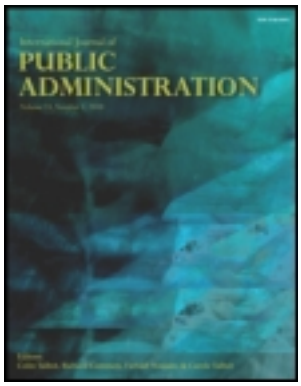

International Journal of Public Administration
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/lpad20

The Social Life of Learning Theory: The "Ideal" and "Real" of Reflective Learning

Helene Ratner [a]

[a] Department of Management, Politics, and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark

Version of record first published: 31 Jan 2013.

To cite this article: Helene Ratner (2013): The Social Life of Learning Theory: The "Ideal" and "Real" of Reflective Learning, International Journal of Public Administration, 36:3, 200-209

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2012.749280

International Journal of Public Administration, 36: 200–209, 2013

ISSN: 0190-0692 print / 1532-4265 online
DOI: 10.1080/01900692.2012.749280

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Social Life of Learning Theory: The "Ideal" and "Real" of Reflective Learning

Helene Ratner

Department of Management, Politics, and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark

There is a growing understanding that public institutions need to be proactive in not only developing their welfare services but doing so continually through various concepts of learning. This article presents an ethnographic study of a public school that aims at working strategically with organizational learning through Donald Schön's concept of "the reflective practitioner." Schön's concepts provide the school manager with a vocabulary to criticize the destructive effects of New Public Management's linear steering technologies. The study also illustrates that expectations of reflective practitioners produce new uncertainties and managerial challenges, especially in manager-employee relations. The implications of these are discussed.

Keywords: reflection, learning organization, actor-network theory, practice

INTRODUCTION

> If one begins, as I do, from the premise that thinking is as "real" an activity as any other, and that ideas and discourses have important and very real social consequences, then in analyzing systems of ideas one cannot be content with interrogating them for their truth value. For a social scientist, there is always another question: what do these ideas *do*, what real social effects do they have? (Ferguson, 1994, p. xv).

Several scholars have observed growing expectations for public servants to engage in processes of learning and development under conditions of change (Andersen, 2009; Clarke & Newman, 1997; du Gay, 1996; du Gay, 2000; Pedersen & Hartley, 2008). This has resulted in a growth in human resource management in the public sector (Brown, 2004), including calls for the managerial fostering of organizational learning environments as the capability of welfare development and strategic change generally is located in employees' ability and willingness to work with changing their practices (Andersen, 2007). This article presents an ethnographic study of a Danish primary school that has attempted to work strategically with organizational learning through organizational psychologist Donald Schön's seminal work *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1991 [1983]). In Denmark, as in many other countries, Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner is frequently promoted as a way to work intelligently with organizational learning among welfare professionals from a practice-based perspective (Kjær, 2010).

Danish primary schools provide an apposite case for exploring the practical effects of learning theories in public organizations. Whereas professionals within pedagogy, obviously, always have had learning as their objective, the profession of teaching has been promoted through the ideal of the self-reflective and choice-explicating teachers who can enter into learning relationships with themselves (Day, 1993; Erlandson, 2005; Krol, 1997). In Denmark, the ideal of the self-reflective and continuously learning teacher is presented as a response challenges ranging from evaluation and quality assessment, over inclusion of pupils with special needs, to managing change and development (Pors, 2009; Ratner, 2012). The emphasis on the need for school management to facilitate such learning environments through reflection moreover appears to be part of a larger international trend with, for instance, school improvement studies claiming that successful school development is contingent upon the management's ability to set up and maintain a "culture of inquiry and reflection, and a commitment to an ongoing self-review" (Preedy, Glatter, & Wise, 2003, p. 11).

Correspondence should be addressed to Helene Ratner, Department of Management, Politics, and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School, Porcelænshaven 18A, 2000, Frederiksberg, Denmark. E-mail: hr.lpf@cbs.dk

The analysis follows a Danish public school, which attempted to use Schön's theory of reflection to foster organizational learning. In the manner of anthropologist James Ferguson, quoted above, the present task, however, is neither to evaluate to what extent Schön's concept of reflective practitioners can orchestrate organizational learning, nor whether such concepts of learning pose fruitful avenues for public management. Drawing its inspiration from conceptual discussions associated with actor network theory,[1] the focus of the article instead is on the *performative* effects of Schön's theory of learning where "performativity" moves the focus from questions of evaluation to studying how theories and concepts constitute practice (Callon, 2010) and produce "overflowing" (Callon, 1999). In that regard, rather than asking how theories of learning can help make public organizations better, the article explores the "social life" of Schön's concept of learning in a public organization, in terms of the organizational realities it helped bring into being.

