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The Challenges of the School Leader

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Introduction

The school leader is often the only individual who assumes overall responsibility for achieving a school's goals; as a result, (s)he often feels lonely at work. This leader's main responsibilities are comprehensive and complex. First and foremost, (s)he has to make sure that teachers have a clear and shared understanding of what are their responsibilities and areas of improvement. The school leader must then create an understanding among teachers that continuous improvement is necessary. Finally, (s)he has to guide the teaching staff through an ongoing process of innovation. In this article we try to give school leaders an understanding of the concept of quality (TQM), knowledge of the process of change based on the problem-solving strategy (P-S), and an understanding of the importance of learning from the process of change, which means creating a learning organisation based on the theory of problem-based learning (PBL). The school leader has to prioritise his/her role as coach for his/her teachers in these processes of ongoing improvement and focus on educational development for all pupils in an inclusive school.

The approach in this chapter is based on simple logic; it starts by pointing out that quality cannot be achieved once and for all but requires continuous improvements being made towards achieving certain goals (total quality management[1]). These improvements presuppose innovation taking place on the local level because centrally developed practical solutions are not always suitable everywhere. In each local professional environment co-workers have to be

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1   Shiba and Waldon, 2001

engaged in holistic innovation projects integrated into their day-to-day work. This process should be led and followed up by a qualified professional leader who can contribute to the individuals staying focused on their goals, thereby being creative and willing to learn how to develop an alternative improved practise.[2] In other words leadership is about facilitating staff members in the processes of

- improving practise, and
- learning from the process of improvement.

Schools' ultimate goal of providing a service that every pupil is to receive in accordance with government policy may be called adapted education. The school leader's main challenge then becomes to develop schools where teachers in collaboration with pupils *create the conditions and situations for learning so that pupils can realise their potential for learning.*

The theoretical framework of this chapter is based on a model for developing competence and quality which I have called *The Loop of Development* (see diagram):
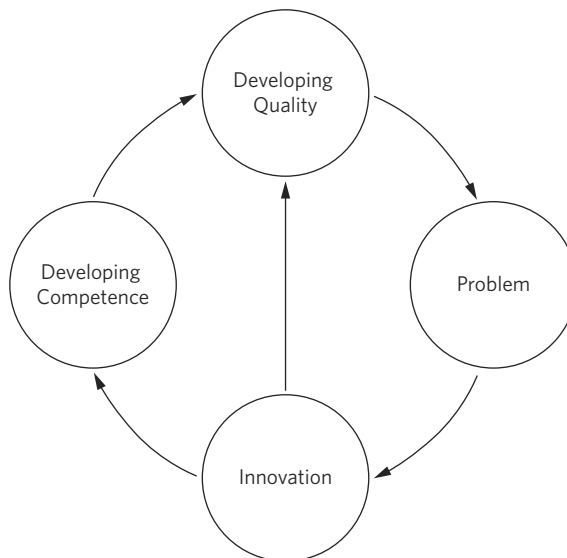
Figure 1. The Loop of Development

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2   Senge et al, 2004 & Senge, P, 2006

The Loop of Development illustrates that the starting point for change and learning is practical challenges in real life (Problem). On the basis of a real problem, the aim is to improve practise (Innovation). The purpose of the innovation is to improve the quality of the work that is being done (Developing Quality). Quality improvement must be evaluated in comparison with the practical problem with which we started. Professionals (teachers and leaders) who participate in the innovation process have to be trained to learn from their experiences so that they can improve their qualifications (Developing Competence). This method of learning is often called Problem-Based Learning (PBL); it is familiar to the majority of individuals working in the education and health care sectors.[3]

In the process of approaching the goal of developing an educational system where everyone can realise their potential for learning, for their own and society's benefit, the headmaster/headmistress needs a thorough understanding of the concept of quality. We have chosen to connect this understanding with the perspective of Total Quality Management (TQM).[4] Let us have a look at the four phenomena included in this perspective: *focus on the user, total participation, continuous improvement and developing competence.*

Focus on the user

Defining the user has at times caused problems for a variety of experts. One such group of experts is comprised of educational professionals. Some of these experts have followed a kind of American 'management philosophy', regarding school owners and administrators as consumers of pedagogical competence. Others have focused on teachers and student counsellors. Still others have at times rejected any attempt to define the user, basing their reasoning on the belief that definition is an impossible task that is unnecessary at best and detrimental at worst.

