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A shared vision for a school: developing a learning community

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ABSTRACT

Background: Developing a school as a learning community is a complex process necessitating active engagement from the entire school community. This paper reports on a study from Finland that focused on exploring learning community development grounded in a shared vision.

Purpose: We sought to investigate the development of a school community with a separate primary and lower secondary school as it progressed towards becoming a unified comprehensive school. The research involved close school-university collaboration to support the community's transformative journey. Our particular interest in this paper is the relationship between the shared vision and learning community development.

Method: At the conclusion of the development project, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the school management team. Thematic analysis of the interview data was undertaken to identify their perceptions of how the shared vision was linked to learning community development.

Findings: The in-depth analysis revealed five major themes: (1) communication of the shared vision and transparency; (2) present and absent themes in the shared vision; (3) tradition and innovation; (4) the long-term nature of school development; and (5) the role of the vision in everyday school life. The analysis drew attention to how a school's past and present influence a shared vision and school development.

Conclusion: This study provides insights into how the preconditions of a school community contribute to the implementation of a shared vision as a catalyst for change. Recognising the distinct needs and starting points of schools is crucial, emphasising the importance of understanding the pre-existing context in school development.

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Introduction

The development of schools as learning communities is a subject of increasing interest and importance internationally. With the broad notion of a learning community widely recognised and well established, the development of learning organisations has become more significant in global education programmes (see, for example, Kools and Stoll 2016).

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However, several factors within school communities may present challenges to community-based school development. These include the isolated nature of teachers' work (Wei et al. 2009); lack of structures to support teacher collaboration (DuFour et al. 2016); administrative barriers impeding transformation, such as a lack of time and clear communication (Voulalas and Sharpe 2005); and teachers' workload (Hairon and Tan 2017). Furthermore, efforts towards the development of learning communities require collaborative learning with peers, teachers' receptiveness to learning, and a focus on continuous development fostered over time (Hairon and Tan 2017; Hamos et al. 2009). It involves, too, commitment to reflection on objectives, regular evaluation of development work, and the use of knowledge gained from that work.

A school's shared vision is, thus, an important learning discipline, aiming to unite the school community by providing a common picture of the future. Research suggests, though, that it is not always easy to discern the link between a school's vision and its daily practices (Blennow, Bosseldal, and Malmström 2023; Gurley et al. 2014). This paper's interest lies in the complex association between a shared vision and the development of a learning community. The paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research on school community development by reporting on a research-based development project carried out in Finland, which was rooted in the learning community framework. In our study, the concept of a learning community draws from the work of Senge (1990) and Senge et al. (2012), wherein a learning organisation is defined as a space 'where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together' (Senge 1990, 3). Further, we understand a learning school community to be one that consistently acts on its learning and improvement by enhancing the community's effectiveness for the benefit of students (Hord 1997). This implies the implementation of collaborative practices among school staff, wherein teachers and other staff work together to enhance teaching and learning. They share their practices and experiences to support collective learning and improve students' learning in alignment with the shared vision. Before presenting more details about our study, though, we seek to contextualise our work within the relevant literature on learning communities.

Background

Learning communities

Discussions about learning communities, and how they might be implemented, became increasingly evident in educational research and development in the 1990s (Hord 1997; Senge et al. 2012). Learning communities are often characterised by aspects including a student-centred learning approach, supportive leadership, a shared vision, collaboration, collective reflection and dialogue, and a positive working climate to foster organisation or community (Bolam et al. 2005; Senge et al. 2012; Stoll et al. 2006). They are recognised for their ability to enhance the capacity and quality of teachers, teaching methods, and student learning outcomes by facilitating organised collaboration among educators (Hairon and Tan 2017). Teachers work collaboratively, reflect on their professional practice, and focus on pedagogy, supported by shared leadership within the school (Stoll et al.

2006). Creating and sustaining an effective climate for continuous learning requires new forms of leadership that inspire and motivate school community members, provide guidance for knowledge sharing, and direction for the school community's future development as a learning community (Fullan 2003; Hargreaves and Fink 2006).

Learning communities are defined in a range of ways. In this study, we understand Senge's term of 'learning organisation' (Senge 1990, 14) as relatable in education contexts to the notion of 'learning community' or, more specifically, 'professional learning community'. Senge (1990, 5–11) defines five disciplines that may accelerate learning community development: 'mental models', 'personal mastery', 'shared vision', 'team learning', and 'systems thinking'. According to Senge et al. (2012), these disciplines can 'provide a great deal of leverage for those who want to foster and build better organisations and communities' (Senge et al. 2012, 5). The five disciplines are strongly intertwined. For instance, personal mastery is essential to cultivate self-awareness, which is a prerequisite for developing a living and consistent shared vision (Senge et al. 2012). In another scenario, mental models influence how teachers and principals may perceive and interpret information about their school community, impacting their engagement in team learning and systems thinking (Senge et al. 2012). Bui (2019) suggests that personal mastery is specifically an individual-level discipline, team learning is a team-level discipline, and a shared vision is an organisational-level discipline, while mental models and systems thinking represent disciplines that are overarching and applicable on multiple levels.

