



# Administrators Communicating Change in Initial Teacher Education - Communication Efforts During Restructuring Partnership

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**ABSTRACT:** *The aim with this study is to highlight the role of administrators and present and discuss their communication efforts during change. The changes in question concerned restructuring of a partnership between a university and organisers of preschool to upper secondary, K-12, within Initial Teacher Education. Findings from interviews with operative administrators showed that there was successful communication effort and re-organisation was carried out. In contrast, the communication efforts offered an arena for unresolved issues concerning the partnership, the communication efforts were directed to a higher degree to external rather than internal stakeholders, and the national sense-making differed from the local sense-making. The study shows the importance of the administrator role in communication efforts during change in higher education partnerships. In their role they balance between keeping legally mandated structure and change. The conclusion is that it is essential to further study the role of administrators, especially communication efforts during change.*

**Keywords :** *Initial Teacher Education; practice; partnership; administrators*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the effort to improve quality, higher education institutions undergo constant change. As in other organisations the implementation of change depends on the knowledge, skills and motivation of the operative staff. In educational settings, the distribution of teachers, administrators and support staff varies. When there are organisational changes in higher education, the administrators at central and department level can be as much operative staff as the teachers are (Hogan, 2014). In some cases, they are even more so in an initial phase of implementation of organisational change. However, the efforts of the administrators at different levels are less often presented and critically discussed (Szekeres, 2004).

The organisation of Initial Teacher Education (hereafter ITE) and the role practice plays differs between countries. There are also differences in how the practicum organisation is designed. Although perceived as important for the education, issues relating to organisation and re-organisation of practicum during ITE are seldom researched (Lawson, Cakmak, Gündüz & Busher, 2015).

The aim with this study is to highlight the role of administrators as well as to present and discuss their perceptions about change and their communication efforts. The actual change is implementation of a new partnerships organisation in Initial Teacher Education. The importance of communication during change is not disputed, but nevertheless the research on communication during change needs to be further elaborated (Johansson and Heide, 2008).

The article continues with a brief introduction to the context for the case and earlier studies on organisational change, especially the communication process. The results of a data collection, interviews with a team of administrators, are presented using a framework from communication theory (Lewis, 2011) and in the end there is a final discussion.

## II. GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVE, LOCAL RESPONSE

In 2014 the Swedish government initiated a re-organisation aiming at increasing quality during practicum in ITE. It was offered as a possibility for the Universities organising ITE, including some additional money to pay for the implementation. The reason was a perceived need of increasing quality during practicum. The re-organisation is mainly a question of concentrating on fewer schools with mentors having completed a mentor course and a higher number of students on each practice school. In addition, the cooperation between the

organisers and the university should increase via dialogue and concerning research. In the new organisation these schools are called 'practice schools' (Niklasson, 2015a, b).

The application from the local university in this case was accepted spring 2014 and the implementation process started immediately. To accomplish the new partnership structure, a team of department administrators worked with the following issues:

- Reorganise the practicum team at the University and engage in team-building
- Follow up the new contracts with K-12 organisers
- Get connected with contact persons from the K-12 organisations and organise continuous meetings with them
- Follow up that each practicum school has built a mentor team with a leader
- Follow up that the information is not 'stopped' at the highest organisational level within the K-12 organisation, but is transferred to all levels, especially to the mentors
- Inform staff at the university of the change

Even though practicum course leaders and other staff at the University are engaged in the implementation, it is the team of department administrators for partnership/practicum who are the operative change agents. In this case they can be presented as working as 'third space professionals' (Whitchurch, 2006; Hogan, 2014) as they can have both administrative duties and teaching duties. This also includes administrators at Mälardalen Competence Centre for Learning (further on MKL) as the centre works with external contacts, organises seminars and promotes school-based research. In the first phase the implementation could be considered an issue of organisation change and communication.

### **III. COMMUNICATION EFFORTS DURING CHANGE**

A change can be perceived as an interruption in an otherwise stable organisation with identifiable structures, or a constant and continuous process changing organisations. Instead of making a division between a rational approach with a view of change as linear and controllable as opposed to a view of change as a complex process full of contradictions, Graetz and Smith (2010) argue for an approach where continuity and change are combined.

Before and during a change process, communication is essential. One reason for highlighting the communication, according to Fischer and Heracleous (2012) is that when change is planned, communication efforts can create readiness for change. Another is that communication efforts can have different focus such as communication as a tool (in a more rational approach) with less context, a process for understanding the accomplishment of change, or as social transformation, understanding the complexity of change (Johansson and Heide, 2008).

