In this article, we present and discuss a method used during 2000 by Myndigheten för skolutveckling [the Swedish National Agency of Education] called “Dialogue for School Improvement.” Dialogues were initiated by the Agency to be implemented between representatives from the Agency and from the municipalities. We analyse three kinds of data: official documents from the Agency; the municipalities’ internal evaluations: interim reports and final reports and finally interviews with people involved in the dialogues. We had three questions in mind:

(i) Why use dialogue as a way to handle school improvement?
(ii) How can a dialogue be described?
(iii) How can the dialogue be understood in terms of a policy instrument and as a disciplinary practice?

Briefly summarised, the dialogue method can be described as a complex policy instrument with disciplinary techniques concentrating on agreement, negotiation and networking while also entailing techniques related to power and money.

Keywords: Governance · School improvement · Dialogue · National Agency · Municipalities

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‘Dialogue’ for school improvement?

EVA FORSBERG AND ANITA NORDZELL

Introduction

The necessity to improve education and schools has been of intense political interest in recent years, and an increased interest from all political parties concerning educational control can be seen in Sweden since 2000 (Rönnberg, 2012a, b). Like the vast majority of the industrialised nations there has been a growing trend of auditing and evaluation in Sweden (Power, 1999), resulting in great confidence in inspection as an instrument of government and means to improve schools (Rönnberg 2012a; b; Leithwood et al., 2006; Skolverket, 2005). How to act and which tool or technique to use to implement public policies is still subject to debate.

In the first decade of 2000, a complementary approach to inspection was introduced by the Swedish National Agency of Education [Myndigheten för skolutveckling/MSU], called the development dialogue. In this article, we will present a way to understand this dialogue as a method for school improvement by the Swedish National Agency of Education. This method can be described as a way for the Agency to initiate school improvement through dialogue with representatives from the Swedish municipalities. The aim of the Agency was not to inspect or control the schools but to support the local actors in their work addressing school issues.

We present and discuss this rather unusual method, employed by a school agency in relation to municipalities, inspired
by two kinds of analytical tool. One helped us to structure the dialogue work process: as a policy instrument and tool used by the Agency for school improvement (Willke, 2001). Another theory inspired us to look more closely at statements made by those involved and at the interaction between people in the work process. Employing Foucault’s concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1999) we direct our interest to governing as a disciplinary practice forming the identities of the parties involved.

**Policy Implementation in the Swedish Education System**

In Sweden, there is an institutional separation between policy-making and policy implementation. The former is a political issue handled by the government, the parliament and the rather small ministries. Policy implementation is first and foremost an administrative matter executed within comparatively large national agencies with a certain amount of autonomy vis-à-vis politicians. Tasks like monitoring, evaluation, inspection and improvement have been handled by different state agencies over the last two decades, and agencies have been united or divided and renamed.

In the late 1980s, independency and accountability at the municipality level were emphasised, and, following a government decision, the municipalities were given responsibility for the realisation of education in 1991. As a result, the municipalities and school staff were also expected to take charge of school improvement. Some years later, at the end of the last century, renewed interest in state intervention for school improvement was manifest from the national political level and the National Agency of Education (NAE; Skolverket, established in 1991), was divided. The result being the consequent separation of monitoring and development issues in 2003 (cf. Forsberg & Lundgren, 2004).

From 2003 to 2008, development tasks were taken care of by the Agency for School Improvement and NAE continued to monitor the situation. In 2008, this system was subject to further change, and improvement was once again placed within NAE’s remit and increased resources for inspection were allocated to the, newly established, Swedish Schools Inspectorate. From 2008 onwards, no resources were allocated for working with dialogue. The dialogue, a method for a Swedish agency to handle school issues, was used over a period of eight years – rather a short period in school history.

**The Development Dialogue and Data**

The dialogue was the agency’s response to a government request for support of school development in municipalities with low achievement rates; it was employed between 2002 and 2008. Different kinds of dialogues were introduced in order to handle various issues that were deemed important for development in the school area. The specific dialogue we focus on in this study was realised from 2006-2008, as the result of a government directive to MSU to allocate 225,000,000 Swedish crowns (€21,000,000) to schools with special needs. The purpose was to support goal fulfilment among pupils with a foreign background.