A shared vision is regarded as an important integral part of a school's development efforts and the change process, aiming to bring about far-reaching modifications within a learning community. According to Senge et al. (2012) and DuFour et al. (2016), having a vision within a school can serve as the foundation for the successful implementation and long-term sustainability of educational innovations, strategies, and programmes. A shared vision promotes organisational learning by offering a shared picture of the desired future, providing direction (Loon Hoe 2007; Senge 1990), and guiding the organisation towards a common goal (Wang and Rafiq 2009). However, shared vision work is far from easy: Murphy and Torre (2014) have argued that one challenge of developing a shared vision is that the concept itself is abstract. In this study, we focus on understanding the nature of vision work as a key part of setting the direction and building the purpose for the broader development of a learning community. To examine the relationship between developing a shared vision and the development of a learning community, it is important to consider what a shared vision is, how it may be developed, and how it has been studied.

According to Senge, a shared vision is the organisation's capacity to hold 'a shared picture of the future it seeks to create' (Senge 1990, 9). A shared vision is a commonly agreed-upon picture of a community's future state that is closely tied to organisational learning, and influences knowledge acquisition and dissemination (Loon Hoe 2007). Developing a shared vision can be seen as a process and tool for a school's development that aims to answer the questions of what a school community wants to co-create and what it hopes to become (DuFour and Eaker 1998; Senge et al. 2012). Thus, a vision should be a tool that can be used continually in decision-making and community development (Hord 1997). In our study, creating a school community's shared vision is about seeking an imaginary space that a community desires to achieve (Gurley et al. 2014; Loon Hoe 2007). Thus, building a shared vision is a formal process in which people committed to a school's

future regularly meet to discuss and negotiate the future of a community (Senge et al. 2012). Senge (1990) describes this imaginary space as ‘pictures of the future’ (1990, 9) and defines five means of forming a vision: ‘telling’, ‘selling’, ‘testing’, ‘consulting’, and ‘co-creating’ (Senge et al. 2012, 89–95). For example, the first two stages, telling and selling, can be beneficial when a community needs a solution quickly (Senge et al. 2012). However, a vision built and communicated only by visionary leaders and administrators cannot be regarded as one that will necessarily support teachers’ attachments or raise their enthusiasm for a vision (Huffman 2003; Kouzes and Posner 2008). As Pekarsky (2007) note, a top-down vision developed by school leaders is unlikely to be embraced by the school community. The last two means, consulting and co-creating (Senge et al. 2012), are useful methods when, first, gathering information from teachers, from which a leader or management team then compiles a vision; or, second, when creating a shared vision as a process that seeks to encourage shared thinking, creativity, and the empowerment of individuals (Senge et al. 2012). Thus, developing a shared vision requires staff members to collaborate, engage in critical reflection, and exchange knowledge (Huffman 2003). As Pekarsky (2007) emphasises, a vision cannot be reduced to a slogan: rather, it needs to work as the basis for daily routines in a school community to which teachers can relate.

It is possible that vastly different visions can emerge during co-creation; for example, a principal’s powerful desire for change may conflict with the perspectives of a school community (Kose 2011). Further, trust and support for teachers and students are crucial for the development of a school as a learning community (Thompson and McKelvy 2007). In this way, a realistic and achievable vision, aligned with organisational values, is vital for providing orientation and driving systemic development, while preventing demotivation in the organisation (Martin et al. 2014). Our study found that the role of teachers in building a vision was particularly significant because, during the development, the aim was to build systemic change in the new school community through joint negotiation rather than top-down communication of a vision.

There is a considerable body of work describing the role of a shared vision for community or organisation development. It is evident that the implementation of a shared vision may be linked to how leadership is exercised – for example, whether leadership and decision-making are shared (Kurland, Peretz, and Hertz-Lazarowitz 2010; Sheppard, Brown, and Dibbon 2009). Studies have highlighted the significance of a shared vision, and, in part, the idea of a shared vision has become mainstream as a characteristic of an efficacious school community (Kose 2011). Building a shared vision requires collaboration, mutual trust, and a sense of security for principals and teachers alike to share their ideas and negotiate, as the process identifies the needs of individuals, and the community, too (Benoliel and Schechter 2017). Interestingly, some research suggests that teachers seem to keep their work towards the school’s vision separate from their everyday classroom tasks, with their students not possessing a strong connection to, or understanding of, the school’s vision (Blennow, Bosseldal, and Malmström 2023). Experiencing a sense of change in line with a vision requires time and resource, and it has been noted that a school’s prevailing culture may be slow to change (Huffman 2003).