The communication efforts can be divided into external and internal communication, where internal communication seems to be less frequent. There can be different explanations for this, but as Harkness (2000) understands it, there is less measurement concerning internal communication, and when internal communication is not measured, there is a tendency that it is not carried out. In addition, as Klein (1996) argues, a lack of internal communication strategy can cause uncertainty and most of all, create a situation where messages about implementation are created informally, almost as rumours, and have a negative effect during the change process. It is essential that the communication effort is directed toward all levels in an organisation.

There are also different theories concerning factors for choosing media strategy. One theory is that the communication should be chosen in accordance with how complicated an actual issue is. Face-to-face communication (rich communication) is preferred for more complicated issues and electronic media could be used for routine information (lean communication) (Daft & Engel, cited in Fischer and Heracleous, 2012). This theory is challenged by Fischer and Heracleous, who argue that communication through electronic media (lean communication) creates a situation where perceptions of common characteristics, such as identification, are promoted. Fewer contexts in combination with the message can promote that a message is received and social identity is enhanced in a group, engaged in the communication effort. Fischer and Heracleous also argue that there is also a difference whether the change agent is internal or external. An internal change agent could be perceived as one in the group and use lean communication, while for an external change agent rich communication could be a better alternative.

According to Lewis (2011), three key communication processes can be discussed in implementation of change: information dissemination, soliciting input, and socialisation (ibid, p. 56). One aim with disseminating information can be to reduce uncertainty. On the other hand, even implementers can be uncertain as, in this actual case, there is no one, clear linear process to be carried out. Even though the team of administrators themselves are not always certain, they must first communicate with the stakeholders at a high organisational level about the needed re-organisation and how it should be carried out and negotiate, further on continue to negotiate and provide information at other organisational levels, both externally and internally. The soliciting of

input concerns participation of stakeholders on giving input and response during the implementation process. Lastly, socialisation concerns how organisational efforts shape the understandings its members have concerning for example values and procedures. During changes, role can be re-defined and stakeholders can be re-socialised. In the actual study, the practicum organisation creates new roles and some with earlier roles are no longer in the practicum organisation.

In the initial process and throughout the change has to make sense, in some way or another, to be carried out. Often this sense-making has to become sense-giving to the stakeholders, a work carried out by the implementers. In the actual case, there is already a practicum organisation and the implementers have to create a frame, such as finding an overarching concept for the change, in order for the change to make sense. The stakeholders can reject or accept what Lewis calls 'management of meaning' (ibid, p. 243). The implementers also have to manage the groups on different organisational levels, manage networks, and manage practice (in this particular case such as course management and placement issues).

Lewis has developed a model for strategic communication and in this study there are certain concepts and strategies which be used for analysis of the findings. In summary, the three key communication processes (dissemination of information, participant input during the process, and socialisation into the changed situation) will be in focus, just as the process of change is supported by three activity tracks: managing meaning, managing networks and managing practice. Lewis's main argument, that change implementation essentially is a social and communicative process (ibid, p. 281) is the guiding principle.

#### **IV. DATA COLLECTION**

Change in ITE concerning practicum organisation was the initial reason to carry out a study during the first years of implementation. Earlier findings from a theoretical ex-ante evaluation have been presented (Niklasson, 2015a), as well as the administrator's response to the ex-ante evaluation (Niklasson, 2015b). The data collection is inspired by a processual research perspective (Dawson, 2012) and the presented result is based on the administrators' lived experience and their perception. Their response to questions asked is in turn influenced by political decisions, local context and the content of the change (ibid).

Individual interviews were carried out with administrators (practicum team and two other administrators) engaged in the planning and carrying out of the re-organisation. They were carried out during autumn 2014 and spring 2015, that is, the first year of the implementation process. The participants were the project leaders during the planning phase (autumn 2014), the vice manager of the department (autumn 2014), two practicum coordinators (spring 2015), the leader for MKL (spring 2015), the new project leader (spring 2015) and the administrator for placement (spring 2015). In total seven interviews were carried out. Four interviews took place in conference rooms at the University, while two were interviewed in their own office. Before and during the interview the respondents were informed about the ethical rules, such as the aim of the study, that their participation is voluntarily and that, as much as possible, their identity will not be revealed (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). The interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes. They were all recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The respondents were asked about the background to the change, its necessity, what should be achieved, information about the change, the implementation, communication about the change, side effects and suggestions to achieve the goals. In other words, the interviews were semi-structured (Bryman, 2011). Even though the roles and their engagement differ between the respondents they got the same questions. Due to their different interests the interviews also emphasised and delved deeper into certain questions.