The article proceeds as follows. After an introduction to the theoretical and methodological basis of the study, it discusses Schön's concept of the "reflective practitioner." It then follows how this concept shaped both the school manager's aspirations of resisting New Public Management[2] (NPM) *and* configured management-employee relations. The article concludes with critical reflections on the implications of the study for public organizations working to strengthen the dimension of learning.

EXPLORING HOW IDEAS BEHAVE THROUGH ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

Actor-network theory (ANT) offers an ontologically relativistic vocabulary for tracing the assemblage of human and non-human entities that make up "the social." ANT does not assign humans and non-humans a-priori asymmetric characteristics such as human intention or material causality. Instead, the purpose is to describe how humans and artifacts construct each other through their relations in heterogeneous assemblages or *networks* (Latour, 2005, p. 5). It is an empirical question whether a human or nonhuman is an *actant*, since this status is delegated from the network (Callon 1999:185). A network is the momentary association and *translation* of heterogeneous actants that have been stabilized to form a network (Callon, 1986, p. 196–223).

An implication of this approach is that rather than considering reflection (and learning) to be a *cognitive* endeavor, as common sense would have it, ANT allows for analyzing "reflection" as an actant: an idea that is distributed in different discursive and socio-material practices where it gains its meaning and importance. This means that Schön's concept of reflection, when used by school managers, is not analyzed (only) as a theory of learning but is viewed as part of a conceptual apparatus that helps generate and perform certain ideas *in practice*. Schön's idea has successfully been "packaged" and "circulated" to a wide range of practices with which it engages in processes of mutual translation. ANT entails careful attention to not only how the idea of reflection is formatted into e.g., "technologies of the self" (cf. Foucault, 1990; Foucault, 1997) but also how these are performed in practice. As a result, the case study includes both practices that school managers recognize as "reflective," but also those assessed as non-reflective as managers. The analysis will show how the managerial assessment of a *lack of* reflection has organizational effects.

The article is based on 13 days of (participant-) observation of a school management team in May 2010, document studies, and 11 semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979) with managers and teachers at a medium-sized Danish primary school (teaching pupils aged 5–15). The primary way of engaging the managers during fieldwork was by "shadowing" them. The author followed them from they arrived in the morning, at 7.30 a.m., until they went home, around 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. in the afternoon. "Shadowing" has been recommended as a process-oriented way of studying organizations as it allows for moving across domains that are usually seen as separate and thus to follow the connections and disconnections between, for instance, human resource management and budgeting (Wolcott, 2003; Czarniawska 2008).

THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Reflection has a long history in organizational learning, organizational culture, and strategic leadership literature (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schein, 2004; Schön, 1991) and has to some extent become a "commodity" that Danish public organizations can acquire through involvement of management consultants and educational programs (Ratner, 2012, p. 142–150). Many of the leading Danish scholars within organizational learning draw on Donald Schön's seminal work *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* from 1983, translated into Danish in 2000 (Gleerup, 2008; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2006a; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2006b; Qvortrup, 2008; Ryberg, 2006). In Denmark, academics and consultants have made especially the public sector an object for theories of

[1] ANT emerged from theoretical debates within Science and Technology Studies about how to study science empirically without considering nature and society as two distinct spheres (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1993). Although there are important differences between them, Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law are generally considered to be the originators of ANT. There are also important differences between ANT and the so-called post-ANT (see Gad & Bruun Jensen, 2010). I use ANT as shorthand for the present purpose.

[2] While debated as a concept, I here use NPM as an umbrella term to describe the philosophy underpinning a series of public sector reforms in Anglo-Saxon countries from the late 1980s and onwards. In short, these reforms introduce a set of tools with a managerial and market oriented logic highlighting cost-efficiency and performativity (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

organizational learning "with the ambition to characterize modern [public] management with a starting point in learning" (Sørensen, Hounsgaard, Andersen, & Ryberg, 2008, p. 7, author's translation). While the contingent commoditization of knowledge about learning itself is an interesting object of study (see Vann & Bowker, 2001), the focus here remains on Schön's concept of learning.

"Learning" is inherent in Schön's notion of reflection. In *The Reflective Practitioner*, reflection is described in opposition to a positivist epistemology of technical-rational knowledge whose "prescriptive formulas" Schön describes as unable to match the complexity of practitioners' work (Schön, 1991, p. 14). This makes reflection an instrument of not only criticizing technical rational knowledge but also to learn from practice. Schön invites the reader to "search, instead, for an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict" (Schön, 1991, p. 49). His characterization "reflection" both entails claims about the nature of practice ("inherently unstable," p. 15) and technical-rational knowledge (fails to capture the "real" of practice).