In the literature on school development, vision work has often been researched and defined in relation to school leadership. Researchers have pointed out that principals are vital in promoting a school vision (Mitchell and Sackney 2006; Murphy et al. 2007), although it must be borne in mind that schools’ varied contexts may limit a principal’s

ability to promote and develop a shared vision (Barnett and McCormick 2003). In addition to leadership, organisational learning is considered a prerequisite for school development (Kurland, Peretz, and Hertz-Lazarowitz 2010). Studies have emphasised the vital role of the principal in identifying the needs and atmosphere of a learning community (Stolp and Smith 1995). Whilst scholars have emphasised the role of vision work in developing school communities (e.g. Harris and Jones 2010; Huffman 2003; Murphy and Torre 2014; Pekarsky 2007), more needs to be understood about how a collaboratively created, shared vision relates to school community development when two culturally and physically separate school levels (e.g. primary and lower secondary schools) are being unified. More research is needed, too, on the relationship between the school vision and how it links with teachers' daily practice.

Study context

This study was conducted as part of a project named Creative Expertise, which received funding from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture for the period 2017–2021. Creative Expertise was an integral component of the national Finnish Teacher Education Forum, tasked with formulating the Development Programme for Teachers' Pre- and In-service Education. The project played a crucial role in supporting the implementation of this programme as an essential element of the national Finnish Teacher Education Development Programme (FTEDP). The school that participated in the research reported in this article was undergoing a transformation into a new unified comprehensive school. This involved the unifying of separate primary and lower secondary levels, and the school was also preparing for a transition to a highly renovated and partly new school building. In Finland, this process is common across many school districts, as unified comprehensive schools have become an increasingly prevalent method of organising comprehensive education. At the municipal level, 22% of the comprehensive schools in Finland are unified (SVT 2020), covering both primary (grades 1–6; pupil ages 7–12) and lower secondary levels (grades 7–9; pupil ages 13–15). Over the past decade, the percentage of unified comprehensive schools has increased by 10% (SVT 2020). In these schools, all grades of pupils are typically housed within the same building. However, primary teachers mainly oversee teaching in the primary school grades (grades 1–6), while subject teachers are responsible for the lower secondary school grades (grades 7–9). All comprehensive school teachers hold a Master's degree in education or a specified subject.

Purpose

Within the project context outlined above, this study sought to investigate the development of a school community as it progressed towards becoming a unified comprehensive school. The focus was on understanding how a collaboratively-created shared vision was perceived during the integration of a primary and lower secondary school, which were both culturally and physically separate. The research involved close collaboration between the school and the university to support the community's transformative journey from separate schools to a unified comprehensive school. We addressed the following research question: *How do teacher team leaders and principals associate a collaboratively-created shared vision with the process of developing a learning community?*

Method

Ethical considerations

This study was carried out in accordance with the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2023). Participation was voluntary, and only teachers and principals who gave active consent at the beginning of the project participated in the research part of the university-school development project. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Before data collection, they were given a brief introduction to the aim of the research once again. To provide full confidentiality to the participants, any data that would allow identification were removed during the data analysis, with researchers using codes to link specific responses throughout the data. All data were anonymised so that neither individuals nor school could be identified from the text.

School-university collaboration context

Preparations for school-university collaboration began in the spring of 2017, when discussions were held with the municipality's head of education and school principals (one principal led the primary school and the other principal led the lower secondary school). Then, a meeting with the school staff was arranged. During this meeting, staff were provided with information about the goals and purpose of the upcoming project. Closer collaboration with the school commenced with the mapping of the school's status and development needs; the examination of teachers' mental models of collaboration, professional development, and learning (see Tarnanen et al. 2021; Toikka and Tarnanen 2022); and by the creation of a shared vision and the formation of development teams. To gather a more informed picture of the school community, all staff were invited to be interviewed individually at the beginning of the project. These interviews were then analysed to build a more cohesive picture of the school community members' personal mastery, mental models and preparedness for collaboration, and more generally, understand how staff perceived the transition to the new unified school.