The data from the individual interviews was read repeatedly and finally summarised in a first presentation. This presentation was first written as a combination of a description of the process and in accordance with the questions asked. In a second reading the framework from Lewis (2011) concerning essential features for communication in change was used as an analytical framework: socialisation into the changed situation, dissemination of information, and participant input during the process. The respondents are mainly presented as 'one voice'. It should be noted that when different stakeholder's comments, other than the administrator's, are presented, it is the administrator's perception and description of the comments.

#### **V. FINDINGS**

##### **5.1 Socialisation**

The implementation concerned the change of practicum, but there were also changes in the internal organisation for both organisers of K-12 and the University. New roles were created, some were re-socialised and some lost their roles in the practicum organisation.

The lead party in the re-organisation is the University and different internal roles had to be clarified. After discussions within the coordination group and with the manager of the department a steering group was established in early spring 2015 and the coordination group was dissolved. The steering group consists of the manager of the department, the vice manager for research of the department (who now came back), the vice

manager for education of the department (who now came back), a representative for the program councils for the different school forms in ITE (new), a faculty program director (new) and the manager for MKL. The new steering group does not include everyone on the practicum team and therefore the project manager reports on the result of the meetings.

There are also changes in roles for the organisers of K-12. First of all some earlier organisers, schools and mentors are not included as they do not qualify, mainly due to few trained mentors. As some schools are not chosen, because they do not fulfil the criteria for having a certain number of trained mentors, the risk is that the staff and organisers could feel left out. Being chosen for appointment as a practice school could be perceived as an increase of prestige. There is a tendency that schools in rural areas are not able to become practice schools. This creates a problem concerning experience of various learning settings such as privileged and disadvantaged areas, urban and rural schools, for the student teachers. The solution is to make study visits. For those engaged, the organisers of K-12 are used to appoint a contact person on administrative level. What is new is that on the school level a mentor team with a mentor team leader should be created. Everyone on the team should have mentor training.

As there has been a course leader turnover for practicum courses at the University there are some persons who should 'take', for them, new roles. In the future it could be an idea that just as the schools have a mentor team, the University could have a group of teachers working the practicum courses, a practicum courses team. This also brings up the issue of 'combination assignment'. These assignments are for teachers working part-time in schools and part-time in the ITE at the University. If there is a core of practicum course teachers from the University and combination assignments, then there is a balance between current experience from schools and longer experience from higher education. A plan is developed for combination assignments, they are announced publicly and some teachers are already hired.

Also, the question is what signal a new critique or a new reform initiated by politicians is giving. A comment is that the education system could be perceived as an experimental arena for different political ideas. If there is a shift in government there is a risk, or chance, for new directives. The changes do not show much respect for the professionals in the education system.

In summary, roles have changed both for organisers of K-12 and within the University organisation. The changing roles also include those organisers of K-12 who are not part of the practice school organisations, as successively they are losing their role. When the organisers meet the criteria, especially with trained mentors, they can negotiate again about participation. The same goes for those included, if there is a staff turnover and trained mentors leave, they cannot uphold their role. This is a clear change of values, from inclusion to exclusion. The perspective has changed from including 'all' teachers and accepting them as mentors, where now only a select group, mentors with mentor training, is accepted. The effect is that fewer organisers, schools and teachers are engaged in ITE. For the organisers of K-12 who are included there are organisational changes. Their communication chain has to be changed and intensified as there are contact persons, leaders for mentor teams and mentor teams to consider. At the University there is a change in the construction of the practicum team, where the project manager for the implementation has to have a dual role, as a project manager and as a member of the team. The change with re-organisation of practicum becomes a driving force for increased communication with all teachers within ITE; the role of the practicum team becomes more visible.

## **5.2 Dissemination Of Information**

During the planning phase in spring 2014 the contacts were made with the highest level with the organisers of K-12. During autumn 2014 the contacts continued with follow-up with contact persons from the organisers and where it was possible also with all teachers at practicum schools, to make sure that information reached out. During the autumn 2014 there was also additional information for the staff at the University.

Successively it became apparent that the change was less anchored and communicated internally at the University. The practical issues concerning re-organisation are carried out, but the vision of more cooperation between the school and university, school development in cooperation with researchers, is not anchored internally, while it is more anchored among the organisers of K-12.