This specific dialogue was implemented in a project called the Diversity Project [mångfaldssatsningen]. The funds were distributed in 30 different areas, earmarked for language development; improvement of upper secondary schools; and better cooperation between the school and home. 32 municipalities were chosen according to the variables of low achievement rates (with a target fulfilment of 75% or less) and high
percentage of pupils with a foreign background (18% or more) in each municipality. This means that the municipalities selected were chosen in terms of underachievement, although this was not true for all the schools in each municipality.

The dialogue was evaluated by a group of researchers at Mälardalen University, including the authors of this article. In this article, we use data collected for the evaluation (cf. Sandahl, Nordzell & Tryggvason, 2008; Sandahl 2009). For our purpose, we categorise the data in three types: the first consists of texts produced by the Agency concerning this specific dialogue ([Myndigheten för skolutveckling], 2005, 2006, 2008a, b) and also published internal and external evaluations and documents, as points of reference and context for our understanding of the dialogue as a concept (Björnsson 2001, 2002a, b; Danmarks evalueringsinstitut, 2002, 2003; Faugert et al., 2003; Ray, 2005; Sandström, Arvidsson & Landahl, 2003). A second set of data is the municipalities’ internal evaluations of the actual dialogue; each municipality produced both an interim report and a final report, in all 64 reports. A third set of data consists of interviews with representatives from both the municipalities and the Agency (MSU). These interviews are only drawn on to a small extent in this article but are nevertheless important in terms of our understanding of the dialogue and the way we have categorised the data.

Questions
In this paper, we analyse the dialogue as a policy instrument for school improvement and also as a disciplinary practice producing identities. We use data from the dialogue implemented during the years 2006-2008 by the Agency (MSU). Our research questions are:

- Why use dialogue as a means with which to handle school improvement?
- How can a dialogue be described in terms of the techniques used?
- How can the dialogue be understood in terms of a policy instrument and as a disciplinary practice?

Before answering the questions, we will introduce two main concepts concerning the method for school improvement herein, as well as present the analytical tools, which we have used to structure and analyse the material.

Methods

Concepts and analytical tools
One main concept is, of course, dialogue, a concept used in general in various ways and for different purposes. For our purpose, research into dialogue as an instrument for change, improvement or development is of special interest. Within organisational research, it is stressed that change is a phenomenon that occurs in the context of human social interactions, within the realms of communication, conversation and dialogue (April, 1998; Wals & Schwarzin, 2012; Wilhelmson & Döös, 2012). In addition, researchers call attention to dialogue as a tool for problem solving (cf. Cameron, 2000) and a means of handling complexity (Wals & Schwarzin 2012).

Dialogue “will become the way in which organisations learn to thrive on complexity” (Varney 1996, 31). Further emphasised is the increased use of dialogue in the public sector “as a transformational tool – in communication, relationships, performance and organisational development” (Bell 1996, 20). More seldom, however, dialogue is used as an instrument for change in state intervention, especially between the administrative levels of the state and the municipality respectively (Björnsson 2002b).

One important concept in the dialogue is improvement: an ideological concept de-
scribed in the Agency’s (MSU) own text, as being the aim (for MSU) to use dialogue as a way to handle school improvement. In our text, we use the terms ‘improvement’ and ‘development’ interchangeably, regarding the desire to make schools better. In this specific context, three leading issues are stressed as especially important for school improvement, in general and as leading issues for all dialogues introduced by MSU:

(i) goal and results;
(ii) long-term activities and sustainability;
(iii) participation and influence (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2005).

Goal and results figure in the dialogue in several ways: for the selection of municipalities, as a starting point for analysing the present situation in each municipality and for the selection of strategies and activities in the action plan, as well as providing a point of reference in the evaluation. These activities are manifest in MSU’s selection document, the action plan, the agreement and the evaluation document. In this way, the formal attention to goal and results is both prescribed and inscribed in the structure of the dialogue.

The idea of long-term activities and sustainability has several expressions. One is the attention paid to structure and system-building discernible in expectations and documents. System-building and documentation are described as important factors for quality work. Implemented school activities are documented, and thereby possible to analyse and use as a basis for taking new steps, making changes and planning for the future (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2006). Another expression of long-term activities can be seen in the municipalities’ recurrent involvement in the Agency’s projects. Several of which have previously participated in former dialogue projects. In addition, long-term activities are understood as Agency statements pertaining to connecting ‘on-going projects and activities’ in the schools with the dialogue. In this way, ‘on-going projects and activities’ could be financed by the Agency.

