Principals' Communication Inside Schools: A Contribution to School Improvement?

by Helene Ärlestig

Abstract

This paper reports on an empirical study of how structure, culture, and message content affected communications between principals and teachers in one Swedish school. The study revealed that communication within this school merely transmitted the information necessary for conducting daily work, which resulted in predictable behaviors, rather than stimulating learning and encouraging challenging dialogue about significant pedagogical and school improvement issues.

During the last decade, various reforms have led to a decentralized Swedish school system. These new educational initiatives call for principals to take responsibility for adapting and implementing national school reforms in the local schools they lead. Guided by his or her own vision for the school and through a democratic process fueled by dialogue with staff members, the principal is expected to lead the work so that the school can be successful (Nygren and Johansson 2000; Utbildningsdepartementet 2001). According to Begley and Johansson (2005, 16), "A democratic and ethical leader sees a clear connection between work assignments, national and local political goals, and the schools' operational philosophy."

Communication is an important process inside schools and the most frequently used tool by organizational leaders. Witherspoon (1996, 204) made an even stronger claim: "Leadership exists only through communication. Leaders are increasingly important as creators of culture, decision makers, and change agents. These roles require the use of communication to develop shared meanings, search and use information effectively, and create and communicate visions to enhance an organization's future and guide it through eras of change."

How key concepts, intentions, and aims become known and adopted within the organization depends on how leaders perceive and use communication processes. Some researchers work with theories that can be used as methods to communicate and understand the local context. Deliberative dialogue, framing, and a salubrious approach are examples of such theories (Antonovsky 1987; Weick 1995; Englund 2000).

Despite the massive body of research on both leadership and communication, few studies focused on leaders' communication in school settings have been conducted. Research that focuses on specific aspects of the communication process, such as interpretation, learning, border setting, and participation, is particularly scarce. In this report, the author describes and analyzes communication between teachers and principals in one Swedish school by examining structure, culture, and content—prerequisites for and factors in the communication process.

Purpose of the Study

The thesis of this study stems from the idea that school leadership does not exist without communication. Through communication, the principal leads and unifies his or her staff members in the work necessary for academic results and school improvement. This study focuses primarily on in-school communications between principals and teachers about pedagogical and school improvement issues, and attempts to address three questions:

- Can different aspects of the communication process, such as structure, culture, and message content, be used as analytic tools to understand communication between teachers and principals inside schools?
- In what ways, if any, do teachers' and principals' communications inside schools focus on teaching and learning?
- In what ways, if any, does the communication process inside schools encourage professional interpretation and learning?

Method

In their recent study, Heide et al. (2005) divided organizational communication into three perspectives: traditional, interpretative, and critical. Through an interpretative perspective, the researcher tries to understand organizational processes largely through qualitative methods. Both leaders' and followers' perspectives on sense making and the way reality is constructed are important aspects (Weick 1995; Heide et al. 2005). The study described in this paper is based on an interpretative perspective where both communication and leadership are seen as processes (Yukl 2001; Huges, Ginnett, and Curphy 2002). Because organizations are social constructions where everyday actions and cultural aspects are vital (Czarniawska 1993; Weick 1995), structures, as well as culture, become prerequisites for the leaders' communication.

In an overview of organizational communication research, several studies have been categorized based on organization-wide communication, group communication, and interpersonal communication. Each of these categories have been further divided into four subject areas: information flow, communication climate, message content, and

organizational development (Greenbaum, Hellweg, and Falcione 1987). The subject areas are comparable to structure and culture in leadership and organizational theory (Bass 1990; Bolman and Deal 1997; Yukl 2001; Huges et al. 2002)—concepts which may be more familiar to readers. Inspired by Greenbaum et al.'s (1987) overview, the author constructed the following evaluation tool (Table 1) to help analyze different subject areas and communication with various groups and individuals.