Also, the focus has been on what the organisers of K-12 should do, not on how the internal organisation within the ITE should carry out the change. There are changes for the staff as the practicum course will engage an increased number of teachers, with several visits at schools. The practicum course is not an issue for the organisers of K-12, but a common endeavour. To increase the knowledge about the re-organisation one day in autumn 2015 was devoted to the re-organisation of practicum in ITE where all staff engaged in ITE were present.

In summary, the communication about a future change concerning organisation started already in autumn 2013 and continued during 2014 and the spring of 2015. Communication about the change will continue as there are different possibilities to interpret how it should be carried out. In a first phase it was a small group at

the University and the highest level from organisers of K-12 who were engaged and got information. Successively mainly the staff from the organisers of K-12 have been informed as long as they are involved. Information to staff at university level has to be extended. The re-organisation on administrative level has been carried out. Some issues have been a major concern. One concerns payment to organisers of K-12 for the student teacher where early information was changed and the compensation was reduced. Another concerns the practicum course where the directives for assessment changed. The latter question is an example of how the re-organisation of practicum often is intermingled with issues which are not directly an effect of the change in the practicum organisation, but are connected anyway. There are mixed perceptions in the administration group about how the information and the carrying out of the re-organisation is dealt with. On one hand the perception of the re-organisation is positive as different levels in both organisations (organisers of K-12 and University) and students are informed, the re-organisation was carried out and no serious resistance has been noticed. On the other hand the re-organisation does not seem to have brought with it a parallel insight or idea of the vision for the re-organisation and the anchoring process at the university seems to be weak.

### **5.3 Participant Input**

During the contact with the schools some comments were made from the organisers concerning the change concerning expectations. One of the expectations is increased contact with the University. This increase is already at hand in the new structure as teachers from the University will visit the practicum schools once during the University practicum course, there will be regular seminars for the organisers and research presentations from the University researchers.

Even though the partnership has been assessed as well-functioning, there have been more general comments from the K-12 organisers concerning parts of practicum which have not functioned so well. There is an expectation of clearer roles concerning practicum and that the planning and information from the University should be carried out and communicated earlier to the mentor teams. There is no reason to doubt the comments and new questions and critique should be handled in the new situation, according to the team of administrators. Staff at schools, not chosen to become practice schools, has taken contact with the team of administrators, criticising the change. In most cases it was the choice of the organiser of K-12 that their school should not become involved. The team of administrator's response has been to urge the staff to show their interest to the higher level of the organisation.

The contacts with the organisers of K-12 who are within the new organisation have not expressed any resistance towards the organisation. Some find advantages with concentrating the number of schools and feel confident that the mentors have the education needed. A hypothesis is that if a mentor gets more than one student teacher he or she will become more professional in their mentoring. From the perspective of the organisers of K-12 they continue to hope for a good recruitment base among the student teachers. They also think that student teachers themselves are contributing to school development.

Even though there had been local problems, such as finding mentors with the needed subject combination, the perception from the team of administrators is that the re-organisation in ITE at the University is not a rescue project for a dysfunctional practicum, but a development project. One argument is that this is a development opportunity, but another argument is that this concentration could have occurred without a total re-organisation, so the change was not necessary. Another argument for the change is that any organisation is in constant change and this is also applicable for the ITE organisation.

In summary, input concerning the implementation has come from several stakeholders. In this case mainly the input from the organisers of K-12, at different levels, is brought up. The team of administrators has got input, and they have also responded, even though they have not 'solved' all problems. One input from the organisers concerns questions that have not been resolved during the earlier field school organisation. The new practice school organisation aims at solving some of the problems but cannot solve all; rather some have to be left aside for the moment. There will be fewer issues like uninterested and unprepared mentors when there is a limited number of schools and when mentor training is a prerequisite to be chosen. Contact and information between the partners on different levels will increase with re-design of the practicum course and clearer roles during the practicum where meetings are continuously on 'the calendar'. The issue of short field work will not be resolved in the short term; it is a longer-term development issue. Lastly, the issues with two parallel organisations and the question of inclusion and exclusion will last during the project period. In contrast to these issues, there are also expectations such as positive effect on recruitment, more skilled mentors and increased cooperation between organisers of K-12 and the University. A national rescue project becomes transformed to a local development project.

## **VI. DISCUSSION**

The aim with this study is to highlight the role of administrators and present and discuss their perceptions about change and their communication efforts. The context is higher education and partnership with

organisers of K-12 concerning practicum organisation during professional studies, in this case ITE for different school forms. Mainly due to a governmental initiative a re-organisation was carried out, reducing the number of organisers, schools and mentors; instead all mentors should have mentor training, there should be a group of student teachers at the practice schools, and communication between the organisers and the University should increase.