The problem is that if we have no defined user, the knowledge we develop will lack focus. Because of the great challenges faced when developing a high level of relevant competence, it is easier for some individuals to be a bit vague. However, as responsible professionals we cannot allow ourselves this luxury; on the contrary, we need to be clear about whom we are serving.

In our work at school, there should be no doubt about the user's identity. Indeed, it is he or she who is about to learn and is therefore called the pupil or

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3   Evensen and Hmelo, 2000
4   Shiba and Waldon, 2001

student. The most important work here, which is mostly done by teachers, is to organise a learning situation that can provide each pupil with the opportunity to use their learning potential in the best possible manner. The school leader always has to be clear about the fact that the pupil is the primary user regardless of whether we are working with learning plans, pedagogical methods, teaching aids, school management, student groups, school buildings, textbooks, teacher training or educational research.

Of course, this principle is as impossible to realise fully in practice as it is simple to understand and support in theory. For example, a teacher might be busy either promoting himself/herself as a good candidate for the school principal post or trying to get work outside of education, and a principal might be busy competing with the neighbouring school about getting articles on his/her own school in the local newspaper. A researcher could be more concerned with gaining a position as a professor; a town official with trying to save money; while a politician is more concerned about making a positive impression on the electorate before the next election.

Continuous improvement

There has at times been a widespread misunderstanding that quality is a condition that we can achieve; therefore, we become complacent. While it has long been known that realising innovative ideas take time, it is probably closer to the truth if we say that we can only come closer to realising a vision through striving for continuous improvement. Let us for a moment focus on the educational system's vision of creating *an inclusive school with individually adapted education for all*, and we can easily see the reality behind the demand for continuous improvement. This is an example of a phenomenon which is easily understood in principle but which is generally unattainable in practice. The question is therefore what we can do with an unachievable vision. The answer must be that we can only get closer to it yet never actually reach it; moreover, this has to happen through constantly taking small steps, as by doing so there will be continuous improvement. In order to explain this relationship, we can use the term *a problem-solving process*. More significantly, everyone can contribute to improving his or her portion of the work to benefit the user. For example, every teacher, both individually and in collaboration with others, can contribute towards the school becoming a place for everyone and helping to ensure that all pupils increasingly receive individually adapted education.

Total participation

Even if each of us has a clear idea of who the user is and keeps this in mind, the pupil might still experience a chaotic, unfocused and confusing learning environment, which in a worst case scenario could become a hindrance to his/her learning. This depends among other things on all the participants having the same understanding of what they are doing. They must working wholeheartedly towards the same goals, and their efforts must be co-ordinated. In other words if every pupil is to receive individually adapted education, all those involved need to have a shared understanding of what individually adapted education is and how it can best be achieved. It is also essential that they have an understanding of the pupil's overall situation and organisational context, which is often called 'system knowledge'. If system-oriented initiatives are to work as intended, they demand participation from all relevant agents, and this effort has to be co-ordinated with a focus on the pupil's needs. In order for this complicated interplay to work in practice, there is the requirement for leaders to assume overall responsibility at the same time that every agent assumes their share of the collective responsibility.[5] The challenges of project management and teamwork in this situation are formidable.[6]

A socially responsible corporate culture depends on full participation on several levels. It depends on macro-level co-ordination in order to manage global resources in a way that in the long term benefit all of humankind. It depends on co-ordination on the local and regional level so that the development and sale of products and services become cost effective and adapted to customers' needs. It also depends on enabling the last link of the chain, the individuals who are in direct contact with customers (pupils) to provide the best possible service. In order for our pupils to get the full benefit from our school system, as determined by us through our legislation and curricula, we require full participation on all levels of society, including schools and outside groups.