Participation and influence are best described as an idea from a “bottom-up” perspective, where the persons responsible for school activities should define the kinds of actions appropriate for each school. A contrasting perspective can be described as “top-down”: where the ideas and ‘hows’ are defined from a position outside the school in question. This issue is an expression of the main idea of the dialogue, as we understand it: to inspire local professionals to initiate and take responsibility for school improvement (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2008b) – on the basis, however, of the agency’s goals and rules.

Analytical tools

The dialogue, as an idea defined by an agency concerned with school improvement, can be seen as a form of state intervention: a governing instrument for school improvement. When considered in this way, we found Willke’s (2001) concepts useful in terms of structuring the dialogue as a process. The Agency’s requirements regarding how a dialogue should be implemented were quite firmly regulated, and Willke (2001) distinguishes between three regulative media: power, money and knowledge (Ioanidou, 2007; cf. Chernilo 2002, 432).

All of these three media are identifiable within the educational realm: power in regulations like the Education Act, the curriculum and guidelines of various sorts; money in the allocation of tax money, in subsidies and special grants to schools; and knowledge in the production and dissemination of information within the dialogue. Information distribution has concerned results from evaluations and research about schools, and researchers have also been directly involved in
capacity-building activities within schools. All in the name of dialogue.

Willke’s typology can be linked to policy instruments defined as “techniques by which governmental authorities wield their power in attempting to ensure support and effect or prevent social change” (Vedung, 2004, 3). Different kinds of policy instruments, such as regulations, financial means and information are put forward. While the policy instrument is a concept elaborated in political science, drawing attention to the power of the state and the bureaucracy, governmentality (Foucault, 1991) as a sociological concept adds an important dimension to our analyses.

Focusing on governmentality, we will pay attention to studying governing as not only an instrument for the study of government but in terms of the mechanisms that shape the ideas, the aspirations and the needs of an individual or a group. In this way, governing is decentralised and permeates every pore of society; it is not a top-down phenomenon and we treat it as something rather interactional. Foucault raises questions such as “How to govern oneself?” and “How to be governed by others?” (Foucault, 1991, 87). Governing of the state is merely one, of the many ways that the subject is regulated. With this understanding, governing is not primarily through the law; rather, it is a disciplinary practice, producing identities.

The use of the concept of dialogue is a key ingredient as it has positive connotations and places it amongst other concepts also referring to a democratic discourse, for example openness, respect, voice, mutuality and negotiation, to mention just a few. The concepts we use structure what we perceive, how we get around in work, how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In this way, dialogue can be characterised as a metaphor that governs our thoughts.

Together, the concepts of policy instruments and governmentality make it possible to concentrate on government action and, at the same time, conceive of state intervention as something that takes place in interaction. Further, it directs our interest to the techniques forming both activities and the identities of the parties involved.

**Results**

**Why dialogue for school improvement?**

We have already initiated discussions to answer this question above, but, in order to express the Agency’s position concerning the dialogue, we would like to present some short texts produced by the Agency for school improvement. One report (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2008b) states the general role of the dialogue as a tool for school improvement:

In the development dialogue the state combines demands for goal attainment with offers of support. The state initiates conversations on school results and development opportunity. Its role is simultaneously clarifying, understanding and demanding. Through process support and knowledge, the state strengthens the schools’ abilities for self-improvement. (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2008b, p. 12)

The dialogues have been described as a way to support and strengthen local school improvement initiatives. Both demands for goal attainment and offers of support are presented. “Simultaneously clarifying, understanding and demanding” is the role of the agency in its relationships with the municipalities, “through process support and knowledge” the schools should fortify their own abilities “for self-improvement”. On the one hand, school improvement is sought after and set as a goal by the government; on the other hand, this should be based on local needs and
wishes from the parties involved, primarily teachers and school leaders.