During the spring of 2018, a shared vision for the future school was created by involving all the teachers from the two separate schools, the principals, and other school staff too (i.e. including special needs assistants, school psychologists, and others) in a vision workshop. This workshop was based on Senge's idea of the 'co-creation' (Senge et al. 2012, 94–95) of the school vision through personal reflection and teamwork. The goal of the workshop was to activate the staff's beliefs and reasoning regarding their personal and collective visions, and in terms of the ongoing processes towards the new, unified comprehensive school. In the vision workshop, the entire staff discussed and considered the school's future, working in groups. Each group presented its ideas and visions to the others. Next, the staff members individually voted on what they felt to be the most important vision for the future school. After the workshop, the school's vision was formed, based on the teachers' reflections and votes, and the main themes of the vision were discussed with the school principals in planning meetings between the principals and researchers. Based on these meetings, and to demonstrate the shared vision, a vision video was created. This video was shown before the workshops throughout the year. The

school's shared vision statement highlighted the need for a positive and experimental learning environment, in which practice creates the school's culture. The vision was based on the notion of a safe and secure, evolving, tolerant, pro-wellbeing and open school where all members were equal and respected. The statement emphasised that the school community was one that would work together to achieve a common goal.

New development teams were launched in the autumn of 2018. The aim was to develop the school community towards the school's shared vision, and, thus, development teams were formed to align with the themes of the vision. The first team focused on promoting a collaborative culture among teachers, and an inclusive school for all learners, by building and developing support for learning and school attendance. The second team developed and discussed common rules for the future unified school, as well as generating activities and events to support the wellbeing of staff and pupils as part of their school life. Finally, the third team considered and developed strategies such as co-teaching and interdisciplinary learning in the new school. Each team had two team leaders working in parallel, but the teams had the flexibility to determine how closely they worked as a team, and how often they were divided into smaller groups to further develop themes that emerged from discussions.

Data collection

At the end of the development project and the academic year (2018–19), data were collected via semi-structured thematic interviews with members of the school's management team. Initially, the management of the school continued with pre-existing arrangements, but the new management team's role increased during the project, especially in the spring of 2019, as the team met more often (about once or twice per month). The members of the school's management team consisted of the leaders of the development teams (subject, primary or special education teachers) and two principals. Overall, seven members of the management team, including both principals, were interviewed individually. The broad themes of the interviews were as follows: (1) shared vision, (2) teamwork, (3) future of the school community and (4) professional development and learning. The focus was on interviewees' reflections about the project and year of planning. Interviewees were asked to describe and explain their experiences, feelings and thinking related to project and school development in general. In most of the interviews, the time was divided evenly between each of the themes. With the leaders of the development teams, the interviews focused more on their new role; with both principals, the focus was on school leadership and how the principals perceived the change in community. The average duration of an interview was 60 minutes. The language of the interviews was Finnish, and the interviews were conducted face-to-face in person, in a setting where the interviewers and interviewees were in the same place.

Data analysis

The data were analysed thematically. An approach based on Nowell et al. (2017) strategies for six phase thematic analysis was applied to support the emergence of rich, insightful and trustworthy findings related to the research question. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) is a valuable technique for examining the perspectives of research

participants and recognising recurring themes in data. This involves the identification, analysis, organisation, description, and reporting of study data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Whilst the primary phases of the analysis were conducted by the first author of the article, both authors were involved in reviewing the thematic analysis at every phase. The analysis comprised a multistage process (see Table 1). First, the authors familiarised themselves with the data, listening to the recordings and then transcribing them into written reports. Data were transferred into analysis software, in order to carry out the initial coding. Early themes emerged in this phase. The first author worked on the initial theming, which was then discussed with the other author. This initial theming was also the first draft of the findings, leading to the first round of reviewing the themes. Through this review, it was possible to explore associations between the shared vision and the development of the learning community. The analysis helped to reveal commonalities and differences in interviewees' perceptions, thereby generating a final theming of the data set which addressed the study's research question. Due to the long-term collaboration (i.e. the discussions, observations, and workshops) between the university and the school, the researchers had gathered information about the school, and this served as background information in the analysis. This background information helped the researchers to interpret and contextualise the themes. The final part of the analysis involved defining and naming the themes that would be reported on in the findings.

Findings

By using the qualitative analytical methods described above, five main themes emerged. These were as follows: (1) Communication of the shared vision and transparency; (2) Present and absent themes in the shared vision; (3) Tradition and innovation; (4) The long-term nature of school development; and (5) The role of the vision in everyday school life. The themes reflect the interviewed participants' perceptions about the school's shared vision in relation to the school development process. In this section, an overview of the findings is presented, grouped in terms of these five themes. Our presentation is supported by selected, anonymised quotations from the original data, which have been translated from Finnish, which help to illustrate the findings (Braun and Clarke 2006). To support anonymity, principals' positions and teachers' subjects or roles are not mentioned.