Developing competence

A substantial amount of research exists on the importance of following up teachers and other professionals after they have completed their education.[7] There is

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5   Kotter and Cohen, 2002
6   Day et al., 2000
7   Von Krogh, 2000

also well- documented research showing that within the school system it is the teacher him-/herself who is the most important professional agent; therefore, we should make it a priority to develop their competence.[8] The need to develop one's knowledge throughout a lifelong career has been becoming more and more obvious.[9] This kind of competence development should of course also be seen as a responsibility of society as a whole, with the Department of Education, universities and colleges as key agents in this regard. Responsibility could be shared in collaboration with teachers' organisations, school owners and higher education institutions. This arrangement could be an effective way of ensuring quality improvement, which would undoubtedly benefit pupils. Continuous improvement requires that experiences be retained and that organisations learn. The School Leader has to take responsibility for developing a learning organisation (a learning school).[10]

   If we are going to be able to continuously improve our work in giving every pupil an increasingly better adapted education, it requires the participation of all involved groups and individuals. This raises significant challenges for organisation, systemic development, management and learning, which in turn requires the establishment and use of *social networks* which need to meet the following three conditions;

- emphasise the development of a network-friendly infrastructure locally, regionally and nationally and which also relates to society as a whole
- the different various and organisations, for example schools, must be open to sharing their relevant 'cases' with each other for mutual learning
- the need for change agents, or process consultants, which might be a more familiar term, must be made clear.[11]

In the process of implementing schools' internal problem-based learning strategy, the following activities are important:

- reflecting on the need for new knowledge, and
- reflecting on knowledge before using it,
- reflecting on the practice/problem in relation to personal knowledge [12]

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8   MacBeath & Mortimor 2001
9   Senge et al., 2004
10   Senge, 2006
11   Shiba and Waldon, 2001
12   Evensen and Hmelo, 2000

The reflection must naturally be related to relevant theory if we want to raise competence levels. Natural scientist and author Piet Hein discusses in one of his poems the people who ...*despise theory and instead claim a practical idiocy which has many hidden theories in it*... We can call this 'pragmatism' and contrast it with 'academicism' where one dreams of developing grand research-based theories which should be able to provide all the principles for practitioners to first read about and then implement in practice. In Piet Hein's spirit we can postulate that behind every human action lies both a choice of values and a choice of theories.

The problem-solving strategy of innovation (P-S)

In the following we will specify and develop a way of working to follow up the intention of realising in practice an overall approach to developing quality and upgrading competence in an organisation. We are choosing school as an example of an arena, a teacher as an example of an employee, and the five phases of the P-S-model as the starting point of this exposition:

Phase 1 **Needs**:   experience of the present situation and the need for change

Phase 2 **Problem**:   clarify, specify and define the need for change

Phase 3 **Resources**:   exchange and gather knowledge, ideas and experiences

Phase 4 **Solution**:   develop suggestions for solutions with plans for implementation

Phase 5 **Implementation**: apply and evaluate the chosen solution

The following figure indicates how the phases follow each other logically from 1 to 5; and that after implementation, we start analysing needs once again.