With former research about school development in mind, these positions can illustrate a dilemma regarding how school development should be handled. Simply put, terms like *governing by goals* or *governing by rules* as well as *top-down* and *bottom-up* are used to illustrate that the initiative to develop an organisation or activity can come from the top or from local actors (Dalin, 1995; Larsson & Löwstedt, 2010). Dalin (1995) mentions that it is necessary to strike a balance between the two positions when talking about school development; as the quotation from the Agency’s text above testifies to.

For an agency whose purpose it is to act for improving schools in relation to municipalities, it seems necessary to handle the dilemma and maintain a balance between the two positions. An agency employing dialogue can be connected to concepts like openness, respect, mutuality and negotiation. The use of the concept dialogue can be understood in this way. In interviews with representatives from the Agency, we find widespread support for the idea of involving local actors in the process, to come into contact with persons with responsibility for school development in the municipalities – ideas more grounded in bottom-up thinking than top-down.

In the Agency’s own reports, we also find motives for the Agency to intervene, motives concerning school improvement in more general terms, and by means other than the use of dialogue, in particular. Two of the headlines in one of the Agency’s reports (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2006) on the dialogue are “Local School Development Presupposes National Support” and “The Need for National Support”. Under these headings, a number of issues are raised, for example the need for improvement of both individual schools and the school system in general. Specific problem areas or key factors that can be managed or promoted by national support are also highlighted. One example of such a specific problem area is the municipalities’ and the schools’ quality system:

There is a great need for increased follow-up in all the different forms of the school system. Systematic documentation of pupils’ knowledge and skills development is often lacking and results are not sufficiently analysed to provide a basis for remedial measures. Methods for both following up and supporting the work of achieving the goals must be improved at all levels in the system. MSU is thus working largely on supporting and strengthening schools’ work on quality and improvement processes in order to make them more effective and successful in terms of enhancing pupils’ outcomes compared with earlier. The schools’ system for quality needs to be further strengthened in order to provide a better basis for analysis and development. (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2006, 15, 12)

The agency identified five development areas: quality work and management; knowledge and assessment; diversity and equivalence; democracy; and education/working life and growth. Even though many issues are discussed in the report, there are few arguments regarding why these matters are best supported by a national agency. However, one reason is that it was a government commission.

MSU was responsible for support, especially within nationally prioritised areas, both in general and for selected municipalities/schools. Likewise, local development of work quality, learning environments and professional competence among educators should be advanced. Moreover, MSU supported the dissemination of knowledge, experience and research among professional educators. Another reason cited for state in-
tervention was that internal and external studies and evaluations have shown that national support was required:

The National Agency for Education’s (MSU’s) national follow-up, evaluation and inspections indicate that powerful national initiatives are needed to provide schools with support and guidance. The state thus has a central role to play in terms of stimulating and supporting work on quality in the direction of better outcomes. (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2006, p. 15)

In addition, different actors’ requests for support of various kinds are stressed, for example “there has been an increase in the proportion of head teachers who regard MSU as an important resource in pedagogical development” (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2006, 16). Managing the future is also seen as a central issue for both the school players and MSU:

Today the demand for national development initiatives is greater than their supply, and we believe that this can be expected to increase, since the Swedish school is facing major and necessary changes in the immediate future. (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2006, preface)

Even though schools have been the target of various national initiatives, they still seem to be in need of assistance. This requires an awareness of new demands and long-term thinking to identify trends and changes in the world:

Few of the initiatives have, however, been sustainable and fully implemented. MSU considers that a broad initiative is needed and that the initiative must be able to work on a long-term basis in order to achieve good and enduring results. (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2006, p. 25)

So, according to MSU, national involvement and support were necessary to initiate, support and uphold school improvement. Some further motives are presented in a report (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2008b). Shortcomings in the municipalities’ ability to take responsibility for school development were noted, as well as differences in their ability to apply for help. National support, as a consequence of national initiatives based on failing performances in municipalities rather than (financial) resources as a result of the ability to apply for support, was launched as the new model – connecting the national and the local levels. Another reason for state involvement was expressed in the following way:

Municipalities and schools often know their development needs. The will to improve is present, but not always the ability. The interest of an external party and the contribution of resources and suggestions on structures can set free plenty of power for use in developments. (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2008b, 11)

In the diversity project, more elaborate motives for school improvement can be discerned. Shortcomings and abilities that fell short were specified in relation to goal fulfillment, to be understood as grades or ratings, and differences such as those in the established category: pupils with a foreign background. Specific areas have been proposed as particularly problematic owing to low competence, poor performances, attitudes that were not conducive, and waning interest (on the part of staff or students).