While practice is too complex for technical rational knowledge, it is also characterized by routines, which renders it potentially dangerous for rather opposite reasons: its repetitive nature, which turns the practitioner into a kind of "practice dope": "As a practice becomes more repetitive and routine, and as knowing-in-practice becomes increasingly tacit and spontaneous, the practitioner may miss important opportunities to think about what he is doing. (. . .) When this happens, the practitioner has 'overlearned' what he knows" (Schön, 1991, p. 61).

Through reflection, however, the practitioner "can surface and criticize the tacit understandings . . . and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience" (Schön, 1991, p. 68).[3] Apparently, the "uncertainty" and "uniqueness" of practice, rendering it unfit for technical rational knowledge, are not immediately available to the practitioner as practice is filtered and mediated by "tacit knowledge" (cf. Polanyi, 1966). If the tacit knowledge is not questioned, Schön argues, we end up with "unreflective practitioners . . . [who are] limited and destructive" as they do not learn from the "feedback" inherent to practice (Schön, 1991, p. 290). In this way, Schön claims that learning emerges not from "professional knowledge" but from the feedback that practice already provides *insofar as* the practitioner reflects in or on practice; a claim that has been criticized for its focus on learning as a cognitive and conscious activity (Van Manen, 1995).

Schön's idea of reflection as a vehicle for changing our mental frames or tacit assumptions is based on the idea "that every teacher carries (socially and personally) constructed 'theories' or 'philosophies' in mind" (Van Manen, 1995, p. 43). This conception of practice has a long history in the humanities and social sciences and has affinities to terms such as "tradition," "culture," "paradigm," and "mental frame" (Turner, 1994, p. 11). Despite their different epistemological trajectories, these terms generally assume that people's actions are caused by "conventions . . . without explicit agreement" prior to conscious reasoning (Turner, 1994, p. 29). While such constitutive aspects of practice in social theory *generally* are considered outside the reach of human intentionality (Turner, 1994, p. 144), Schön's conception of reflection posits that one *can* engage with these and change them at will.

Reflection — and learning — thus constitute an "outside" of practice where otherwise invisible elements can become explicated and changed. The hope is that reflection can empower teachers to see how their tacit, non-conscious knowledge in fact is constitutive of their practice and *learn* to engage with practice in new ways. The outside of practice, then, is also somehow outside oneself, or outside one's fundamental assumptions, standard reactions, and attitudes. The teacher is to split him or herself in two, an active and intentional subject, which can change the passive attitudes that have been explicated through reflection (cf. Foucault, 1990; Foucault, 2000). Reflection thus produces a dualism between "thinking" and "practice" where practice can be described as "standardized" or constituted by unquestioned assumptions, reactions, or attitudes, which need to be "irritated" if practitioners are to *learn*. This dualism may have an auto-organizing effect. As soon as the artifacts of reflection have been absorbed into practice, new reflexivity is needed to re-differentiate reflection from practice. As Marilyn Strathern notes in a discussion of audit: "if the assumption is that much of what is invisible is what is simply not yet made visible, then there will always be more to learn about the organization, further realities to uncover" (Strathern, 2000, p. 312). The very idea of explicating tacit knowledge can potentially generate *infinite* new practices in need of reflection.

Moreover, Schön's notion of reflection exhibits a tension in relation to the role of the practitioner: whereas all practitioners, by virtue of being practitioners, engage in tacit "artistic" and "intuitive" adaptations to practice, formulated as a positive contrast to the prescriptive technical rational knowledge, the practitioners also pose an obstacle to *learning* from practice through reflection as they have to do so voluntarily in order for this to take place. Schön's work thus exhibits a displacement from practitioners being the heroes, against technical-rational knowledge, to being the obstacle *unless* they reflect on their practice. Schön's notion of reflection and learning thus changes the ontology of the practitioner: from being the "legitimate knowledge-bearing

[3]Schön offers two forms of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Where the former regards practitioners' thinking about what they do as they do it, the latter takes place after the act. It should be noted that this distinction has been criticized (Eraut, 1994).

being" (Vann & Bowker, 2001), s/he is now only a "good" practitioner insofar as s/he engages in reflection. And this is where, as the analysis will show, practitioners' reflection becomes an object of management.

The auto-organizing property of reflection and the (new) expectation to practitioners to engage in reflection is related to the concept of the "learning organization," which was a goal of the case school. Where "organizational learning" seeks to characterize processes (such as reflection) involving individual or collective learning, the "learning organization" is characterized as the commercial prescription of such processes to identify or foster more learning (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999; Smith, 2001). With concepts such as "the learning society" (Schön, 1973), Donald Schön has also been identified as an important source of the concept of the learning organization. In this work, he characterized society as involving continuous processes of transformation, necessitating the need for institutions to engage in continuous learning. The notion of the "learning organization" thus involves a claim about society as undergoing continuous transformation, fortifying the auto-organizing property that already exists in his dualistic conception of reflection. Moreover, as a commercial prescription in organizations rather than a description of processes already taking place (cf. Smith, 2001), new accountability relations between managers and employees emerge (Ratner, 2012).