Table 1. Organizational Communication Evaluation Tool

	Structure	Culture	Message Content
Communication with all personnel			
Group communication			
Individual communication			

The study was conducted in one school in a town in northern Sweden. The empirical results are based on documents, questionnaires, and interviews collected in the school. The collected documents included the school's working plan and examples of weekly informational letters. During a staff meeting, 36 teachers and both of the principals completed the written questionnaire. Eleven teachers did not attend the meeting and, therefore, were not included in the study. Individual 30-minute interviews were conducted with six teachers randomly selected by the school secretary. The two principals were interviewed individually for one hour.

Theoretical Background

Leadership is a conscious process whereby a leader tries to influence followers in a specific context. Both the followers and the situation influence the leader's actions and decisions (Yukl 2001; Huges et al. 2002). As formal leaders, school principals have many role expectations—some clear, some unclear, and others contradictory (Strand 2001). From a national perspective, the expectations of Swedish principals have changed toward a more challenging, democratic, learning, and communicative leadership style (Utbildnings-departementet 2001). This shift in roles is a result of the Swedish school system moving from a system managed by rules to one managed by objectives (Nygren and Johansson 2000; Persson, Andersson, and Lindström 2005).

Bolman and Deal (2003, 307) compared four types of organizational processes:
- structural—communication is used to transmit facts and information;
- human resource—communication is focused on the exchange of information, feelings, and individual needs;
- political—communication is used to influence and manipulate; and
- symbolic—communication is used for storytelling.

In an organization that is bureaucratic and managed by rules, the focus of communication is often on distributing information efficiently and effectively—the most simpli-

fied, traditional, and normative view of communication. The leaders' ability to formulate messages and the recipients' ability to listen and reproduce meaning are critical aspects in the communication process. This type of communication is used to give leaders more control, is perceived as efficient, and engenders predictability in organizations, rather than to provide an opportunity for mutual sense making and interpretation. Conversely, in a decentralized organization, interpretations and the exchange of ideas and information are critical. In a democratic context, the focus is not only on the result, but also on how the work is conducted.

Effective, successful leaders must have a realistic view of communication and its direct and indirect effects. They must understand the complexity of communication, which seems simplistic to most people at first (Clampitt 2005). Communication in organizations has a broader purpose than simply transmitting information; rather, communication is an interpretative process of coordinating activities, creating understanding, and building acceptance of organizational goals (Heide et al. 2005). According to Nilsson and Waldemarsson (1994, 10), communication also is important from psychological and social perspectives.

> *A relatively small part of ordinary communication is about distributing facts. The main part is about finding and strengthening our own identity . . . showing how we want others to perceive us and our relation together given the kind of social situation we are in* (author's translation).

Though the objectives of the Swedish curriculum (Utbildningsdepartementet 1994) were outlined in a concentrated 20-page document, national written guidelines to help teachers put the objectives into practice in the classroom were not included. Instead local interpretation, dialogue, and discussion became integral in determining how to meet the objectives. The principals' capacity to frame or link general information to daily actions became essential in creating meaning and helping teachers relate daily activities with organizational goals and visions (Weick 1995; Fairhurst and Sarr 1996; Lesley 2004). School leaders today are expected to allocate more time to creating meaning and supporting teachers than to managing given structures (Strand 2001). Affirmation and feedback by school leaders also are essential in showing concern for individual needs and in helping to construct the organizational culture and structure. Some researchers have claimed that the relationship between communication and organization is so strong that they cannot be separated and seen as single entities (Johansson 2003).

Even when the intentions of principals and teachers are good, and extensive communication exists, pedagogical work and professional understanding do not always benefit. Kotter (1996) claimed that leaders interact so often and so frequently that communication about visions and change often is overshadowed by sheer volume. According to Weick (1995), providing more information does not always solve ambiguity and misunderstanding; rather, a need exists for higher quality and other forms of communication.

Relating everyday actions to visions and goals should be a visible and important part of communications between principals and teachers in a decentralized Swedish school. But, was this found in Middletown School?