Certain subjects, especially basic skills, are stressed as important areas for development. Likewise, teachers “need greater insight into the impact of different conditions, the individual’s capacity and the importance of the group context in learning” (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2006, 22). Improving this requires teachers at all levels to change their
ways of working” (25). Municipal school managers, principals and teachers are all seen as important actors for change, but also as actors in need of change. In sum, we can conclude that both the more general motives of developing a quality system and more specific arguments referring to unacceptable gaps in basic skills are present in the diversity project.

A description based on the techniques used

In order to understand the dialogue as a means of interaction between the Agency and the municipalities, we analysed texts from the Agency, including the municipalities’ interim and final reports. The Agency’s intentions, as expressed in its official documents, are followed up by the municipalities’ evaluations concerning their work with the dialogue. We have chosen to categorise the material according to the techniques involved: techniques we found instrumental in terms of understanding the dialogue. Our aim is to picture this rather complex dialogue not only from the agency’s perspective but also while considering the experiences expressed by the municipalities. Inspired by Willke (2001), we identified three techniques:

– dialogue process
– financial support
– communication

The Dialogue Process

The dialogue process was presented by the Agency as a model for the municipalities to use in their internal school improvement activities. The dialogue is described as a linear process entailing initiation, agreement and evaluation.

Initiation

Initiation was grounded in the Agency’s selection of municipalities; the Agency contacted the selected municipalities and its directors of the local education administration. The dialogue project was introduced to the municipalities, including accompanying support: financial support; process support; and the possibility to take advantage of additional resources (further education; lectures; training programs, and networks). Present at these meetings – called dialogues – were the Agency’s team and representatives of the municipalities.

People from the municipality’s administration were always present (and, in many cases, personnel representing the schools too: usually a principal but sometimes a teacher with responsibility for school development). Participation in the project was presented as an offer. In all cases, the municipalities accepted it. Besides the appreciation of financial support, municipalities described it as an offer they could not refuse, owing to the problems identified: “When MSU (the Agency) has identified a problem and offers support, you can’t say no”, (as one municipality representative remarked).

Agreement

The aims of the meetings were “to reach agreement on the measures to be implemented through joint discussion” (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2006, 35). This encompasses the planning and organisation of activities documented in an action plan, as well as in an agreement between MSU and each municipality involved. In the action plan, the municipality is expected to describe “the present situation, an inventory of needs, a strategy, a choice of targets for achievements, a budget, a follow-up plan and evaluation, as well as a deadline and the form in which to report the results” (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2008b, 2). The agreement is seen as a way to lay out the “division of responsibility” (Myndigheten för skolutveckling, 2008a) relating to the elements of the action plan.

These official documents were important for the implementation of the dialogue in
the municipalities; as is expressed by one statement from a representative of a municipality, highlighting the relationship between the agreement and the legitimacy of the project: “thanks to agreements/contracts signed by top directors, the project has been given importance and a clear focus”.

The dialogue process also includes the dissemination of information from the Agency on the possibility of the use of additional resources, such as further education; lectures; training programs, and networks. The dialogue as a medium is affected by questions of time; the number of offers and rules of application, amounting to problems concerning overload and time constraints. Statements made by the municipalities that attest to this are: “the offers [of further education from the agency] came at short notice” ... “but we did not have time to make plans for them.” Also mentioned is “the long-term decision, information and follow-up paths characteristic of municipalities”, concerning critique from representatives of the municipalities that they need time to implement ideas in the municipalities.

Evaluation
The dialogue process also includes follow-ups and evaluations as mandatory assignments. The municipalities were expected to make both interim and final reports. Alongside these demands, manuals followed laying out what to include and what to assess. Whether these were mandatory or not is not entirely clear; however, after analysing the reports we can see that the structure and the content of the reports are similar in many respects. In some cases, the reports are based explicitly on school or project reports; although, in many cases they are produced by the MSU’s contact person in the municipality.