Theme 1: communication of the shared vision and transparency

It was evident from the analysis that, overall, the teachers and principals experienced the development of a new kind of teamwork mainly positively. However, the teachers reported that a lack of communication about the vision sometimes affected teamwork, as it was difficult for the teams to assess the limits of development concerning the vision. Thus, they considered that it was challenging, at times, for teams to focus on collaborative development. Moreover, there were many overlapping concerns to take into account, such as other meetings and additional tasks (e.g. school celebrations) which affected and limited the time given to the teams. As one teacher explained, it was necessary to spend time negotiating, leaving less time for actual development; 'Well, it played a significant role, at least in my opinion. We had quite a lot to deal with in the team'.

Table 1. Phases of the thematic analysis.

Phase 1: Becoming familiar with the data	Phase 2: Generating initial codes	Phase 3: Searching for themes	Phase 4: Reviewing themes	Phase 5: Redefining and naming themes	Phase 6: Producing the findings
<p>We organised information into archives, identified themes from recordings and transcribed the interview data.</p>	<p>We created initial coding and identified relevant text sections related to the research theme of a shared vision.</p>	<p>We sorted and collated all the potentially relevant coded data extracts into an initial theme of a shared vision. Additionally, we created an early draft of the findings.</p>	<p>We analysed the coded data extracts for each theme to determine whether they formed a cohesive pattern. Data were separated into five themes.</p>	<p>We determined which aspect of the data each theme represented and named each theme.</p>	<p>We provided detailed findings, including any relevant direct quotations.</p>
<p>Example of transcribed interview data</p>	<p>Initial codes (n)</p>	<p>Example of theme searching</p>	<p>Data grouped into five themes</p>	<p>The five themes</p>	<p>Example of reported findings</p>
<p><i>Question: Well, if you think about your team and the vision of school community, what thoughts do you have when you look at the past year?</i></p> <p><i>Response: And there are some things we understand a little better, those things that are going to be relevant and important, for that we really are 'openly together'. We will not be able to work there in the new school if we stay in our own silos. I can imagine that it must have been a bit of a big threshold for many teachers, that now we have to weigh our own thoughts and attitudes. It can be difficult. But how is all this going to show up then? It is hard to judge at this point. It will probably come with time; development must be given time. It is a really unrealistic idea that all we are doing would somehow suddenly happen there in a new school. All this thinking and work is there in the background. The hope, of course, is that this development will move there and make an impact on the daily life of the school. It would be a sad thing that we have been working on a vision and an idea for a year, but we do not have anything permanent.</i></p>	<p>Development teams (65) Summarising the academic year (61) Shared vision (53) Team leaders' experience (52) Personal mastery (50) Future in unified school (47) School leadership (46) Staff development (40) Past year (31) Development project with university (26) Students (24) Team learning (18) Manager team (15) Spring semester (16) Challenges (13) Rules (11) Autumn semester (9) School day structure (9) Assistant principal (7) Multidisciplinary learning week (7) Feedback (6) Special need assistants (4) Pedagogical café (3) Visits to another school (3) Indoor air quality (3)</p>	<p>'How does shared vision influence the process of developing the learning community?' A lot of time has been spent promoting the vision. Showing a vision video and returning to a vision could have calmed the raging debate. The operating culture should correspond with the vision's message. In future schools, the vision should be displayed more clearly. The challenges of community engagement. The vision was broad and had many overlapping aspects of teamwork. The school's starting situation and spirit of time were reflected in the vision. The understanding of well-being, trust and openness increased. The process takes time, but there are visible and promising beginnings in terms of vision. Practices in line with the shared vision need to be supported more strongly to ensure that change is being built together.</p>	<p>For example, 'Communicate the vision' theme included: -A lot of time has been spent promoting the vision. - Showing the vision video and returning to a vision could have calmed the raging debate. - The school should match its vision. The operating culture should correspond with the vision's message. - In future schools, the vision should be displayed more clearly.</p>	<p>1) Communication of the shared vision and transparency; 2) Present and absent themes in the shared vision; 3) Tradition and innovation; 4) The long-term nature of school development; 5) The role of vision in everyday school life.</p>	<p>The teachers explained that it was necessary to spend time negotiating, leaving less time for actual development. <i>Well, it played a significant role, at least in my opinion. We had quite a lot to deal with in the team.</i></p>

