

Reflective learning opportunities for school leaders in sustainable school improvement projects

Katrine Puge, PhD Student, Aarhus University, Denmark

Line Lindhardt, Project member, Aarhus University, Denmark

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Abstract

We have developed a simple tool used by school leaders to collect, reflect on, and learn from experiences in school improvement projects that we call ‘Reflection Papers’. Using this tool, leaders reflect on the changes that have been implemented and on what they have learned from these changes. Introducing Reflection Papers requires *time*, as learning to reflect involves practice and patience; *pressure*, as a little bit of external pressure impels leaders to reflect; and *consistency*, as consistent language use in meetings and in the Reflection Papers helps leaders understand the importance of reflection. The tool facilitates learning opportunities, thereby contributing to the ongoing professional development of school leaders and enhancing the institutional capacity for change.

Introduction

In school improvement projects, leaders and staff plan and perform new activities, adapting their everyday work in ways they expect will improve the quality of the school’s educational programmes. The experiences gained through these activities represent opportunities for continuous reflection and learning.

As part of a seven-year school improvement programme within the field of vocational education and training, our research team works with school leaders¹ at ten schools to ensure the sustainability of their various projects. Drawing on school improvement literature, sustainability refers to 1) the long-term implementation of project activities, and 2) development of the schools’ change capacity (Askill-Williams & Koh, 2020, p. 33; Fullan, 2002).

The programme, launched in 2019 by the Velux Foundations, aims to improve the quality of vocational education and training in Eastern Europe². Ten schools were invited to participate, each receiving 0.5–1.5 million Euros in funding. With the support of the research team, each school plans and implements projects focused on quality improvement. The content of these projects differs, but they share a common approach to the change process and collaboration.

In this paper, we present the tool we have developed to support this process, which we call ‘Reflection Papers’, and describe how it facilitates reflection and learning opportunities for leaders in school

¹ In this paper, ‘leaders’ refers to everyone with a leading role in the school improvement projects. This may include the school principal and other leading staff, as well as project coordinators and teachers with responsibility for the implementation of the projects.

² Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic

improvement projects. Our results show that Reflection Papers contribute positively to the development of the reflective skills necessary for leading change. The use of Reflection Papers is a method that provides strong learning opportunities for leaders despite the papers being a relatively small and distant intervention in comparison to formal courses or other types of professional development. In this paper, we discuss how the ability to reflect may affect schools' change capacity.

School leaders as drivers of sustainable school improvement

In school improvement projects, school leaders play a vital role when implementing changes. Several studies have addressed the role of leadership in school improvement, pointing out that change management is not an innate ability of school leaders (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2002). Instead, leaders must constantly learn from their experiences to develop their ability to lead change processes.

School improvement initiatives require leaders who are willing and able to reflect on changes and act on these reflections. Leaders must be able to reflect on what they learn from their experiences. In a case study on school improvement, Karagiorgi et al. (2018) show how systematic self-reflection can potentially transform schools into learning organizations. Similarly, some researchers refer to schools' *capacity for improvement* (Thoonen et al., 2012), in which reflection is part of a more far-reaching process of change. Other researchers refer to the concept of *schools' capacity for change* as "the different kinds of school resources to enable the school to respond to new demands arising from change" (Lai, 2015). Others again incorporate the notion of organizational learning in the concept of *school capacity*, covering both the culture and structure of schools, with reflection playing a role in continuous learning and capacity building in a project by Mulford (2007, pp. 23-35). All of these studies refer to aspects of organizational learning and deal with schools' capacity for change understood as the ability to engage in future change processes.

Learning through reflection plays a key role in building change capacity. According to McIntosh, the "fundamental skills of learning how to reflect are generally overlooked (...)" when designing research and development projects (2010, p. 32). In such projects, an ability to reflect is key to the successful leadership of change processes. Hence, our interventions focus particularly on developing the reflective skills of school leaders who are leading school improvement projects. As Fullan states, this type of "learning in context is related to sustainability because it improves the system in a way that establishes conditions conducive to continuous development" (2002, p. 11). In our project, the school leaders are 'forced' to reflect on and learn from their experiences. This not only enables the development of their reflective skills, but also develops the capacity for further improvement in future change processes.

Data collection

We have collected various forms of data that offer an insight into how the leaders and their projects have developed and the impact of our interventions on this development:

- *Reflection Papers* collected every second month throughout the project period, starting in 2019.