AGAINST NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Like other public sector institutions, primary schools face challenges of adapting to a political environment of surveillance and accountability as well as growing tensions between managerialism and professionalism (Ball, 2003; Caldwell, 2001; Cuban, 1988; Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 2003). Debates about the unanticipated and detrimental effects of new public management (NPM) such as "teaching for tests" are common knowledge among school professionals who learn about them from educational programs and in professional union debates. At the case school, Schön's theory of practice generated a certain emancipatory hope of resisting NPM, perhaps because of the similarities between commonalities between contemporary critiques of NPM (Andersen, 2000; Clarke & Newman, 1997) and Schön's critique of technical rational knowledge. The following is an analysis of central documents from the school and the school manager's diploma thesis,[4] aiming to show how the manager articulates reflection (and learning) as resistance against NPM.

The manager was concerned that the local authorities' technical-rational quantitative performance program's different numerical indexes and rankings risked defining the meaning of quality, evaluation, and development as opposed to letting them be determined by didactic reflections from the pedagogical staff.[5] In a document that is distributed to all pedagogical staff and which can be downloaded from the website, he referenced the Danish scholar Peter Dahler-Larsen's (2006) critique: the current climate of governance is "indicator fixated" and these may be constitutive rather than evaluative if teachers blindly follow them without considering their own professional standards of quality, making them blind to the "real" challenges (ANON, 2009, p. 12). Moreover, he continues, the risk is that performance indicators may bring about the potential demoralization of teachers' professional identity because their efforts are not recognized.

In his diploma thesis, the manager revisits this challenge, asking how the school "professionally can meet this challenge in a self-reflecting and flexible way" (ANON 2010, p. 6). The solution is a "professional didactic offensive" against external pressures (p. 8). This is possible insofar as the school becomes a "learning organization," which the manager defines as entailing continuously "challenging our mental models: questioning the implicit, daily norms and routines; meeting new ideas positively and without resistance; reflecting and offering honest feedback" (p. 8); a definition that is inspired from Schön's work on reflection. Reflection — and learning — is moreover important "at all levels":

> At all levels in the school's organization, there is the question of development, quality and evaluation. Either we, as professionals, "thematize ourselves" through reflections on what we already do and what we would like to do. [. . .] The dreaded scenario is that questions regarding quality, development and evaluation bring about a technical-rational response such as measurements through standards. (p. 9)

He continues, "[considering that] a learning organization is . . . autopoietic, i.e., the system creates its own input from its own basis," this endeavor necessitates a "complex system of communication with a common (. . .) language for all employees" and shared values (p. 9). In order to become a learning organization, he concludes that it is necessary for everybody to share a "common language," which

[4]Unfortunately, their true name and origins cannot be disclosed here without compromising the confidentiality agreement. I use "ANON" here and in the reference list instead of their true identity.

[5]All schools in Denmark are rendered accountable and comparable through such performance monitoring system. Here, a software program, which can be accessed on the municipal intranet, produce information about individual schools' test scores, grade point averages, teachers' sickness absence, pupils' illegal absenteeism, hours spent on teaching and resources allocated to special priority areas such as special education or Danish as a second language. Each indicator is ranked with a color (red for ranking below the municipal average, yellow for being within the average and green for performing better than the average). They are used, among other things, for annual conversations between the local municipality and the school manager to assess whether they conform to agreements in contracts and whether the school should give specific areas certain attention.

he translates into generating a "common vision." Learning through questioning "mental models" and "routines" is thus posed as an alternative to the technical rational standards that is part of their governmental context. Moreover, the "vision" becomes an instrument in becoming a learning organization, which is to counteract constitutive effects of performance indicators associated with NPM.

In wake of the diploma project in management, the manager decided to instantiate the process of becoming a learning organization through working with a "vision." Like other private sector strategy concepts, the concept of "visions" has today become a quite common aspect of strategic change management in the public sector (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).[6] The idea of having a vision rests upon the assumption that managers can incite change and collaboration towards a common goal if employees share common values and a vision of the future (Rüegg-Stürm & Gomez, 1997). While it has a different trajectory than the concept of "the learning organization" — and different implications for organizations — there are also commonalities between the two concepts. For instance, similar emphasis on shared values is highlighted in the literature on learning organizations (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). Moreover, reflecting on the school's "vision" and "values," is considered a central step towards becoming a learning organization: does each practitioner's tacit personal values correspond to the official ones of the school? Should they be questioned? What other tacit knowledge do they already inhabit, which others could learn from? That the manager understood "visions" to be a method to become a learning organization, thus, is not that surprising; especially not considering how the vision processes was imagined to take place as a series of reflective sessions, the very same type of reflection that was seen as inherent to learning from practice.