When organising adapted education in an inclusive school, it is each pupil's resources and potential for learning which form the starting point for any innovation and which must be seen in connection with the goals as they appear in legislation and curricula. Innovation has to focus on the pupil's development and learning. When organising education that is adapted to the individual pupil, it is the pupil who is the **primary user** of the school organisation, and the teacher is the most central **internal user**. The P-S-model may be used on two school levels:
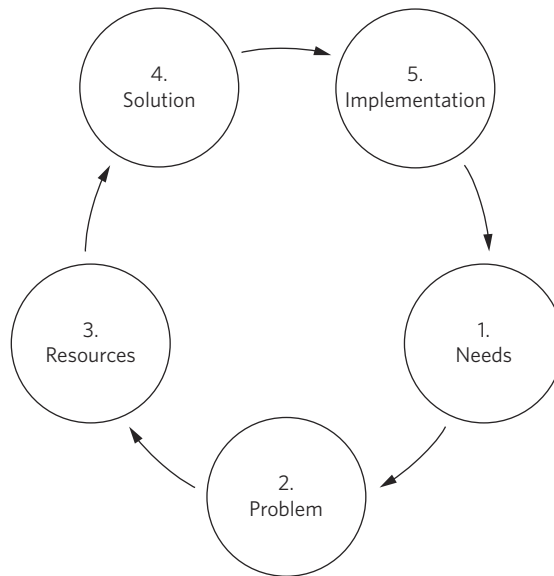
Figure 2. P-S-model

1. The internal user (the teacher) can use the model to organise education for the primary user (the pupil) in the best possible way – **the primary level**.
2. School will be the natural organising unit for innovation which purports to upgrade teachers' competence in order for them to contribute to improving the quality of work at school – **the secondary level**.

The *secondary level*, where individual schools innovate locally, will now be the main focus of discussion. These innovations obviously have to be structured in order for them to contribute towards a continuous improvement on the primary level (pupils, students etc.), and this should be one of the School Leader's central tasks.[13] Other tasks such as administrative and financial management work, must be seen as supporting or assisting the development of quality and competence.

Needs

According to the P-S-model, innovation will have a positive starting point if the main participants *experience a need for improvement* in a specific area. We should emphasise the importance of the central participants experiencing

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13   Hesselbein et al, 2000

a real and existential need for change.[14] In this context it is argued that a need which is experienced as a crisis is the best starting point for change, and that staff members who are satisfied with their situation will not be loyal supporters of innovation. We are talking about the importance of having a sense of ownership of an innovative idea;thus, we can safely say that it is unwise to initiate innovation without a process where the affected staff members have participated in discussions and had a real influence on the planned project. When a school experiences a dramatic increase in disruptive behaviour combined with poor exam results, it most likely will not be difficult for a leader to get people motivated for innovation. On the contrary, in these circumstances ideas will often come from further down the system, and the leader can simply implement these requests from the "grassroots". However, the need for innovation will often be more diffuse and controversial, as for example when educational authorities want fewer resolutions in relation to pupils with special needs or ask that a particular method (for example, the project method) constitutes a certain percentage of the education programme. It may also be difficult to gain support for restructuring when the connection between the organisational structure and quality is not immediately apparent. In both the corporate world and public administration, there are numerous examples of restructuring where the only thing clearly understood by the staff members is that the new leader wants to improve his/her own status. One could claim that a leader has two possibilities to initiate innovations in his/her organisation and secure a sense of ownership of them amongst his/her staff by doing the one of the following:

- intercept needs or an idea coming from further down the organisation, or
- sell an idea coming from the top or outside of the organisation.

The least complicated option is obviously to intercept ideas from further down in the organisation. These projects can get off to a flying start because there has often been an informal internal discussion about them before their launch. The leader can 'pick a ripe fruit', so to speak. It is much more challenging to either follow up ideas or needs coming from management, marginal internal groups or external groups. In order for innovation to work, one has to be sure that the idea has *wide support* among both staff members and management in the organisation. One also has to be fairly sure that all the participants have a *concrete and shared understanding* of the idea.

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14   Kotter and Cohen, 2002

Problem

The second phase of the P-S-model concerns what is often called a problem diagnosis. This is about realising, clarifying, defining and describing the problem or challenge from which the need for change springs. It is obviously unsustainable to start an innovation project based purely on a perceived need because work done in this phase often proves vital to implementing the project. Individuals have to be realistic about their level of ambition, measuring their potential for improvement with available resources. In this phase final checks must also be made in order to ensure that the problem is clearly understood and there is a shared understanding of the challenge at hand.