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The School

Middletown School has 400 pupils in grades 7–9 and 47 teachers divided into five teacher teams. Many schools in Sweden are organized into teacher teams where 3–8 teachers have joint responsibility for a number of classes. The teacher teams meet regularly to coordinate and plan the activities of the pupils. Each team is comprised of a mix of novice and experienced teachers, with varying levels of teaching experience. Most of the teachers are women. The school has achieved above average academic results compared with the other schools in the municipality and with the average in the country. Each team has a team leader.

Two principals—one female and one male—are responsible for the school. During the past few years, they have worked hard to create and activate a written working plan with routines and policies. The purpose of the working plan is to describe the school's mission and to support the teachers in their day-to-day work. The plan consists of items such as the school's objectives; teacher team objectives; routines concerning absence, health, and bullying; a yearly calendar; union agreements; and Middletown School's quality report from the previous year. According to the school's working plan, teacher teams and groups organized by the subjects they teach constitute the base of the pedagogical work, while principals are the leaders. The principals' vision, *Our School 2007*, also is included in the plan. The plan is revised and updated annually.

Findings for each of the three elements of the communication process—structure, culture, and message content—are presented separately. Each element is further divided into the three categories shown in Table 1: all personnel, groups, and individuals. A brief summary and analysis of the findings is included at the end of each section.

Structure

All personnel. The information flow in Middletown School is based on organization-wide communication. Monday morning begins with a 20-minute informational meeting led by the principals. Nearly all teachers attend these meetings. Communication is one-way—from the principals to the teachers—with little time for questions. One of the interviewed teachers compared the meeting to a shopping list; "It is just to tick off the items," she said.

Once a month on Wednesday afternoon, all teachers meet with the principals. The purpose of these meetings is to raise pedagogical issues. At the meetings, the principals share information and encourage discussion. Meeting content is limited to one or two subjects.

The school has a Web site and an e-mail system that are used frequently. Nearly all teachers check their e-mail daily or at least once per week. A weekly newsletter that contains information on current events, the following week's events, and a list of all scheduled meetings for the upcoming week is disseminated to teachers. The newsletter also reports whether the principals have meetings and duties outside of the school.

Good routines are employed at the general meetings. Staff members receive agendas and memos to keep them up-to-date. One of the principals stressed the importance of

documenting decisions in writing, so that everyone can hear, read and, if they do not remember, know where to find information on different decisions.

Groups. Each Wednesday afternoon, teacher teams meet to plan instructional activities and to discuss their teaching practices. A principal visits each teacher team once or twice per semester. Because the teachers value team planning time, the principals try not to disturb these meetings too often with their own topics.

Once a week, the principals meet with the team leaders to share information that team leaders should pass along to their groups and to find out with which issues the teams are struggling. Other regular group communications include subject and project meetings and class conferences.
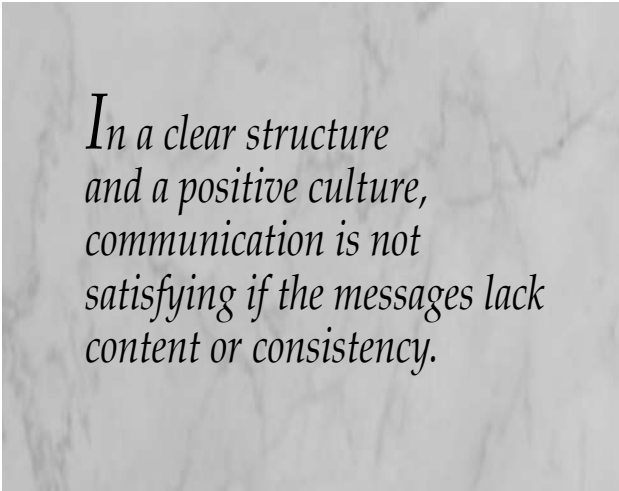
Individuals. Teachers generally referred to staff meetings when they talked about individual communication with the principals. Conversely, the principals referred to written communication with individual teachers and to frequent unplanned, one-on-one dialogue.