Process structured by necessity
To conclude presentation of the dialogue process, we add two concluding statements made by representatives from two municipalities, characterising this “structured process” as “an overall activity involving the whole of school practice” and also something necessary for principals and school leadership:

The strength of this structured cooperation […] is that it is an overall activity involving the whole of school practice. If you take one point at a time, there seems to be a tendency to get less of an impact in the long run.

Learning and support are enhanced through the process. Principals and school leadership teams need active process support in order to successively achieve the objectives of the school. This competence is lacking in most of our schools today.

The latter statement made by a representative of one of the municipality sanctions MSU’s expressions, in their official documents about the need for support when working with school improvement issues in the municipalities.

Financial support
The financial support offered to the municipalities was both direct and indirect. Direct financial support was given to the municipalities through subsidies. Indirect resources refer to process support through the participation of the Agency’s dialogue team and the additional resources mentioned above. Here, we focus on the subsidies (direct support), as in the grants the municipalities applied for. In most cases, the municipalities received less money than they applied for.

The municipalities had to plan the project within a short period of time, without information about the rules concerning how much money they should expect. Some
comments from representatives of the municipalities were as follows: “this project has been enormously time-consuming, at the same time as decisions have arrived late”; “it was a heavy program within a short time limit”. Other factors mentioned are related to the amount of money and the rules for allocation (below is a comment from one municipality):

Here comes a demand that we have to do this and that and at first we reacted very negatively, but then you realise you are just as good as anyone else and see the opportunity to get money.

To summarise, the financial support aimed at implementing projects for school development can be described as a tool for enabling and facilitating, while also being time-consuming for the municipalities. It can also be described as an instrument for the state to push, change and restrict actions. Some actions were approved by the Agency for support and others not.

**Communication**

The concept of dialogue concerns communication and exchange between people. From the Agency’s point of view, communication between people forms part of the plan. To join the project, municipalities had to appoint a group of people who were to be engaged in conversations with the Agency’s dialogue team. The conversations took the form of meetings – generally held every other month, totalling about 6 to 8 meetings in each of the 32 municipalities, held at the municipalities’ offices. The meetings dealt with questions regarding how to work in each municipality and which of the ‘ongoing projects’ in the municipalities that could be incorporated in the dialogues. Being incorporated also meant that the municipalities got financial support from the Agency.

We find it relevant to discuss the meetings in the context of face-to-face meetings, as with many of the statements made in the declarations from MSU about the dialogue deal with the personal contacts and the opportunities connected with them. In the reports from the municipalities, these personal contacts are described as making different kinds of things possible: “a personal contact facilitates co-operation”; “a lively relationship moves the process forward”; “shared understanding can emerge through a dialogue”. Face-to-face meetings stand out as an instrument for promoting common understanding between the Agency and the municipalities, as well as transferring knowledge from municipalities to the Agency and from the Agency to the municipalities. The dialogue is described as a facilitator for these things, as well as for school improvement. As described by one interviewee from a municipality: “things happen in human meetings, nothing on paper.”

**Discussion**

**A Disciplinary Practice and Identity Production**

To continue the discussion on communication, we would like to use the concept of identity construction as something produced in interaction, in meetings and between persons involved in dialogue. As mentioned above, this study focuses on governing not only as an instrument of the government but also as a way to shape the ideas, aspirations and needs of an individual or a group. We concentrate on governing as a disciplinary practice (Foucault, 1991), and direct our interest on how different identities are produced in the texts analysed. We will present some of the Agency’s, as well as the municipalities’, statements about themselves, each other and the process they are involved in. Identity is looked upon as something ex-
pressed in talk and text, something that is part of the routines of everyday life, in everyday interaction (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Nordzell 2007).

On a general level, we have seen how school improvement is presented as something in need of support: through an instrumental process with rational actors, where the MSU team members are described by the municipalities as informants; subscribers; advisors; experts on school improvement; experts on planning; implementers of methods; the representatives of the government and those in authority; partners in discussion; sources of inspiration; subscribers of agreements, and creators of legitimacy.

This is not all that much a novelty. In, for example, an evaluation of a former public school inspection (completed in 1991), three roles were stressed: the initiator, the controller and the advisor (Thelin, 1994). Even though today’s list seems rather more comprehensive, there are similarities to be found. If we consider descriptions made by the representatives of the municipalities about the MSU representatives – “the others” – as also producing identities of those making the statements – the municipalities – we can see the municipalities’ position as those in need of information; financial support; advice and expertise of various kinds, and as implementers.