During the development process, it was felt that friction could be caused by a perceived lack of transparency regarding the school's future. In reviewing the current state of the school, teachers and principals spoke extensively about the idea that the school community had been most affected by teachers having different attitudes and ideas about the future. The various ways of perceiving and envisioning a shared future in the school were discussed. Whilst a teacher remarked that 'Teams seek for mistakes, and some of us cling to even the smallest things if the principal dares to say something', one principal reflected that 'It may have taken too many months to convince some of them (teachers) of this development project'. The other principal stated that it was important to communicate and present the school community to the students' parents and guardians realistically, rather than paint what might be seen as an unrealistic picture with words from the vision, as it could appear that the school may not correspond with the story being told. The principal was, thus, concerned that the reality of the school and the narrative presented might not align, which could lead to confusion about the school's operations, particularly among the students' parents and guardians.

Theme 2: present and absent themes in the shared vision

One principal reflected about how much of the school's vision was influenced by the school's current state, as some historical and practical issues seemed to give rise to broader notions of wellbeing (e.g. temporary facilities). Both principals described how temporary facilities and concerns related to the future school building may have led to the emergence of, and emphasis on, safety and wellbeing perspectives in the shared vision. Other interviewees raised the same kind of issues about the reality of schools being in separate buildings. In addition, problems with old school buildings may have contributed to the rise of themes, such as wellbeing and safety, with staff members thinking about potential problems with the new school. Teachers and principals hoped the new school would remove such concerns. Moreover, it was noted that some important themes, such as pedagogical development, were less evident, as observed by a principal:

I wonder if it would happen that a certain thing would be emphasised. That everything is 'safe' and 'everyone has wellbeing'. Maybe other themes such as sustainable development, multidisciplinary learning and the ideas of a new curriculum will not rise.

In general, the unified school was perceived as an opportunity for new teaching approaches, especially as it was thought to offer new scope for teaching collaboratively. However, the teachers felt that it might be difficult to see a substantial change in teaching because the teaching would still be based on the same curriculum (FNBE 2014). For example, as one teacher commented, 'I must do my work in the same way, and according to the curriculum, I mean teaching. Maybe the new school will create a new framework for teaching'. Enthusiasm to reform teaching and pedagogy was evident, as well, in the interviews, although the school's vision did not include this aspect of teaching and pedagogy. One teacher mentioned that they felt there was a lack of discussion about pedagogy, which may have been due to the focus on the construction of the new school: 'There should be some allocated time where you can get together, not with these teams but with larger groups. Let us say "pedagogical coffee" or something'.

Theme 3: tradition and innovation

Several interviewees highlighted what they perceived as the school's initial state, the traditional nature of the practices, the challenges involved in the decision-making and insufficient openness. For example, according to the interviewees, especially the teachers, a lack of openness was a problem in the school community. One of the principals interpreted it as a general characteristic of the municipality:

We have a culture here in the municipality where many things are prepared without telling anyone about them. I hope that this culture does not prevail in the new unified school.

On the other hand, the other principal commented that the staff needed to be challenged to discuss and confront their thinking, mentioning that they (the principals) occasionally heard from teachers the argument that 'we are used to doing it this way'. According to this principal, the teaching profession involves building the future ('children are the future'), but traditions often prevent new ways of doing things; 'We are somehow so stuck in that traditional and existing culture'. Related to this, building a vision opened thoughts about, and discussions on, different themes. For instance, one teacher noted that it led to better knowledge of future community members, feeling that not only the trust between teachers but also their capability and will to work together was strengthened:

Some of these things may have been understood a little better (in vision): which questions will be relevant and important for us, such as 'trust', and the fact that we are together in a new premises.

Theme 4: the long-term nature of school development

The teachers and principals discussed the nature of the vision and school development as a long-term process, with all the ideas related to the shared vision materialising over one academic school year. Some teachers described the year as an intermediate space between the old and new school. One of the teachers commented on personally gaining a lot from the development, and hoping that teamwork would continue, but mindful of the idea that, in the new school, change would not materialise on its own and effort must be sustained.

However, the analysis suggested that development work raised negative issues, too, in the school community, such as the 'search for errors' mentality. Negativity was not only a matter of criticism; it affected the way things were handled and promoted in the development teams, as well. Thus, as one teacher noted, a vision-based learning community is not built instantly, and it cannot be assumed that there will be something 'ready-made' in the new school premises:

But how all this will show in concrete terms, it is difficult to determine how all this will materialise in concrete terms. It will probably come with time. It is an unrealistic idea to think that everything we have done will somehow suddenly come from somewhere when we move to a new school.