According to the interviewed teachers, principals' visits to their classrooms were important—largely to ensure that the principals knew what their work looked like. However, a majority of the teachers surveyed claimed that they seldom were visited by or received individual feedback from either of the principals. The principals agreed that too few classroom visits were conducted because time was limited.

In a clear structure and a positive culture, communication is not satisfying if the messages lack content or consistency.

The principals also met each teacher individually, on a formal basis, at least once each semester. In the fall, the principals held individual development dialogue and, during the spring semester, discussed salaries with each teacher. In Sweden, the principals have responsibility for setting individual salaries based on performance.

The teachers also thought that the principals spent too little time at the school and that their visibility was limited. During a two-month period, a review of the principals' schedules showed that they had duties 2–3 days a week outside of the school. Most of these were entire days, with both principals gone at the same time. Despite their time away from school, teachers claimed that the principals generally were easy to reach, especially via e-mail.

Half of the teachers thought that the principals visited corridors and pupil social areas less than once a week. The principals related that they felt it was important for them to

spend visiting time in the corridors and social areas to talk with teachers and pupils. In fact, one of the principals' goals was to be visible in the corridors every day that meetings did not take them away from the school. Visiting the staff room during breaks and having lunch with pupils were other ways in which the principals tried to be visible in the school.

Summary and analysis. Communication as a concept often was connected to planned information that was presented to all personnel during meetings. Communication was perceived as a way to transmit messages rather than to affirm and develop teachers' self-esteem and self-confidence as professionals.

Many teachers verified that they were satisfied with most of the communication they received. They felt that the communication structure had improved in recent years and that the e-mail system helped to distribute information.

Though teachers believed that they were well-informed, they did not feel that their pedagogical work inside the classroom was recognized. Teachers wanted individual responses to pedagogical issues and to be observed in their classroom instruction, rather than to have collective discussions. They related that principals' classroom visits and participation in team meetings were rare events.

Culture

All personnel. The teachers' responses to the questionnaire confirmed that collegiality existed within the group and few new conflicts occurred. According to the survey results, most teachers remained quiet and listened in school-wide meetings. Even when they had different opinions, teachers avoided discussions that led to conflicts. In most instances, teachers presented their opinions, but were not challenged in a deeper discussion.

Groups. Discussions in the teacher team meetings were closely related to the teachers' work with the pupils, rather than on general pedagogical issues. The teachers stated that the smaller group format provided opportunities for them to be more open about their beliefs and to raise questions. One of the principals stated that it was important to give teacher teams space and time to work by themselves. Some teachers indicated that working in teams actually resulted in small schools—with their own goals and culture—within the larger school.

Individuals. Interviews showed that more than half of the teachers felt that they could go to the principals if they had problems. A third of the teachers reported that they always or almost always had active support from the principals regarding conflicts with parents and pupils. The principals verified that the teachers often sought support in everyday problems.

The teachers and the principals had different opinions about other matters, however, with the principals generally having a more positive view. For example, the principals did not believe that negative attitudes toward school improvement existed. Yet nearly half of the teachers were convinced that negativity was present and that poor attitudes were prevalent.

Summary and analysis. Camaraderie existed among staff members, with each teacher comfortable with his or her well-established role. The teachers' focus was on forming a safe and secure environment to avoid interruptions in planned activities. Conflicts and discussions generally were avoided because they took too much time from discussions about their ordinary work. Little time was available to reflect on how different thoughts and actions constructed the reality in which they worked. Opportunities and ways to communicate about different views and how school culture influenced their work were lacking.

The principals reported that they had high expectations for the teachers. Though research in school leadership suggested that high expectations are important (Höög et al. 2003; Leithwood and Riehl 2003), the expectations in this school were unclear. Hence, the interpreted expectation was that teachers should do everything in an excellent way, rather than adhere to specific requirements.