With ANT, the point in the following analysis is not to evaluate *whether* they achieved the goal of becoming a learning organization or what they would need to do differently in order to successfully achieve this goal. Instead, it is to explore how the very idea (that teachers should learn from practice) instantiates specific organizational processes and affects accountability relations between managers and teachers. With ANT's inspiration from ethnomethodology (cf. Garfinkel, 1967), it does not make sense to create abstract criteria for assessing when the organization is "truly" learning. What matters is whether *the practitioners* assess something to count as learning: this depends on the *local* achievement of an accountable notion of "learning" and not the researcher's definition (Latour, 1988). Even if we go to visit the literature on "learning organizations" Smith has noted that "it is very difficult to identify real-life examples" (Smith, 2001).

The vision process was arranged around a series of reflective meetings where teachers, divided into three groups, were to translate a vision, formulated by the school's four managers, into a mission relevant to their year group. Where the vision was considered to be at the "level of values," the mission would be an operationalization of these values and thus enable the pedagogical staff to question their practice. The following analysis explores the vision process arranged to make teachers reflect (in a particular way) on their practice, exploring the organizational processes that the idea of learning through reflection instantiated.

ORGANIZING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: DEFERRALS AND INVERSIONS

The managers presented the school's vision, which they had already written, at a common staff meeting. After this, the plan entailed two more meetings: one where each of the three teacher teams should reflect on the vision into a team-specific mission and another common meeting to present them to one another. Obtaining a different mission for each team would not only create links between the school's vision and the teachers' practice but also initiate the process of continuous reflection on practice and on their tacit values and knowledge as envisioned in the notion of a learning organization. To guide the formulation of the missions, two pieces of paper, one with the vision and another with a set of questions for reflection, were circulated among the staff. The questions read:

- What is/should be the core task of your group?
- Which tasks, situated in continuation of the core task, is your group put in the world to solve (2–3 tasks)?
- In relation to the core task, how is your group unique? What singles you out compared to similar teacher teams in the municipality?

The questions assume a reflection process where value is to be extracted from within, from their practice, in the hope of singling them out as "especially special" compared to other schools in the municipality. They also directed reflection to ensure a connection between the vision and practice. When planning for teachers' reflection on the vision, the managers had preempted that it might become too abstract to simply ask the group to connect their practice to the vision through formulating a mission. Indeed, it was necessary to specify the mission into a "core task," which again was to be specified in "tasks . . . in continuation of the core task." It seems that each reflective bridge between the vision and practice was in need of another bridge to make the vision even more concrete and, thus, easier to connect to practice. The managers' thus connected their vision to the

[6]Moreover, Danish municipalities have through the late 1990s and 2000s developed different strategies for at once making schools independent organizations and making them refer to overall political goals (Pors, 2011). That schools should have a vision is related to such developments in the governing and professionalization of schools.

teachers' practice through a dynamic involving still more concretization and specification.

One team did not produce the hoped for connection between the vision and their practice. Instead of formulating a mission, the teachers and pedagogues were eager to involve the assisting manager with other issues. Much uncertainty regarded complaints from an after-school care institution, whose pedagogues were unhappy with teachers leaving pupils' conflicts for them to solve instead of taking care of them before sending the pupils onwards. This debate gave rise to general disagreements about how to shape their practice. The issues included a call for "common rules" regarding how to react to unwanted pupil behavior. There was a widespread experience that people would rather "save themselves" than help each other out in difficult situations with pupils experienced to be particularly aggressive. The staff thus articulated a series of overlapping and related problems exhibiting a lack of well-being in the group. As the debate produced a growing diversity of viewpoints and mutual accusations, the goal of reflecting on practice to question "tacit knowledge" and find its true didactic quality became ever more unlikely. Their frustrations became an agenda of their own, suspending the original plan of formulating a mission. Both managers and the staff were interested in "reflection" but on very different aspects of their practice.

Not only had the meeting failed to produce a mission. It had also produced new problems for management. How to recognize the teachers concerns, incompatible as they were with producing reflection on their (tacit and explicit) values through writing a mission? The manager explained how she had decided, at the time, that it was more important to discuss the team's issues, to listen to the staff. Until that had happened, she estimated that they would not be ready for reflecting on the vision. In minutes from the meeting, the manager thus wrote: "the mission has been postponed to deal with *here-and-now problems*, which we in the in-schooling team need to discuss." This suspension of the vision process produced a distinction between "here and now problems," considered to emerge from practice, and the vision, considered to be outside of practice. While the managers had envisioned reflection to be a re-articulation of practice to instantiate learning, they did not recognize the team's frustrations as adequate descriptions of that practice. Indeed, naming them "here and now problems" attributed them a temporary and surmountable character.