The municipalities require someone who governs, someone to talk to, to make agreements with, and a party that legitimates the municipalities’ work on school development. This position has also been expressed more directly in interviews with municipalities:

We need people with an overview and people who are able to help the municipalities with development work.

The dialogue is described as a good method for MSU to “reach the municipalities effectively”:

The municipalities require support and professional competence in order to be able to work on school improvement – and that is what MSU can give.

The municipalities are identified as in need of help. The agency’s identification can be described as a donor and the municipalities identify themselves as receivers. Although it has not been described as simply as that, the process has been described as two-sided. The dialogue process makes it possible for the Agency to get information about processes and needs in the municipalities. This has been described as positive for the Agency, and also as a possible advantage for the municipalities.

The dialogue has been described as necessary in many ways when it comes to initiating school improvement projects and also as a means of handling the interaction between a national agency for school improvement and autonomous municipalities on a personal basis. People meet, talk, interact, give and receive support, exchange information and a great deal more. In statements about the dialogue process, we can highlight terms like ‘openness’, ‘respect’, ‘mutuality’ and ‘sincerity’; in other words, terms with positive signatures in human meetings. The overall statement about the dialogue process is phrased in terms of a constructive attitude (in terms of statements from the municipalities): the dialogue has worked “very well”; “extraordinarily well”; with “smooth cooperation”, and as “a sensible and wise method for successful improvement”. However, a few statements reveal a rather more negative attitude: the dialogue has been “both good and bad” and “fairly good”.

The municipalities require support and professional competence in order to be able to work on school improvement – and that is what MSU can give.
The Dialogue: A complex policy instrument with disciplinary techniques

As mentioned in the introduction, since the beginning of the 1990s and the restructuring of the school system, there have been a number of changes in the administration. Monitoring, inspection, evaluation and school improvement have been divided and then amalgamated again, although with a different emphasis. During the last few years, an increase in monitoring and inspection has been identified (Rönnberg, 2012a), and it has been argued that this affects the whole system, leading to an audit society and a control regime (Power, 2000; Forsberg & Wallin, 2006; cf. Ekholm & Lindvall, 2008).

The dialogue, used throughout a short period in Swedish school history, is a comprehensive policy instrument, one not easily characterised and not primarily categorised as inspection. Its core, as expressed in the concept of dialogue, can be defined as an instrument that concentrates on agreement, negotiation and networking. However, the dialogue also contains techniques related to power and money. The agreement is a legally binding document and participation conferring the right to receive financial support. In other words, legal and economic instruments are also present. Another sign of complexity is that the dialogue can be seen as an instrument for both detecting and affecting problems (cf. Hood, 1983). In the process, the municipalities can detect expectations and conditions for both the dialogue and the project; furthermore, it is also possible to glean information about local needs and terms. Since the same is true for the Agency, in some respects the dialogue can be characterised as a bi-directional (reciprocal) instrument.

The dialogue cannot be understood in any simple way when it comes to the degree of coercion involved. Although, formally, participation is voluntary, we have seen how being identified as having problems/ being offered financial support makes it almost impossible to refuse participation. Likewise, once having decided to participate, several activities and responsibilities are mandatory. The formally-binding instrument is the agreement between the Agency and the municipality, although other documents also function as coercive instruments, for example the action plan, including situation analyses, actions prioritised, a budget and a time schedule. Of importance here are also the requirements for follow-ups and evaluation. From this perspective, it is evident that there is a mandatory structure embedded in the documents and the attached activities (cf. Granath, 2008).

Complex patterns of interaction can be seen in the analysed data between the three identified techniques (the dialogue process, the financial resources and the communication). Within each of them, more specified techniques could be found, which, in turn, are interrelated. The process is structured around three phases and a number of activities. Within the dialogue, actors disseminate information and knowledge; identify problems; make inventories; propose, negotiate and choose strategies and activities; apply for money; enter into agreements; distribute money and opportunities, and evaluate actions and their effects.