The teachers also expressed high expectations for the principals. Even though the principals had many duties—often outside of school—the teachers expected strong leadership concerning pedagogical issues. They wanted leaders who communicated the right answers and expressed them in a way that didn't create confusion or misunderstanding. A work environment that is safe and pedagogically developed, with enough time and space for everything, was desired. One of the teachers described how the principals often talked about the teachers' task and mission, but did not clarify their own responsibilities. Teachers shared that dialogue about the principals' priorities, what they do, and what they want to accomplish should increase.

Content

All personnel. When teachers talked about the content of messages they received, they primarily referred to information that was communicated in weekly meetings and e-mail. A great deal of information was processed through the e-mail system, and opinions differed regarding whether all of it was necessary or if too much information was being disseminated. According to one of the principals, they tried to have dialogue with teachers before decisions were made to foster shared meaning among staff members.

When decisions were made by the principals or others outside of the school without teacher input, explicit information was communicated in written messages. Some of the interviewed teachers claimed that the written information often dealt with complex topics. When teachers received written information about controversial decisions, their suspicions were raised and questions ensued. Unfortunately, in these instances, no chance for discussion existed nor could the teachers get help from the principals in interpreting the consequences of the decisions.

According to the responses by both teachers and principals, many issues that are the core of school work were rarely included in everyday communications between principals and teachers. Table 2 shows issues selected by the author based on her experience as a principal trainer and the frequency that they were discussed. After dividing the topics into three groups, it became clear that issues related to everyday activities were most frequent.

Table 2. Frequency of Content in Conversations with Principals

Communication about:	Weekly	1–2 times per month	1–2 times per semester	Almost never	No answer
Rules	22%	42%	25%	3%	8%
Comfort	17%	39%	33%	6%	5%
Action plans	14%	31%	44%	-	11%
School improvement	8%	33%	50%	3%	6%
Quality	3%	33%	50%	8%	6%
Results	6%	25%	61%	3%	5%
Curriculum issues	3%	20%	67%	5%	5%
Academic goals	8%	11%	61%	8%	12%
Visions	3%	17%	61%	14%	5%
Social goals	8%	11%	61%	11%	9%
Grades	-	8%	75%	11%	6%
Teamwork	-	8%	39%	47%	6%
Feedback	3%	3%	50%	36%	8%
Instruction	-	3%	31%	61%	5%

The school's working plan included common development goals. Some of these goals were followed by a more detailed appendix on how to act in various situations. Though the teachers thought that they knew the principals' attitudes and aims, they had difficultly identifying what was most important. A common view about the schools' pedagogical focus was lacking. Teachers did not perceive that the weekly newsletter and weekly meetings with the principals addressed pedagogical issues related to learning and improvement. As Kotter (1996) found in his research, the school's ordinary communication overshadowed communication about vision, goals, and results.

The principals recognized the importance of communicating positive results and supporting teachers in their behavior. The teachers acknowledged and appreciated this communication strategy by relating examples of times that staff meetings began with positive comments. Examples included external recognition from parents or superiors, and principals providing praise for hard work. Concrete dialogue on matters such as feedback, instruction, grades, and teamwork was seldom held. The principals' rare visits to classrooms and to teacher team meetings limited the number of occasions to talk about these issues.

Groups. The principals indicated that they welcomed invitations to participate in team meetings to encourage discussions on topics from a bottom-up perspective instead of a top-down perspective. The interviewed teachers, however, found it difficult to identify topics they deemed important enough to invite the principals to discuss. They preferred that the principals pop into the meetings to listen and to participate in ordinary discussions.

Identifying whether meeting content had any connection to the working plan, to the pedagogical staff meetings, or to individual dialogue was critical. Most often, these issues were discussed separately on single occasions rather than in a process with various groups using different forms of communication.