One possible approach here is to work out a description of the situation at the time of the project's start and from there describe in detail any aspects that are unsatisfactory. The next step is to come up with some alternative explanations of why these aspects are not working. If possible, the ideal situation, or alternative situations attempted to be approached through the innovation project should also be described. If an ideal situation is unattainable, realistic secondary goals (milestones) should be formulated. It is important that the goal of the project is to achieve something that is desirable, not only to get away from something undesirable. At the same time it is important that there are achievable short-term goals in order to confirm whether or not the correct path has been chosen.

Last, but not least, it is important to ensure that the problem is relevant to the primary user's needs and/or rights. As far as school is concerned, this is easy in principle because we have very clear guidelines from school policies regarding our mandate; the previously mentioned requirement for pupil-adapted education in an inclusive school. Practically speaking, this is very difficult, as it requires continuous follow-up and evaluation to ensure that our methods, working conditions, aids, organisational style and so on bring us closer to our goal. This type of evaluation needs to be a part of all phases of all innovation projects.

When the diagnosis to a problem has been made in order to clarify the need for change, it is important to involve both pupils (as primary users) and teachers (as secondary users), as well as other relevant participants in the process. It is, however, also important at this point to take the pupil's needs and conditional framework, or context, as a starting point. The school's conditional framework must be adapted to pupils' diversity and each pupil's ability and needs. There are many conditions to consider in today's school, including: the teacher's *working methods*, *organisation* of instruction, *competence* to take on the tasks required by law of the teacher, *resource management* and finances.

All these areas are key conditional frameworks that we can easily relate to most of the a school's perceived needs. We often have more possibilities than we can see – and it is important to see the possibilities and not be too hung up on what limits progression. The teacher's choice of *working methods* is an important factor of adapted teaching. The teacher's teaching practice is of the uppermost importance and must therefore be regarded in connection with theory showing how it contributes to pupils' learning. The choice of working methods can for example be based on the assumption that teaching is most effective when pupils have a high level of activity and involvement.

How schools *organise* education is also a factor that plays a major part in turning adapted learning into practice. As a rule, a flexible structure must be planned that facilitates the use of different working methods, which in turn is an important prerequisite for providing adapted education for all. Educational policy and the curriculum are also important factors because they provide us with direction for the work to be done and hence the competence needed to implement this work in schools in both the classroom and for the individual pupil.

If teachers at a school are to grasp the necessary working methods and implement the necessary restructuring, they must have specific areas of *competence*. While relevant knowledge is required in school policies and the curriculum, teachers do not automatically possess it. They must therefore be provided with opportunities to continuously pursue professional development. This could be an important condition in order for teachers to view the law as a challenge and develop a sense of ownership of it. They should also participate actively in the innovations which must take place in schools at all times.

In order for schools to realise the working methods, organisational structures and competence needed to provide adapted education, appropriate *resource management* and sufficient economic funds are required. A great deal can be achieved within the existing financial framework; however, the request for funding is often so urgent that it dominates school operations. Perhaps some teachers have too great a belief that an increase in economic resources can solve the problems with which schools are struggling. Lately, this topic has surfaced during debates about special needs education. We have registered that although there is a tendency here to want more funding to do more of the same things, there is obviously a need for professional development as concerns the quality of training in special needs education. When it comes to financial resources, it is always necessary to make choices and prioritise. It is not unusual that small

reallocations solve problems, thereby preventing these problems from becoming too great to solve.

It is important that united collegia spend the time and effort necessary to describe the problem which is most likely the cause of their perceived need – it is easy to abandon this phase too soon.