At this point, the manager discussed how to move forward with the team coordinators (two teachers and two pedagogues). They saw the so-called "here and now problems" as a gap between the vision and practice. At a private meeting following up on the "failed reflection," they wrote the mission statement without the team. Although this was against the initial plan, the manager explained that the team's teachers and pedagogues had complained that too many meetings had just produced "talk" and that "action" was needed instead. Writing the mission on behalf of the teachers, however, also entailed sacrificing what had originally been thought of as the reflective learning process. After writing the mission, they returned to summary of the expressed frustrations. How could they generate a sense that "something" was being done? And how could they formulate the frustrations as a problem that they could learn from? They began by transforming the list into four general themes to sum up the diverse, individual bullet points:

- Aesthetics: from mess and chaos to a nice and cozy atmosphere
- Common rules and guidelines
- Common attitude to vulnerable pupils
- Power of cohesion

Each theme comprised an inversion of the frustrations to their opposites: wishes of working in a tidy atmosphere instead of the current mess; common rules and guidelines for dealing with pupil conflicts instead of disagreements on how to react; "power of cohesion" to support and help one another. To put this list to "action," they arranged an extraordinary team meeting and had teachers sign up for working groups within each theme. These working groups were tasked with producing "clarity" and clear "expectations" within their theme. By abstracting a list of scattered frustrations into general objectives, they emerged as themes to which people could be assigned. Through abstraction and condensation into four themes, the problems were given back to the teachers as problems which could produce "learning" and change the existing practices. What was achieved, then, was not the expressed request for "clarity," "common approaches," or "better cooperation," but a plan for it to be accomplished in the future through processes of reflection and learning. The "here and now problems" could precisely not be solved "here and now" but had to be deferred to future meetings.

The managers transformed many of the negative experiences into their positive opposites in a mind map, which they hoped could inspire learning from — and the change of — practice. Short statements and positive words populated the board as the positive inversions of the frustrations. For example, "lack of cohesion and unity" was replaced with "united steps, united lines of direction, united action." "Think about coherence between "breaks" and "classes"" was the positive inversion of conflicts overflowing from breaks to class. These positive statements were later copied to a colorful mind map, which was to be distributed among the teachers at a future meeting. The manager and coordinators thus (again) did the reflective translations necessary to turn problems from practice into what they deemed to be objects for engaging with practice in a learning manner.

Management did not achieve closure by having the teachers reflect on the vision and begin the process of continuous questioning their routines to facilitate learning; but neither did the teachers solve their "here and now problems." While

writing the mission solved the management's concrete and immediate task of producing a mission, it also produced a new problem. Instead of having the mission as an instance of learning from reflecting on — and questioning — practice, the gap was simply displaced from vision-practice to mission-practice. The process of engaging teachers in a reflective learning process had not yet taken place. Instead of having the teachers reflect, the working groups, the mind map, and the mission instead circulated on documents, which became vehicles for distributing and encouraging the hoped for learning process.

THE PARTIAL EXISTENCE OF "REFLECTIVE LEARNING"

The much wished for reflective learning existed and did not exist at the same time. On the one side, it was absent in the sense that the big team had not written the necessary document (the mission statement) or interacted in the "right" reflective, learning-generating manner. On the other side, the perceived absence of reflective learning had generated reflection *on behalf of* the teachers, undertaken by the manager and coordinators. It moreover had real effects in generating a complicated organizational process with the goal of involving teachers and pedagogues in reflective learning.

One concrete effect of the "absent reflective learning" was the generation of meetings. The "here and now problems" alone generated several extra meetings: first, one where the manager and the coordinators rephrased the "here and now problems" into a vocabulary deemed apt for learning processes and second, a group meeting, presenting this reflective work to them. The expectation was that each working group arranged internal meetings to continue the debate. These were followed by more meetings: a meeting between the manager and the coordinators where they designed yet another group meeting and that group meeting where teachers were to reflect on practice with help from not only the vision but also the mission.

The management meeting before the second attempt at making teachers reflect began with one of the coordinators voicing her frustrations. As the vision had been annexed by the team's general frustrations at the first meeting, it became an important issue to avoid a repetition of that situation. Moreover, it had been difficult to coordinate the process and she thought that the team should know about her frustrations. She suggested that the frustrations, which everybody had felt, should constitute a starting point for engaging with the mission.