Individuals. According to the principals, they continuously discussed the school's mission and its core tasks. They stated that every conversation they held had a pedagogical angle and that every action they took had a pedagogical implication. They claimed that they continuously reiterated the school's main pedagogical challenges and provided information so that the teachers could connect how resources and schedules are prerequisites for everyday actions and create possibilities for school improvement. They also said that they explained various processes to help teachers see the processes from new perspectives. They believed that they consciously modeled good communication and employed varied forms of communication.

Teachers' comments regarding the principals' leadership on pedagogical tasks were few and based on sporadic events. For example, if a teacher had disciplinary problems with a group of students, a dialogue with the principal might help the teacher find ways to handle the problem. Other topics, like involving students in planning and teacher team building, were discussed with all personnel rather than in individual conversations. According to the responses received, a majority of the teachers thought that the principals were not interested in their teaching. Feedback on issues such as teamwork, grades, and instructional questions were rare.

The annual individual development dialogue was deemed important. Many of the interviewed teachers claimed that this was the only time they could talk to the principals about their pedagogical views and other important issues without interruption. They agreed that this dialogue affected what they did and how they behaved.

Summary and Analysis. The teachers stated that a discrepancy existed between ordinary work—teaching—and school improvement. School improvement was identified as something outside or above their ordinary work. Teachers did not relate individual dialogue with the principals about current issues to school improvement. The teachers wanted more active, direct, and recognizable leadership in pedagogical matters.

When the principals talked about communicating information about school improvement, they included nearly every vehicle from individual dialogue to in-service training. According to the principals, individual dialogue was a significant part of their ordinary communication. They claimed that they gave feedback to the teachers each week.

The principals' role and mission were not as clearly communicated as they thought. The teachers had respect for the principals' heavy workload, but they did not really know what the principals were doing. The principals and the teachers interpreted concepts differently—even though they thought that they were talking about the same things. School improvement and the principals' role were two important areas where the principals and the teachers had different interpretations.

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According to the teachers, they were familiar with the school's working plan and found parts of it instructional. The interviewed teachers revealed that they were uncertain, however, about how they were supposed to act in relation to the policies. The principals' conversations about pedagogical issues and school improvement did not challenge the teachers' values and ideas. The principals, on the other hand, thought that they were always listening and that most of the meetings were a learning opportunity for everyone.

Discussion

For practitioners to analyze their own organization's communication can be challenging. Using a taxonomy that includes prerequisites for the process can help principals and teachers better understand the impact that structure and culture have on messages. Though the principals in this study tried to be explicit and communicate the content of their messages clearly, structure and culture were obstacles that affected the outcomes.

In a clear structure and a positive culture, communication is not satisfying if the messages lack content or consistency. Varied communication channels that support one another contribute to more efficient communication. For example, in Middletown School, written information was not supported by oral dialogue. Therefore, seeing the connection between the principals' communication with teacher teams and individual teachers and the schools' pedagogical tasks, visions, and results was difficult.

Communication in Middletown School was not consciously used as a tool to understand the schools' reality and create meaning. Rather, communication in this school was used to create predictability and control in a regulated organization. In Middletown School, the principals and teachers emphasized transmitting and reproducing information. Even when teachers and teacher teams had different standpoints, reaching consensus and making rational decisions was more important than taking the time to listen to and understand different pedagogical perspectives (Begley and Johansson 2003).

The teachers and principals had a difficult time identifying how to improve the school's internal communications, but were in agreement that changes needed to be made. Professional democratic and decentralized organizations must use communication to encourage different perspectives and interpretations. Increased visibility or participation by the principals is not the only solution to better communication.

How principals use communication to transmit information and to affirm and interpret everyday actions in relation to the school's visions and aims needs further investigation. The way in which communication supports pedagogical issues and school improvement and the communication processes in other schools are other interesting areas for exploration. Using interpretive analysis and a holistic model can reveal important aspects that are missing from studies with a more traditional view of organizational communication. One thing is obvious: communication is as vital in organizational processes as learning. The relationship between school leaders and different aspects of the communication process need to be explored further.

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