Resources

In the first phase, we have focused on our needs for change and potential for improvement, and we have made this more concrete in the second phase in relation to working methods, organisation, competence and resources. In the third phase, the time has come to obtain the necessary competence and ideas in order to implement an actual improvement. According to the P-S-model, in this phase we aim to collect and develop an overview of the available knowledge relevant to our ambition to improve the practice in the relevant area. At the same time, it is important to look for good ideas on how to utilise this knowledge in order to realise our planned improvement of a more adapted and inclusive education. It is important to focus on both the *barriers* we have to relate to and the *possibilities* we can utilise. We then have to mobilise both our knowledge and professional networks in this work. This is about *where* we can find ideas and knowledge and with *whom* we can collaborate. A natural place to look is in available books, journals, magazines, periodicals, databases etc. In addition, we should not neglect experiences gained from our own work and workplace, which, while they might have been partly recorded in reports and similar things, unfortunately often exist only in our memory, becoming oral retellings. We really should write our experiences down so that we and our colleagues will be able to learn and expand on them at a later stage. Even if our own experience and knowledge are of vital importance, we cannot avoid using our professional networks. Your own place of work, for example a school, is an important arena from which to obtain experience. f Neighbouring schools, colleges and universities also constitute central collaborative partners. A more developed generation of the P-S-model operates with an *external consultant* who has specific qualifications, including both the expertise and experience required to guide us through innovation. An educational-psychological service, a public special education support system, local resource centres or a certain number of private consulting companies can provide help and support. However, it is important to keep in mind that the core of all educational innovation is the teacher's ability and desire to critically and creatively reflect on his/her own practice.

Let us continue to illustrate this work, starting from the categories used above, beginning with *working methods*. When a teacher chooses his/her working method, this is based on the experiences of the teacher (practice) and assumptions (theories) about what advances learning and development. It is therefore important that the experiences are varied and rich, and that the relationship to theory is characterised by an open and inquisitive attitude. The age of each pupil, their level of knowledge, ability to concentrate and physical as well as intellectual level, will be some of the central variables in the choice of working methods. In other words, there are many great challenges and ways to differentiate teaching, and it is important to evaluate content, working methods and teaching aids in context. Pupil participation and activity create motivation and contribute to pupils taking responsibility for their own learning.

Another angle is *competence* in the tasks that teachers are legally required to perform. There are many requirements laid on teachers, meaning there are high expectations of teachers' competence. Educational law and the curriculum provide direction for the work to be done in schools and the experience that teachers need to have in order to fulfil these requirements. With new tasks regularly being added to schools' workload, there are new requirements for competence in the different areas. There is continuous change in the school system, meaning that teachers have to participate in competency innovation and development. In this context it is natural for teachers, school administrators and owners to find out if teachers have the professional competence necessary to fulfil schools' politically defined goals. It is the teacher who is ultimately responsible for finding out and evaluating if he or she has the competence necessary to carry out the required tasks. Some relevant questions that may be used in this connection are:

- How are the tasks at hand covered by the teacher's competence?
- What kind of professional development does the teacher feel he/she needs?
- How can the teacher develop his/her own competence?

The last categories that we have focused on in this context deal with *organisation* and *resource management and finances*; these are all of great importance to the implementation of an inclusive education that provides adapted education for all. A great deal can be achieved within existing resources and financial allocations. In order for this to happen, it is important to be aware of how the available resources are used. If there is a need to re-organise priorities, this can be the first step to an innovation project, as minor adjustments can often solve the problem. Re-organisation can be useful both to achieve good

resource management and lay the foundation for new work practices. However, re-organisation that is not rooted in a solid needs analysis may be either a waste of time or directly harmful.

We have now considered *phase three* in the P-S-model – ideas, experiences and information – about knowledge gathering and exchange. We will now move on to *phase four* – suggestions for solutions and formulation of a plan for implementation.