> Coordinator: But I'm thinking - why not take the starting point in how it felt to be a coordinator this year? That thing with the cohesion. (. . .). Just to mention briefly that this [the vision-mission process] comes from *our* frustrations, confusion and chaos. It isn't because we all of a sudden have discovered a vision [pretends to blow dust of an imaginary piece of paper] or because the municipality has press-ganged us. It's as colleagues, as coordinators.
>
> [. . .]
>
> School manager: Exactly. It is important that they [the team] experience being heard. They shouldn't feel that this is the management's project - rather that it [their frustrations] is deeply related to the vision and mission.

The manager and coordinators decided that the "here and now problems" could strategically be linked to the vision and mission, to avoid the potential critique from teachers that it did not address their everyday problems. The "here and now problems" were to encourage the realization that they needed to work strategically with learning. Where the vision and the frustrations could not co-exist at the first meeting (where it was a question of either discussing the vision or the "here and now problems"), the manager and the coordinators planned to weave connections between the vision of becoming a learning organization, the mission, and the team's experience of both a fragmented workday and internal disagreements.

While they considered it important to absorb the frustrations within the framework of "learning organizations," they were also keen to avoid opening up for yet another session of "here and now problems." The aforementioned mind map, which had translated the "here and now problems" to a visionary vocabulary, was thought of as a device to prevent this from happening as it could inspire "reflective learning" rather than "complaints." They moreover planned to divide the team into smaller groups who were to reflect on how to translate the mind map to practice. The manager saw this as a way to "activate [the team]" and make "people think along" (from interview). To make sure that the dialogue in the work group would take the "right direction," they decided to place a coordinator in each group.

Despite having both a vision, a mission, a mind map, and four working groups with a coordinator, they were still concerned that the activities would fail to sufficiently establish a "common ground" for beginning the reflective learning process. They thus created *two additional themes* to guide working with the mind map. One was titled "common themes," to inspire looking for connections between the different ideas on the mind map, and the other was "a coherent school day" to connect the mind map's ideas to the mission. To concretize it even further, a coordinator suggested bringing up examples of "coherence" from the past, which they could learn from. This suggestion was quickly abandoned. Another coordinator objected that bringing up examples from the past would risk encouraging the team to chip in with other, presumably negative examples from the past. The learning process should "first and foremost be forward-looking," as she said. As an alternative to "examples from the past," they agreed that the coordinators should begin by presenting their own thoughts on "coherence in the

school day" and "common themes," to give the team some inspirational and concrete sentences, which could link them to the common themes, and again to the mind map, which in turn could guide reflective learning on practice.

When the managers provided the vision, the mission was imagined to instantiate the reflective learning from practice. When this failed, the (reformulated) "here and now problems" were reformulated to generate motivation to embark on "learning," a process, which again was assisted by the mind map, and then the common themes and so it continued. Each reflective link generated a new juncture, a remainder or gap, which required a new link. The complexity, the pattern of a disrupting gap, remained in their imagination of potential interruptions, regardless of whatever reflective link they planned for. This movement thus points back to the inherent dualism in Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner as the actualization of learning processes in this case continued to reproduce this dualism.

All these endeavors, however, also changed the relationship between "learning" and "practice." While reflection, before the vision-process began, was imagined to emancipate teachers' from potentially destructive effects of NPM, it ended up producing a concern that practice could not become an object of learning. Reflection started out as a means to become a learning organization with a common vision and ended up being a goal in itself, as a matter formatting the teams' experience of present frustrations to a positive outlook for the future. Where reflection started out as a means to define *a mission,* the mission, marshaled with the working groups, a mind map, and common themes became the means to generate reflective learning. *Reflection had changed from being a means to a goal.*

"LEARNING ORGANIZATION" BOUNCING BACK

The manager had been very happy with the meticulously planned meeting. The following day, he reported of good spirits, "activated" teachers and pedagogues, and was proud that the coordinators had steered the process so well and had really demonstrated their management skills. Five months later, however, the assessment of their goal of becoming a "learning organization" was less optimistic: the process had been co-opted by the need to plan the new school year. A year later, the school was in the middle of a merger with another school and they spent all their efforts integrating the new staff and pupils. All the detailed planning work entailed in becoming a "learning organization" and to establish working groups was put on hold. In an interview two years after the vision process, the manager mentioned that they had abandoned the idea that this group should become *a learning organization*. As he said:

> They are at a place where it isn't possible. We demanded self-management from them without looking at their competences. The entire vision process with the in-schooling team was more than anything a learning point for us. It was management feedback to us and we needed to redefine our management of them. So we never followed up [. . .]. Instead we asked: 'what kind of management would you like?' And now we support them, we assist or even command them but we don't disturb them anymore. When I was a teacher, it was my dream to be as self-managing as possible, to be allowed to formulate my own visions. But not all teachers share that dream.

