The knowledge base on schoool improvement.
Some thoughts about what is known
and what actions are taken.

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Knowledge about school culture and the development of schools have steadily grown during the 20th century. Early works by Waller (1932) on the sociology as well as on the social psychology of teaching have been updated several times. Mort and Cornell (1941), who studied the tempo of American school reforms during the thirties, left important traces for others to follow. During the fifties Gordon (1956), as well as Coleman (1961), contributed with the understanding of the dynamics of the relations between students as an important explanation of school effectiveness. During the sixties Miles (1964) argued against Mort´s and Cornell´s view that innovations in schools are slow processes in his basic papers on innovation in education. He also put forward his ideas on the healthy organisation (Miles, 1965) and Sugerman (1969) presented a paper on the school as a social system, of which both have stimulated later researchers in their understanding of the inner lives of schools. Bocoock (1972) and Sclechty (1976) summarised sociological and social psychological research on schools during this period.

British empirical contributions to the understanding of schools and their transformations have grown from Hargreaves (1967, 1972) earlier works on the inner lives in schools to more recent work based on this theoretical fundament in combination with management of change theories (Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991). Stenhouse (1977) pointed at the importance of the understanding of the school and its change from a teacher point of view. In Scandinavian countries Ekholm (1971) studied the inner lives of schools and contributed to the understanding of the social development of students (Ekholm, 1976).

During the eighty´s co-operation between different approaches of school improvement were stimulated by the OECD. Based on Dutch initiatives, more

than a dozen volumes of condensed knowledge on school improvement were produced. Themes were covered like the useful knowledge of school improvement (van Velzen et al, 1985), what is known on long term effects of school improvement efforts (Miles et al, 1987), dissemination of successful practices (van den Berg et al, 1989), the use of school based review as a tool for change (Bollen and Hopkins, 1987), how school improvement can be supported (Seashore-Louis and Loucks-Horsley, 1989) and the role of school leaders in school improvement (Gielen et al, 1987). This co-operation brought American and European researchers on school improvement together and an intense exchange of ideas took place.

During the early nineties new overviews of the knowledge on school improvement have been presented. Fullan (1991) assisted by Stiegelbauer, have a ripe volume on the new meaning of educational change, where he shows that a lot of the knowledge so far used, have failed to effect improvement in schools. This view have strong support in longitudinal studies made during 1980 - 1985 of 35 schools (Ekholm, 1987) and during 1969 until 1994 (Ekholm and Kull, 1996) of 9 schools in Sweden. In both these longitudinal studies schools have much stayed the same although they have met strong demands to improve their inner lives and also have received strong support to that.

Fullan (1991) are far from alone to present overviews of what we know about school improvement work by now. Murphy and Hallinger (1993) and Guskey and Huberman (1995) are examples of some other researchers that have edited contributions to the understanding of actual knowledge on school improvement. Fullan ends his overview of the knowledge field with some advice on how the rich knowledge on school improvement and transformation can be more used. He wants to replace an older, not well-functioning paradigm of school improvement, with a new one that is based on six pillars.

New paradigms to help the utilisation of knowledge

He points at the necessity to change minds from negative to positive politics, which in Block´s (1987) thinking mean that each person that wants something good to happen, for instance in a school, have to work continually on shaping and pursuing what is valuable. Fullan proposes that people who want good change to occur in schools are helped by looking for alternative solutions instead of monolithic ones. He put forwards the fact that more successful improving schools and school districts have moved into a better future together with some partner. He recommend schools to work in alliance with others and also to change the thinking from an "if only" to an "if I/we" perspective. By the latter Fullan refers to the power of keeping the perspective of what can be done and not looking for why things are difficult to do in a school that need to

develop. He recommends the improvers to accept the full richness of knowledge about the change process.

We know many things about that process and it is a complicated and rich field, where the improvement process not gains from being simplified. Fullan especially draws the attention to the fact that improvement work need long term conditions, several years, to become lasting. Finally Fullan concludes that it is important to shift from development in schools based on isolated innovations to a more broad institutional development. He identifies the problem of change and stability in schools to consist of making too many efforts to innovate than is possible to manage, which leads to many finished but not still alive innovative projects in many schools. The important perspective is to create an infrastructure for ongoing improvement in the school as an institution, not to implement more of isolated innovations.

These learnings are close to the perspectives that Murphy and Hallinger (1993) present in their close look on the research based on restructuring of schooling. They find it useful to make a backward mapping with the eyes of students on the change that need to take place and to focus on the improvement process itself to be successful in the longer perspective. They also recommend systematically work combined with school-specific approaches to the improvement. They remind the developer of the need for support among schools to help them to create better solutions. Beside some structural developments in the lives of schools they also see cross-fertilisation between schools as an important component of the development process as well as professional development of teachers. Smylie (1995) elaborates how schools might be redesigned to facilitate learning among teachers. He points at such inbuilt qualities of schools as teacher collaboration, shared power and authority between teachers and authorities, that need to be mixed with egalitarianism among teachers as well as with variations, challenge, autonomy and choice in teachers´ work. Smylie pays attention to the need for access for schools to multiple sources of information for learning and external referents to help the school to receive feedback on its strivings. He also pleas for schools to accept teacher´s learning as a part of the definition of teacher work, so that the learning of teachers can be an integrated part of the daily working life in the school.