- *Semi-structured interviews* with leaders: 2-3 per leader. These interviews focused on the leaders' use of Reflection Papers and how it helped them learn from their experiences with the projects.
- *Observations* from evaluative midterm meetings where school leaders and the researchers reflected on the effects of the Reflection Papers.
- *A survey* exploring the leaders' perceptions of the impact of our collaboration in terms of reflection and learning.

How do leaders learn from their experiences in school improvement projects?

'Reflection Papers' are a tool that can help leaders learn from their experiences during activities conducted as part of school improvement projects by developing their reflective skills. In the following, we will present this tool and show how the participating school leaders found them to be an important source of learning. In addition, we will highlight certain conditions that we have found necessary for the successful use of Reflection Papers.

Using Reflection Papers as a tool for learning

We developed Reflection Papers as a tool for ongoing data collection and reflection. Each Reflection Paper consists of three or four questions for leaders to reflect upon. The aim is to get the leaders to reflect on their experiences during the implementation of their school improvement projects, learn from these experiences and maintain a developmental perspective.

Therefore, the questions focus on the following broad topics:

- *What has been done in the project?*
- *What have they learned from their activities?*
- *How do they know their activities were successful?*

We send Reflection Paper templates to the school leaders every second month for them to fill in and return. Some school leaders fill out the papers by themselves, but the majority meet with key personnel involved in the projects.

The Reflection Papers result in learning opportunities for both teams and individuals as they are impelled to reflect on their experiences during project activities.

Using Reflection Papers taught the leaders to reflect

To begin with, school leaders were more likely to answer the questions by describing activities rather than reflecting on what they have learned from these activities. As stated previously, reflection is a skill that needs to be learned.

One school leader explained their lack of experience with reflection: "Prior to this, we did not work with reflection. You made us use reflection as a method to correct the progress of our project."

With regard to Reflection Papers, another manager suggested that the most important contribution of the collaboration with our research team was that the "Aarhus University team has given us an evaluation method". This suggests that the leaders had not previously worked with systematic written reflections.

In general, the leaders linked evaluations with effect measurements and key performance indicators at the beginning of our collaboration, rather than with reflection and self-assessment. Therefore, systematic reflection on experiences *during* the process of school improvement was something new that they had to learn.

In the early responses to Reflection Papers, descriptions of activities took up more space than reflection on *what the participants had learned*. Meanwhile, later responses showed progress in terms of the ability to reflect. Generally, the answers began to indicate a deeper level of reflection in the fourth or fifth round of Reflection Papers. This tells us that leaders gradually learned the skill of systematic reflection.

Overall, our empirical data suggests that the school leaders are satisfied with the tool. In one interview, a leader described the effects of using Reflection Papers: “I become more reflective and more inspired in terms of my work and life in general.”

Other leaders expressed how Reflection Papers helped them see their projects from another perspective. For instance, one leader stated: “I know now that it is important to reflect on the process and not only on the outcome of this process.” This is also reflected in a response from another leader: “What you have helped me understand is that the process is more important than the target. It was difficult to understand, but now I do.”

In our survey data, leaders reported that collaborating with the research team has influenced their projects and competencies. Rating the impact of the collaboration on their “ability to reflect on what [they] have learned” resulted in an average score of 4.3 out of 5, while the average score for the impact on their “ability to evaluate the progress of [their] projects” was 3.9. This indicates that our approach and the tool of Reflection Papers were effective in producing the intended learning outcomes.

In conclusion, Reflection Papers contributed positively to the professional development of leaders and to their use of reflection during the implementation of school improvement projects. The tool provided strong learning opportunities for leaders.

There are certain conditions for the successful use of reflection papers

As shown, the intervention using Reflection Papers has been successful. However, asking leaders to answer three questions every second month is not enough. Using Reflection Papers requires that certain conditions are fulfilled.

1) Time

One important aspect of Reflection Papers concerns *time*. It takes time and practice to learn how to reflect. The continuity in answering the same questions every second month gave the school leaders the opportunity to practise reflection. Instead of learning how to reflect before starting to use the Reflection Papers, they learnt how to reflect along the way, linked to their actual experiences with project activities.

In an early interview, one leader explained how “the questions are very complicated, and it is not easy for us to answer them”. In other words, reflection is not an easy task. It is a skill that leaders must

practise in the course of their everyday work. Learning how to reflect is a process that requires time and effort.

Another leader explained the process: “In the beginning, it was a burden. We didn’t know what you wanted. Most probably, the first [Reflection Paper] was sent far too late to you, past the deadline. We have lots of other things to do. We didn’t feel that it was that important. (...). And ever since, we have handled this completely differently. We do it on time so there is time to translate it. Now we know each step.”