Solution

In *phase four*, which we are now entering in accordance with the P-S-model, we formulate concrete suggestions for creating a solution then choose one suggestion and develop a plan for implementation. This must start from a perceived need (see phase one), the descriptions which emerged when setting the problem diagnosis (see phase two) and be based on the experiences and ideas for solutions (see phase three) which have already emerged. Now is the time to formulate the plan for implementing the initiative. Reaching agreement among the participants regarding the solution's choice and formulation can be a long process. Some teachers are so impatient to start up initiatives that they do not allocate the necessary time to this phase. However, one quickly discovers that if insufficient time is allocated for the participants to come to agreement and reach a shared understanding of the chosen solutions, it will negatively influence the implementation plan. It is therefore recommended that enough time be put aside for this phase, where suggested solutions and the plan for innovation implementation are formulated in collaboration with all the involved participants. At the same time, one has to prepare for how to deal with potential obstacles which may arise during the innovation phase.

Implementation

When the perceived need from phase *one* is realised in the *second* phase, relevant ideas and knowledge gathered and systematised in the third phase and a suggested solution formulated and chosen in the fourth phase, we have reached the *fifth* phase, which is called implementation. This phase also includes evaluation to find out if the innovation's goal has been achieved. At the same time, it is natural to think of how to *disseminate* the relevant new practice.

Many people view implementation as the basic process in innovation because it is in this phase of the innovation process that any improvements will have consequences for further practise. The implementation strategy will obviously vary according to which areas we are focusing on, and we have to especially consider the phenomenon of *ownership*.[15] In order to best succeed with the innovation plan's implementation, it requires among other things that the innovators (the headmaster/-mistress) focus on the participants' sense of ownership. Hopefully, this has already been well established in the previous phases, but this does not exclude the need to maintain and develop the sense of ownership in this phase, too. If the working method that is chosen and implemented concerns improving the project-work method, it will be important to develop a sense of ownership of this change both beforehand and during implementation. If teachers are sceptical of project work as a starting method, this will have consequences for the innovation which is being implemented. As we already know, a sense of ownership is developed through *participation* in the process of planning and decision making. It would therefore be unwise to implement a version of the project work method without it having been developed by the teachers themselves, possibly assisted by a particularly experienced or competent colleague. Even if this version of the model has been applied successfully in other places, it is still crucial that the teachers in question make the necessary adjustments before and during the implementation phase.

The *barriers* that have not been dealt with before this phase have to be worked on during the phase we are now in. At the same time as the relevant working method requires changes in teachers' roles, it usually requires organisational changes as well, for example adjusting the timetable, length of each shift etc. It also determines requirements concerning participants' competence; for example, it presupposes that the teacher will develop his/her qualifications in the relevant area in both methods and counselling. This could be about how a teacher masters certain specific approaches within planning, organising, implementation and evaluation. Furthermore, it may be about specific counselling skills. The more independently pupils work, the more counselling or instruction has to be part of a teacher's job, which can require improving his/her counselling competence. These changes often require resources; therefore, there must be a focus on good resource management.

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15   Rosen and Carberry, 2003

As is clear from the above, these five phases cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive categories which follow each other step-by-step (serial). On the contrary, each phase has its specific tasks and challenges, and it will be necessary to follow up these challenges and problems in the subsequent stages. It will be necessary to improvise, planning ahead and being prepared to make adjustments at all times. Innovations are complex systems, which in a school setting cannot be supported purely by a strictly rational and linear logic. The P-S-model is, however, flexible enough to include the nuances and unpredictability of reality, and as such has a disciplinarian effect on the participants in innovation projects.

Prologue

The reputation of the school leader depends on how well he/she has managed to change his/her school into a better place to learn for all its pupils. He/She is expected to achieve an inclusive school that provides education for all (EFA).[16] In this article we have tried to give the School Leader some tools for guiding his/her teachers and help them continuously improve their instruction. Among all the challenges a School Leader faces, this must be considered the most important and must therefore be given top priority.[17] The ultimate challenge for a leader will always be *making innovation work*; and for a school leader, this means *working for the benefit of his/her pupils*.[18] In addition to clearly understanding and accepting this focus, the leader needs to have a mind suitable for innovation, decision making and problem solving.[19]

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16   UNESCO, 1994
17   Glasman and Glasman, 2007
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