Conclusion

Using the symbolic terms the stick, the carrot and the sermon as policy instruments (Vedung, 2004), we can conclude that the dialogue includes all three of these. We would, however, like to add a fourth instrument, which we call “absolution through confession”. The etymology of the words indicates both sacramental and secular confessions. In general, however, to confess is “to disclose”, “to own up or admit” to something and the content is characterised as “the knowledge
of which is considered by others humiliating or prejudicial to the person confessing; a making known or acknowledging of one's fault, wrong, crime, weakness, etc." (Oxford English Dictionary, 2008). It is therefore an act of making public and visible some kind of shortcoming on the part of the confessor and assuming responsibility for it. Part of the activities in the dialogue process can be described in those terms. Initially, the municipality has to admit a problem – a deficiency defined and identified by the Agency. The problem and its solutions have to be owned and spelled out. Finally, the municipality has to report on, and make visible, through evaluations, the effects of actions taken, disclosing any remaining shortcomings. Through confession, including transparency, it becomes possible to qualify for temporary absolution.

In this way, some expressions made by representatives from the municipalities about the need for support and the lack of competence in municipalities can be understood as including an act of confession. To be identified as having problems, being in need of support and getting support requires acknowledgment and avowal.

Rhetorically, the dialogue can be summarised as a transformational tool and a way to support the idea of organisational change. As we mentioned earlier, the concepts we use structure what we perceive, how we get around in work and how we relate to other people, so our conceptual system plays a central role in defining our everyday realities (Börjesson, 2003; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Dialogue can be described as a metaphor that directs our way of understanding the world leaning towards concepts of interrelationship, mutuality and common understanding. One way to understand the use of dialogue by an agency with the ambition to intervene in the municipalities’ work for school development is that there is a need to maintain a balance between the will to intervene and the municipalities’ autonomy in school questions. Dialogue can be understood as a response to a need for a pedagogical tool in governing. Today’s democracy demands certain new technologies to produce mutual understanding between political ambitions and the will of the governed (Börjesson, Palmblad & Wahl, 2005).

The dialogue can be seen as support and empowerment for the municipalities in their work on school improvement, as well as an instrument for the state to acquire knowledge about the municipalities’ work concerning school issues. It can also be described as a practice governing or shaping behaviour according to a particular set of norms and ideas.

One tool described as important in the dialogue is the face-to-face meeting. Respect and legitimacy have been mentioned in this connection. In research on dialogue, there is a considerable interest focusing on how dialogue should be carried out in order to be a good communicative instrument, along with several combined definitions that have been created by researchers. Some examples are genuine dialogue (Isaacs, 2001), intergroup dialogue (Dessel & Rogge 2008), deliberative dialogue (McCoy & Scully, 2002), deliberation dialogue (Walton, 2010), with diverse definitions and with diverse methods and argumentation techniques as the basis for these definitions.

In our study, we did not access the dialogues ‘in action’. Based on the material we analysed, statements about the dialogue might, however, be perceived as a soft policy instrument (cf. Lawn, 2006; Lindgren, Hult, Segerholm & Rönnberg, 2012). The relational aspect has been placed at the forefront, and the Agency’s presence in the municipalities has not been described as a top-down phenomenon. Rather, it has been related to, according to our understanding, a way for
the municipalities to learn how to govern themselves. Soft governance is an approach to policy change in which the government relies more on knowledge and information and less on hierarchy and rules.

Through the dialogue, ideas about both school development and specific school issues are marketed and exchanged. Accordingly, a pedagogical process is created in which the identities and practices of local actors are formed (cf. Grek, 2010). In sum, the dialogue stands out as a complex policy instrument. It makes use of a number of techniques, interacting in various ways, shaping activities, practices and actors, developing knowledge of and thoughts on school improvement, diversity and identities.

The dialogue can be a more effective method for governing local organisations like municipalities, especially when combined with hard powers such as formal accountability and various kinds of measurements (Brandsen, Boogers & Tops, 2006; cf. Lawn, 2006). As Nye (2004) puts it, soft power co-opts people through knowledge transfer rather than coercing them. Of necessity, this is a more common method in transnational activities within the European Union and the OECD (cf. Grek, Lawn, Lindgard, Ozga, Rinne, Segerholm & Simola, 2009). However, the dialogue used by the Swedish school agency is an interesting national example enabling professional autonomy and governing to co-exist.

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Notes

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