It was evident that the teachers did not expect rapid change to occur in the new school community. Thus, the vision could not be forgotten although the pace of

change was difficult to predict, with the teachers talking about it taking years. Teachers and principals referred to the need for a new kind of leadership and structure to support development, in line with the shared vision. One principal observed that a vision should be visible for the students and staff in everyday life, if not directly, then at least through interaction. One of the teachers noted that the school must develop a structure that genuinely supported the growth of development teams and the school's management. This teacher referred to the emphasis on openness, and the pursuit towards the common goals within the school's vision, for example, through expanded clarity in decision-making:

I want all these things (from the vision) to be related to the new unified school. Transparency, for example, without a doubt. Moreover, of course, joint decision-making will be important. Indeed, if we decide to continue these teams. I hope that what the teams present will also be considered in the school community's decisions. And we need to evolve (as a school), not continue the same old stuff, especially if it does not work.

Theme 5: the role of the vision in everyday school life

According to the analysis, the teachers felt that the vision could seem somewhat remote from daily life at school. Interviewees identified and discussed how much time was spent working on the vision during the development project, especially at the beginning. Several interviewees questioned how sufficiently the vision had been reinforced during development, noting that vision-based development could have been supported even more effectively by returning to, and discussing, the vision during staff meetings. It was generally agreed that the vision should be presented to parents and guardians at the start of the following school year, as there was much interest in the new school building. In addition, the teachers hoped that the school's vision and values would be more explicitly visible in the new school.

The teachers talked about the importance of the school's common policies. Some of the teachers felt that common rules had been worked on intensively during the past year. On the other hand, one of the principals felt that a lot of time was spent harmonising the rules, especially at the beginning of the project, but since then, talk about rules had become gradually more subdued. According to another principal, the vision work was valuable, with the assumption that the start of the new school would be busy, with everyday matters piling up on the principal's desk. This also emphasised the need for clarity in relation to common rules. One teacher pointed out that an important part of the school community's everyday practices in the unified school would be that these rules would be openly discussed and familiar to everyone.

In all, the interviewees discussed various aspects related to the school's vision and development, as well as the new school building itself and its potential for new teaching approaches. One key point that emerged was the importance of effectively communicating the school's vision and values to parents and guardians and reinforcing these in staff meetings. Overall, the interviewees expressed the belief that through open communication, shared understanding, and a commitment to ongoing improvement, the school could continue to develop on its new premises, although the pace of change might be slow.

Discussion

Through our research, we gained insight into how a collaboratively-created, shared vision was perceived during the integration of a primary and a lower secondary school. Our in-depth, thematic analysis allowed us to investigate how the interviewed team leaders and principals associated this shared vision with the process of developing a learning community. We explored the notion of a shared vision as a catalyst for change and as a way of enhancing a school community's capability to operate as a new school community. In this section, we consider our findings, and their implications, more broadly.

The themes that emerged from the analysis bring to the fore various aspects and considerations that are important in school development, including communication and transparency, tradition and innovation, the long-term nature of school development, and the role of a shared vision in terms of daily school life. They highlight the importance of clear communication about a school's shared vision and the need for discussion and negotiation during a school's development. It is evident that transparency within the school community is crucial, in line with research on the theme of leadership in the community (e.g. Hargreaves and Fink 2006); a culture of lack of transparency may cause friction. The notion of prioritisation of issues and themes in relation to the shared vision was also raised through the analysis: teachers and principals discussed the role of safety and wellbeing within the school's vision, with recognition that this should not be at the expense of other crucial school-development themes, such as sustainable development, curriculum development, and initiatives for multidisciplinary learning. In terms of tradition and innovation within a school community, it was evident that even if a school has a strong vision and a shared direction for the future, old habits can be deeply embedded. From the perspective of school development, challenging customary ways of doing things is essential but, at the same time, can be difficult. Further, the long-term nature of school development was acknowledged, bringing an awareness that not all concepts bound to the shared vision can come to fruition within a single academic school year. Some educators characterised the year as a transitional period, bridging the gap between the old and the new school. It was also noteworthy that interviewees perceived that the shared vision may have felt remote from the school's day-to-day reality. Whilst interviewees recognised and deliberated on the amount of time dedicated to working on the vision during the development project, particularly in the initial stages, they believed, as well, that development based on the vision could be more effectively supported by revisiting and discussing the vision in staff meetings.