He still hoped that the team would be able to reflect "on a higher level" one day, and he continued to arrange small scale learning exercises. Overall, though, the idea of the "learning organization" was no longer the goal with this team. Instead, one could say, the managers had been forced to learn from their attempt to stimulate a *learning organization*. The idea of reflection as a modality of learning had bounced back to the managers.

CONCLUSION

As many public organizations attempt to move beyond NPM, one influential idea is that of coupling public management with learning theories (Sørensen, Hounsgaard, Andersen, & Ryberg, 2008). In times where "learning" is celebrated as a solution to contemporary challenges facing public managers (cf. Andersen, 2007), it is important not only to visualize the potential positive outcomes of such a combination but also to explore, critically, the unanticipated effects of turning "learning" into a management ideal. This article has analyzed how a Danish primary school attempted to resist unwanted constitutive effects of NPM performance indicators through becoming a "learning organization," with a starting point in Schön's notion of the reflective practitioner. This generated managerial hopes of having their pedagogical staff engage in a learning process through questioning their routines and mindsets continuously. This, the manager emphasized, would enable them to develop practice "from within," from their own values and visions rather than those imposed by the prevalent performance indicators that otherwise characterized their context. Drawing on ANT, the analysis analyzed the idea of "organizational learning" as an actor and followed its processes of translation and (partial) enrolment as managers attempted to engage teachers in reflective learning processes.

As discussed earlier, Schön's theory of the reflective practitioner does not only pose reflection and learning from practice as an alternative to technical-rational linear knowledge forms. It also re-articulates the ontology of the "good" practitioner to one that continuously questions his or her own assumptions and routines. Schön defines practice as a process that provides feedback (for learning) to the practitioner *only* insofar as the practitioner questions his or her tacit knowledge. The article has followed the managerial efforts

vested in engaging teachers in reflective learning relationships with their practice through a vision process, which the manager saw as mandatory to become "a learning organization": without common values and visions the continuous questioning of practice would make organizational learning difficult.

The analysis illustrated how the ideal of the reflective practitioner produced disappointments and a laborious planning process when more than a third of the school's pedagogical staff found the initiative irrelevant. The managers met these challenges by doing the meta-reflection on behalf of the teachers and by deferring learning from both teachers' and managers' problems to future meetings. The teachers' reflections on the vision, however, ended up as a managerial goal that was also deferred to new meetings. In the meantime, the managers handled the reflective translation between vision and practice on behalf of the teachers. Both managers and teachers attempted to include one another in their version of "important problems." The managers also tried to connect the two versions of problems by encompassing the teachers' frustrations in new learning processes. What emerged was a set of meetings through which neither teachers nor managers could include each other in their *specific* matters of concern.

The idea of practice as being in a dualistic relationship with reflective learning creates the desire to establish a connection; this desire, as we saw in the description of the managerial meeting, however, co-produces a concern that new gaps can emerge. This means that recursion partly is a result of the very conceptual imagination of a "separate practice" and the idea of reflection as a connection to it. A concrete effect of this co-production, is, as we saw, much managerial concern of how to plan for new ways of including the teachers in learning. In this case, the idea of becoming a learning organization through reflection was bounced back to the managers who, through their very endeavor to generate reflection among teachers, learned that the goal of becoming a learning organization might not be that realistic. Such a managerial reaction, however, is hardly always the case. A study of a different school that similarly aimed at producing reflective practitioners also finds a rather different effect: the repeated managerial discovery that teachers did not reflect simply brought about the conclusion that more reflection was needed (Ratner, 2012).

The promises and aspirations that Schön's concept of learning gives rise to in a context of fatigue with NPM are difficult to disagree with. However, just like the management tools introduced with NPM, theories of learning may have other effects on practice than those anticipated by management, as this ethnographic case study testifies to (see also Ratner, 2012). To reiterate a classic ANT finding, processes of enrolment are likely to fail and produce their own overflowing (Callon, 1999). In this manner, the article offers reflections on caveats to keep in mind when public sector institutions begin to work with theories of learning. The idea of learning is not an innocent solution but, in this case at least, produced new scales of what it means to be a "good teacher," which inevitably excludes parts of the staff who do not manage to appear "reflective." When the difference between "real" and "ideal" is not be applied reflexively to the idea of reflective learning, to question whether reflective learning indeed *is* needed and to question its effects, we have an ideal that is rather likely to entail accountability relations between managers and teachers where it is difficult to argue *against learning* and where much organizational effort is vested in realizing an ideal that mainly produces disappointment. Insofar as public management can fruitfully be re-thought with concepts of learning, it is essential not just to embrace this idea uncritically but also turn its unanticipated effects into an object of learning, even if this sometimes involves abandoning and weakening the concept of learning itself.

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