Another leader explained how learning to use Reflection Papers is a lengthy process that eventually pays off: “Now we feel this is the way, even though it is not easy. We start to understand why it makes sense”.

In conclusion, introducing Reflection Papers requires time and patience as the process unfolds.

2) Pressure

Another important aspect concerns *a little bit of external pressure*. In other words, completing Reflection Papers forced participants to reflect.

One leader described how the use of Reflection Papers forced them to spend time on reflection: “the cooperation with Aarhus University made us think about and do things we might not have done without it. For instance, we are forced to find time to sit down and talk things through, which we usually would have postponed”.

Another school leader described the outcome of our collaboration: “The new thing is that you force us to keep activities going [in the project]. You ask questions and we must find answers to them. Without you forcing us to fill in Reflection Papers, we wouldn’t have reflected that much.”

When we asked one leader how she came to see ‘reflection’ as the best approach, she simply answered: “to be honest, you forced us.”

Hence, the Reflection Papers functioned as bimonthly interventions by forcing the leaders to reflect. In general, they said that they would not otherwise have used systematic reflection.

It is important to note the role of the research team in exerting this pressure. In the collaboration, the school leaders want to live up to the research team’s expectations. The Reflection Papers are not only being filled in because the leaders consider it a useful exercise, but also because they need to be sent to the research team. Firstly, doing so is collaboration contractual obligation. Secondly, an extensive process of building trust between the research team and school leaders has created interdependency. In broader terms, the Reflection Papers work best when there is a certain amount of external pressure and expectations, impelling leaders to reflect.

3) Consistency

Finally, learning how to use the Reflection Papers requires a *consistent terminology*. One important quality of the Reflection Papers as a tool is the relatively simple form, comprising three to four questions that are formulated in broad terms to facilitate reflection. Broad questions such

as *what have you learned* encourage reflection, whereas more detailed questions – for instance: ‘*which pedagogical consequences will the new activities have for the teaching/training in classrooms and workshops?*’ – are too context-specific and hinder reflection. This may be because participants are more likely to try to ‘find the right answer’ than to reflect on their experiences. Both types of questions have been tested during our project with our experience indicating that the broader the questions, the more they encourage reflection.

For instance, one leader described how the project team at school had to discuss their reflections in order to answer the questions: “the questions are very complicated, and it is not easy for us to answer them. We really have to work together as a team to be able to answer them”.

Throughout our collaboration with the leaders, and especially when introducing the Reflection Papers as a tool, we have asked the same question over and over again: *what have you learned?* It has been important to maintain the perspective of *learning from experiences* when communicating with school leaders. One school leader stated: “It was actually from your Reflection Papers that we came to understand what you were originally asking and why these reports and reflections are important.”

In the process of learning to reflect, the leaders started recognizing the questions and, in this way, came to understand their importance. When developing leaders’ ability to reflect systematically, it is important to employ a consistent terminology – both when introducing the Reflection Papers and in the types of questions they pose.

Summing up, introducing Reflection Papers requires *time*, as learning to reflect is a process that takes practice and patience; *pressure*, as a little external pressure impels leaders to engage in reflection; and *consistency*, as using a consistent terminology in meetings and in the Reflection Papers helps leaders understand the importance of reflection during their projects.

Discussion and conclusion

Our results show that school leaders are not necessarily familiar with employing reflection as part of their everyday work. We have shown how Reflection Papers are a tool that supports the professional development of leaders and their use of reflection during school improvement projects. By using Reflection Papers, leaders learn how to reflect on their experiences. Hence, the tool provides strong learning opportunities for leaders. We want to stress, however, that asking questions is not enough in itself. Our results show how time, pressure and consistency are important conditions for the successful use of Reflection Papers.

As described, school improvement literature points to the importance of reflection as a tool for learning and increasing the capacity for future change initiatives at schools. As McIntosh has proclaimed, the “fundamental skills of learning how to reflect are generally overlooked (...)” when designing research and development projects (2010, p. 32). We have developed Reflection Papers as a tool for strengthening such skills among the school leaders participating in our research. Doing so provides a bedrock for future initiatives to implement sustainable improvements at the participating schools. As leaders reflect on the experiences gained through school improvement activities, they learn to understand the processes of change – an understanding that is vital when leading educational change (Fullan, 2016, p. 37). In other words, reflection offers opportunities to learn *how to lead*

change. We understand reflective skills as among the necessary resources if the schools are to respond to new demands; hence, learning how to reflect contributes to an enhancement of the schools' change capacity.

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