The management of networks (Lewis, 2011) by the team of administrators, was carried out in a way that included the organisers of K-12 at top level, then an additional level with contact persons and some selected significant persons at the University. This did not exclude additional contacts, but they were not as frequent. As the administrators already have a network of contacts with different stakeholders, the communication about changes in partnership and practicum organisation could start early. The organisers and the University had a common assignment to inform other levels. The contact persons within the K-12 organisation seem to be reached, but the findings in the study show that communication efforts in the internal network were not as intensive and successful as those concerning the external contacts. The team of administrators made a choice (French & Bell, 1973), to focus on the external communication. A possible explanation for the choice, using suggestions by Harkness (2000), is that internal communication is not measured, which is also the case here, but it could also be a question of putting a very strong emphasis on visible, external relations, and less on internal relations that are perhaps taken for granted. The informal information, and possible disinformation, Klein (1996) points out as a consequence of less frequent internal communication was not an issue that the team of administrators elaborated on.

The communication efforts also included management of meaning (sense-making), but in an initial phase the meaning-making seems to be only an overarching, rather diffuse idea of increasing quality in practicum (and ITE). Lewis (2011) suggests the concept of 'framing' when an overarching concept is used to explain an activity. In this case the concept 'development project' can be perceived as an overarching concept. A framing concept also frames the activities with more or less freedom, in this case, the framing concept supported the fact that the structure was built and negotiated during the initial process. A lack of well elaborated structure, timeline and vision was not only considered a lack; instead it became a possibility to re-structure successively during dialogue. The content in the communication could be perceived as mainly administrative during the initial phase with description of the re-organisation and how it should be carried out, and as Johansson and Heide (2008) suggest, such a focus creates a readiness for change and the communication can be perceived as a tool. As there are two parallel practicum organisations, field schools and practicum schools, and in addition ITE is mandated by law, there is a need to focus on both continuity and change as Graetz and Smith (2010) suggest.

Lastly, the team of administrators was engaged in managing practice in different ways. A new practicum portal was created and the organisers of K-12 and the University can use this 'lean communication', as the context and administrators are familiar (Fischer & Heracleous, 2012). In contrast, 'rich communication' with meetings face-to-face was used by the administrators during dialogues with high levels within organisers of K-12 in the early planning phase and later on during the implementation during meetings with additional levels within organisers of K-12. Even though the administrators at the University are familiar to the organisers of K-12, due to staff turnover, it was a role, rather than a person that was familiar. A rich communication effort was then needed, and the context suggested by Fischer and Heracleous (2012) for using mainly lean communication due to familiarity and group identity was not at hand.

## **VII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study was constructed based on a perspective that the education system is in constant change. This change is interpreted locally, in this case, represented by a team of department administrators. By using Lewis's framework for analysis it was possible to find the 'story' of the implementation in the first phase, but also some of the contrasting 'stories' that could not be merged. It was also possible to describe how roles and meaning-making were constructed. With contrasting perceptions it is possible to use Dawson's (2012) expression, the implementation is to a higher degree a continuous process rather than a rational endeavour.

At the same time, the way of analysing the data has its limits. It is hard to present a fixed set of suggestions for implementation of change during ITE, if the presentation is of a local endeavour. It is not possible to argue for finding a 'best model', but rather to give insight and understanding of a process.

Another limit is that there are aspects that are not elaborated; data is 'pushed aside' which could be further investigated. In this case study there is, for example, a possibility to delve deeper into a discussion about power relations. As Johansson and Heide (2008) point out, when focus is on process, power relations are not always clearly revealed. It is possible also that emotions among the administrators, as Dasborough et al. (2015) suggest, could have been explored, which did not become an issue in this study.

There are 'voices' not heard in this presentation, one of which is the student teacher's voice. But there is another voice which is as significant, the voice of the organisers of K-12 who are not participating, but

excluded in accordance with the new criteria for participating as a practice school. Even though with limits, the study is one step further in a more extensive study to understand the communication efforts during the re-organisation of practicum during ITE.

### **VIII. CONCLUSION**

The study shows the importance of the administrator role in communication efforts during change, this case partnership in higher education. The administrators have a broker role between external partners to a University with professional development programs and the University. In their role they balance between keeping structure, due to legal requirements, and developing the partnership and practice organisation during ITE. The conclusion is that it is essential to further study the role of administrators, especially communication efforts during change. In the balance between upholding structure and change, administrators play an important role.

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