Support of the new paradigms

In some studies of schools that have developed practices that improved the qualities of the learning of the students, these pieces of the futuristic knowledge basis have been used. For instance Huberman and Miles (1984) presented in their close look upon innovational processes in twelve schools evidence for several of the six conclusions that Fullan have drawn from his rich literature overview. In two Scandinavian cross-national studies (Vasström, 1985 and

Ekholm, 1986 and 1990), where fifteen improvement oriented schools were followed over five years in each study, several parts of the knowledge basis for lasting improvements was supported. For instance the importance of cross-fertilisation between schools, the acceptance of improvement processes as complicated ones, working on a broad front with the changes, to stimulate learning among teachers as a part of the daily work are some of the components that was supported. The same kind of support is given for the futuristic knowledge basis by two other cross-national studies (Dalin et al, 1994 and Hameyer et al, 1995). In the first of these studies, changes in 31 school sites in three developing countries were analysed and in the second study the history of fifteen schools in four industrialised countries, that had succeeded to institutionalise activity-based practices in their inner working lives, were analysed. Support is also given in a study conducted in rural Pakistan of 32 schools with different degree of success with their students (Farah et al, 1996).

Little use of school improvement knowledge

The knowledge that exists today on how school improvement can be carried out to be effective, seem to be rich and full of nuances. In some parts the territory of school improvement knowledge have had these qualities for a long time, although, as Fullan (1991) pointed out, the use of the knowledge basis does not seem to have worked well anyway. However this notion seem to be true also for other research based knowledge that could be used by school people. As Tydén et al (1995) points out, there are many signs that school people ignore knowledge that is produced by researchers. One reason seem to be that the researchers create their knowledge from another angle than the school people use. Another reason seem to be that there are difficulties to get school people to critically assess, re-examine and adapt the knowledge to their own reality.

During the nineties researchers try to formulate further knowledge thesis to prevent a repetition of earlier lackings. It is important that these thesis are put forward. It will help the collective process of creating more stable and reliable knowledge about school improvement, but I doubt that the formulation of the thesis will help the people that try to improve schools to reach better results. I believe so because during the latest decades the utilisation of what is known about the inner lives of schools, about the factors that create effective schools, about the mechanisms behind successful innovative work in schools and about the institutionalisation processes in schools, have been discreet. Or it might be better to describe the utilisation of this widening knowledge basis about school improvements as very restricted. Some few people widely scattered around the world have grasped and used the knowledge about school improvement and about how you might be able to get better results out of your school. This kind of knowledge have not grown into the common owned and used knowledge that appears as something self-evident in learning materials, as modules in pre-

service training programmes for teachers or as parts of the knowledge structure of professionals.

Frequent renaming of a young territory

During the last decades research that have grown on school improvement have shifted name. During the late seventies the focus was on teachers and their learning. In-service training of teachers was combined with an interest in the development of schools. In the early seventies the term in use was school development. For instance Dalin (1973) presented a series of books on this topic. In many ways the focus of interest in the knowledge territory of school improvement at this time was directed by views of a deficit paradigm (Huberman and Guskey, 1995). Administrators, politicians, evaluators and researchers determined the deficits and to some extent some of these actors held the idea that something was lacking and needed to be corrected. Teachers were more seen as change objects, than subjects of their own growth and holders of the school improvement process. In one way you could say that teachers, as a large collective, share the responsibility for these attitudes, together with the others actors. The teachers were not interested to include a common shared responsibility for the school as a working organisation into their professional responsibilities. It seemed to have been enough to care for the students and for the teaching. Therefore there have rarely been any request for school improvement knowledge among the broad layers of teachers. That kind of knowledge still have no place in the curriculum of the pre-service training of teachers.

In the late seventies the focus was turning and school effectiveness and school improvement were used as two different areas covering close parts of the actual knowledge territory. School effectiveness had an immediate appeal on the conservative politicians that were dominant in the US and in England. The leading political people in these two countries changed the rules of the game for the researchers. It become difficult to get state funding for studies of the egalitarian and grass-root democratic strategies of school change that had developed through the sixties and the seventies (i.e. Schmuck et al., 1975). The rational restructuring of schools was more attractive, with a hope of quick results in slow working social organisations. The term to describe the knowledge field in the US turned over to restructuring, but in Europe the other denominations of the territory have been kept. As Creemers and Reezigt (1997) shows there is however several tendencies to link school effectiveness thinking together with school improvement from the middle of the eighties and onwards.