Scholars have long drawn attention to the importance of a vision in school development (e.g. DuFour et al. 2016; Harris and Jones 2010; Pekarsky 2007; Senge et al. 2012). Overall, our findings suggest that a shared vision can be a useful tool for reflecting on school development, whilst it is also the case that linking the shared vision and everyday school life can be demanding. This resonates with research indicating that vision may be preserved at an institutional and discursive level but not entirely present within the school community's everyday practices (Blennow, Bosseldal, and Malmström 2023). Further, it is useful to question how well a co-created shared vision can represent a truly shared picture which is useful as a tool for the new school community (Senge 1990). In the particular context of our study, two separate schools, with their own practices and perspectives, were preparing to unify. It is possible that the vision could have, perhaps, been reinforced

more robustly throughout the process. Indeed, some participants suggested that the vision should be more visible in aspects of daily life at school, in line with the idea that a living shared vision should be more closely tied to knowledge acquisition and dissemination in the learning community (Loon Hoe 2007). Moreover, it was observed that changes in the school community tend to appear gradually and may be difficult to perceive. The speed of change is doubtless an interesting factor when assessing the amount of development that could happen in a year, as cultures typically take time to change (see Huffman 2003). In our study, the slow pace of change and the understanding that the school was in a temporary facility (i.e. waiting for the move to the new building) understandably influenced the nature of the development project.

Although time had been designated for vision work, the interviewees felt that the school's traditions related to leadership, pedagogical thinking and development, as well as teaching practices, did not undergo significant changes within a single academic year. Teachers and principals believed that substantial change would likely occur in the new premises and that the outcomes of the development efforts might remain somewhat concealed until the transition to the new school building had happened. With this in mind, it may be necessary to reconsider the vision and re-evaluate school development initiatives as a school community gains experience in new premises, in situations where this is part of the change. Thus, commitment to vision work and collaborative discussions on shared decision-making in the new premises can play a pivotal role in sustaining school development (see Kurland, Peretz, and Hertz-Lazarowitz 2010; Sheppard, Brown, and Dibbon 2009).

Overall, within our project with the school community, it was evident that certain themes became more prominent, while others faded due to factors including a lack of recognition, insufficient emphasis in everyday school life, or minimal impact on the working community. Some questions may not have surfaced in connection with a school's vision either because they closely relate to work (e.g. teaching methods) or may pose challenging issues that cannot be swiftly resolved. For instance, this school's vision did not contain themes directly associated with learning, although this is a fundamental aspect of the school's function. It is possible that this has a contextual basis: in Finland, teachers enjoy significant autonomy, allowing them the freedom to plan their teaching in the manner they deem most effective, so the teachers may, perhaps, have perceived the merging of different schools as having less specific influence on teaching practices.

Limitations

It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the current study. Our research focuses on the development of one learning community, specifically, analysing a change process within a school community's unification procedure. Furthermore, a small number of participants were interviewed. As the study is underpinned by the idea that recognising and appreciating the diverse and unique characteristics of each school is a critical factor in facilitating effective school development (Senge et al. 2012), it does not aim to make generalisations about the use of a shared vision to support school development. Instead, the strength of this study lies in the insights gained from our qualitative analysis of the data and deep collaboration with a school community.

Our study found that it was crucial for principals and teachers alike to feel comfortable that the development work aligned with their decision-making practices (Stolp and Smith 1995). As researchers, we needed to adjust to the present practices and structures of the school community. We collaborated with the school staff to address the problems and challenges that emerged during the development process, and we actively sought opportunities for community learning and development. However, we acknowledge that the findings may not fully represent the perspectives of all members of the school community but, rather, are limited to a selected group of key stakeholders involved in the school's change process. Team leaders and principals may have a different perspective on school development in comparison with other staff members, given the support and guidance offered during the development process from school leaders and researchers. Finally, it is important to reflect that the researchers' choices in facilitating the vision workshops and school development may have influenced the work of the development teams and the shaping of the vision in a specific direction. We recommend conducting similar research in other contexts, to explore school change and gain a better understanding of the areas that need attention in both pre-service and in-service teacher education. Considering the identified constraints of this study, a larger pool of participants and schools selected for similar development could open up possibilities for comparable research in diverse school contexts.

Conclusion

The development of a school as a learning community is a complex process that relies upon the active engagement of the entire school community. School development work is always shaped by the community's history and present situation, making every school's progress a unique process (see Senge et al. 2012). New initiatives invariably depend heavily on the extent to which various parties within a school community genuinely feel they are working towards shared goals. The commitment of teachers and staff to embrace change is influenced by the extent to which the school community strives to become an open and trust-building community (Huffman 2003). Our study of the development of a school community in Finland, as it progressed towards becoming a unified comprehensive school, has provided insight into how the preconditions of a school community can contribute to the implementation of a shared vision as a catalyst for change. It draws attention to how recognition of the distinct needs and starting points of schools is crucial in all school community development efforts.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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