swedish, summary in English. 303 pages.

Author: Pär Engström

Doctoral dissertation

Department of Sociology, Göteborg University

Box 720, SE 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

ISBN: 91-975404-2-0

ISSN: 1650-4313

Göteborg 2005

This study deals with collaborative conversations (medarbetarsamtal) between headmaster and teachers in Swedish compulsory schooling. The dialogues have been investigated in terms of three aims that concern the headmaster's leadership, institutional and intra-institutional dialogue, and staff dialogue. On the basis of these aims, the study has tried to answer questions about the interaction in dialogues, their content and their significance for the participants.

The study's theoretical points of departure are taken from leadership research (e.g. a dyad theory and leadership's sources of power), from previous research on staff dialogue (a perspective of evaluation and of development), and discourse theory (which includes e.g. coordination between the speakers and an initiative-response dimension).

The empirical foundation of the study comprises 12 taped staff dialogues as well as follow-up interviews with those involved. Totally 19 persons took part in the study (12 teachers and 7 headmasters).

The analysis consists of a quantitative and a qualitative part. The former is an IR analysis that tries to clarify the dominance relationships in the dialogues, while the qualitative analysis is a search for meanings in the interaction and in the content of dialogue.

One result of the study is that the dialogues exhibit a variation in patterns of interaction. The explanation for this variation is that the dialogue participants distinguish among themselves mainly in regard to the time length of their relations and professional lives. If the relation is new, the headmaster tends to guide the dialogues (primarily through questions), whereas the interaction pattern becomes more egalitarian if the participants have known each other for some years.

Another result is that the headmasters see the staff dialogues as an opportunity to build trust in the teachers, and a way to get information about both the individual teachers and the school activities. The teachers appreciate the headmaster's attention to what they have to say, and feel strengthened by praise when they receive it. Beneath these meanings, the study has also revealed a control aspect of the dialogues, whereby the headmaster as chief verifies that the teachers carry out their mission in a purposive manner.

The study's contribution to leadership research is a theoretical framework that can illuminate both the professional and personal relations between headmaster and teachers. In addition, numerous empirical examples are presented of how the headmaster and teachers converse about their activities. To dialogue research, the study contributes a greater understanding of variation in the symmetri-asymmetri dimension of institutional as well as intra-institutional dialogues. This variation can be understood through the three components of position, relation and profession. Finally, the study contributes to development of theory about staff dialogue by connecting the sources of power that the participants activate in the dialogue with the meanings that the dialogue has for the participants and with patterns of interaction.

Key words: Leadership, sources of power, control, trust, dialogue, initiative and response.