Low acceptance of school improvement knowledge

The territory is however still not a very well accepted and respected one. Some anecdotal evidence might illustrate. In the beginning of the nineties, I and a Danish colleague made a condensed version of the school improvement literature that was published by the OECD during the eighty´s for a Scandinavian audience (Ekholm and Ploug-Olsen, 1991). We were supported by the Council of Ministries of the Nordic Countries to do the volume and people from the publishing house of this council, NORD, helped us with the editing. However, the head of this publishing house was rather sceptical towards the title of the book "*Förbättringar av skolor*"(in English *Improvements of schools*), as he thought that people in the field would associate too much with a book on architecture. Another incident that made me aware of the low degree of acceptance that the school improvement territory have was during an intensive week that I spent in Paris in 1989 together with 25 colleagues at the International Institute for Educational Planning to produce a book that could be used when planning for quality of education in developing countries (Ross and Mählck, 1990). I tried to put forward ideas on how the knowledge that had been produced within the school effectivity tradition and the school improvement tradition could be integrated into the traditional thinking within the comparative and statistical approach to educational systems. The interest to use that kind of knowledge as a part of strategy to plan for better education was very small among the leading persons at the institute. Later, when I have spent time in one developing country as an adviser to the National Institute of Education of Sri Lanka, I have found that the need for this kind of knowledge is great. And as have been shown in studies made in this country (Perera and Lieynenga, 1995), the use of this knowledge field have been of good value.

A plea for a stable name of the territory

One of the problems using the knowledge about school improvement is that the territory changes its name rather quickly. We are invited to this conference to work on the theme The challenge of *school transformation*. I have been involved as a researcher and an actor within the school improvement area since the late sixties. During these thirty years the knowledge field have changed its denomination at least every five years. Innovations in education, school innovations, inservice-training in education, school development, restructuring of schools, school improvement, Maybe we could gain from being less changeable in this area. It helps a field of knowledge to be able to keep a denomination stable, as it becomes more easy to the users to identify the content and where it is possible to utilise. Another name on the knowledge basis might help the use of it. The proposal imbedded in the name of this conference - school transformation - is not what I would like to see. It gives to many associations to electricity or to the lives of animals, where for instance the

change between different forms of living among insects (from caterpillar to butterfly) are real transformations.

What we have built knowledge about is school improvement, how schools do when they raise the quality of their inner lives and when the results of learning among the students become better. Either we could stay with the denomination of the territory as school improvement, and really decide together to keep that for many years, which I think would help our efforts to disseminate the knowledge to many people, or if school improvement is too much of a limited speciality within the territory under development, we can of course choose another denomination that could be used for many years. If so, my proposal is that we call the knowledge field *school amelioration*. Amelioration is a seldom used expression in English, based on Latin (*melior*=better) and its French development *ameliorer*. The expression have a meaning and it is neither used nor misused.

Concentration on dissemination

To be able to understand what parts of the large bulk of knowledge that have been produced on school improvement I think it is important that the knowledge comes into more regular use. What we have seen so far, is to a large extent a utilisation of the knowledge by fascinated users. The real test of the quality of the knowledge within the field of school improvement may come when the less interested and less enthusiastic user acts with it. But before we reach such a state where a broader use of the school improvement knowledge is apparent we need to face the problem to get the knowledge disseminated and accepted as important. The school improvement knowledge seems to be most easily adopted by people that already have the same perspective on schools as the knowledge producers have. One such group is school leaders, that share the view of schools as local organisations that most researchers in the field hold. In my country, Sweden, we have since the middle of 1970 trained new school leaders in a national education programme. In this programme literature, thoughts and actions based on the school improvement knowledge have been frequently (Ekholm, 1992) used. The participants have started to use the ideas, but one important learning from this long-lasting and ongoing field experiment in knowledge dissemination is that the knowledge still is difficult to use in the normal school setting. The school leaders try to use it, but also give frequent testimonies about the difficulties to get teachers to adopt the knowledge. They do not seem to share the perspective of the school as a local organisation, that the school leaders keep in their minds. They have a stronger concentration on the classroom level and do not share the school leaders interest for creating new infrastructures of the school to make improvements more possible.

Maybe we ought to spend some energy on inventing ways to help the knowledge about school improvement to become a every teacher kind of knowledge. What are the effective strategies to get this kind of knowledge on the lists of literature during pre-service training of teachers? Do we need to create alliances with other important knowledge areas, like for instance theories of instruction, learning theories or classroom organisation? Areas that are highly respected and appearing as knowledge descriptions all over the world. Maybe we should use the strategies that the people behind knowledge about quality check and quality development have used. They do not stay with educating people about the ideas, but they also point out who have accepted the ideas by the use of accreditation. Maybe the use of school improvement knowledge would be much more frequent if we introduce a quality mark that says that you are both familiar with the school improvement knowledge, that you are using it and that school improvement specialists are checking your knowledge use every five years? School improvement knowledge is however not an isolated phenomena. What we have succeeded to show is working in schools also have sense in many other organisations. Maybe we should help schools to cross-fertilise their improvement work by getting them to develop together with other organisations. To join a bank and a hospital that are occupied by using the knowledge on improvement (or should we call it amelioration?) may help the school to learn more about its own movements and its internal life. It helps to look at others when you want to learn about your self and if school people looked more at others and their strivings to become better they might explore all the similarities instead of being fascinated by the differences.

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