

Beginning Literacy eight years on: Seeking harmony between a literacy programme and the change programme

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Abstract

Beginning Literacy as a model for literacy education in the first two years of primary schools has been an option for Icelandic schools for eight years now. The BL model is twofold: First of all it entails an approach to literacy teaching and learning and secondly it involves a professional development programme for teachers and schools to implement the teaching and learning approach. This paper is mainly intended to be a critical investigation of the structure and effectiveness of the BL professional development programme. This will be built, firstly, on a comparison with the current school improvement and professional development literature and, secondly, on preliminary findings from interviews with teachers, development leaders and external consultants taken in case studies of six BL schools. The paper starts with a brief account of the Icelandic educational context and of BL as an approach to literacy education, followed by a short summary of the BL study. From there we will present our critical analysis of the BL professional development programme.

Keywords: Beginning Literacy, literacy education, professional development, school improvement, educational change, professional learning communities.

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Introduction

In most countries of the world there is an emphasis on literacy. It is described as a fundamental skill and a key outcome of education; a key to human empowerment and political, cultural, social and economic development, and as a prerequisite for academic success and informed and active participation in society (UNESCO, 2003). Definitions of literacy have also moved from a narrow perspective on reading and fluency to a broader view of reading, writing and social communication for personal fulfilment and practical purposes alike (Eurydice, 2011; OECD, 2002). Iceland is no exception and a new National curriculum for pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary schools published in 2011 states literacy in its widest sense as one of six fundamental pillars of education that are intended to inform all education (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools: General section / 2011). The other five fundamental pillars are: sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. Some of those (e.g. democracy, equality and creativity) have at least an indirect connection with literacy. The curriculum is outcome-based and the outcomes of education are built around knowledge, skills and competences as core concepts, and several key competences – derived from the six fundamental pillars – are described. These are similar for both compulsory and upper secondary schools and relate to:

- Expression and communication of thoughts, feelings, opinions and knowledge, orally, in writing or otherwise
- Creative thinking, reasoning and ability to draw conclusions
- Working independently and in cooperation with others
- Responsible, creative and critical handling of knowledge and information
- Responsibility for own education and evaluation of own performance

As is evident from the above there is emphasis on literacy education and Iceland's new National curriculum guide is the first to attempt to introduce literacy as a fundamental pillar of education and a key competence across the three levels of the school system. On the other hand, there is no implementation strategy present and there seems to be little agreement about literacy education in the country, and clear criteria to define literacy competence do not exist.

Beginning Literacy

Beginning Literacy (hereafter BL) was developed by Rósa Eggertsdóttir, a specialist at the Centre for School Development (CSD) at the University of Akureyri (UNAK) early in the first decade of this century. It was piloted as an experimental programme in a few primary schools in the school years 2004–2005 and 2005–2006, but from the autumn of 2006 it was offered to schools generally through a two year contract with the CSD. Since then the approach has steadily gained momentum and currently 68 primary schools –

about 42% of all Icelandic primary schools have adopted BL, and either completed the two-year period of implementation or are on the first year of it.

BL is an approach to literacy education which is built on an interactive model (Lipson & Wixson, 1991; Rumelhart, 1985) and in line with that model it assumes that neither the bottom-up model with its emphasis on phonics nor the top-down model of whole language are by themselves sufficient to explain the reading process and inform literacy teaching (Eggertsdóttir, 2009). Literacy teaching needs to address both decoding skills and top-down processes.

Reading is an interaction between the written language and the understanding of meaning (Just & Carpenter, 1985). For the reader to improve his understanding of the written language, he needs to activate his former knowledge or schema. He takes in new information and applies them to existing knowledge, and he might need to modify his former schema or create a new schema because the old one is no longer sufficient (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). BL also draws on theories of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1991) where the readers actively engage with the text and make meaning of it based on their experience and background knowledge.

Furthermore, BL draws on definitions of inclusive education and classroom communities and assumes that every child should learn within his or her class community by means of scaffolding and other means of adapting learning to the needs of children.

BL is implemented in schools through a two-year contract between each school and the Centre for School Development (CSD) at UNAK. Professional development is therefore an essential element in BL and cannot be separated from the BL model. The implementation of BL draws on definitions of professional development as an ongoing process of intentional activities that aim to develop teachers' skills, knowledge, expertise and teaching practice (Guskey, 2000, 2014; Joyce & Showers, 2002). Guskey (2000) further emphasises that such a process needs to be systemic in the sense that it "considers change over an expanded period of time and takes into account all levels of the organization," (p. 20) and is guided by a clear vision and planned goals that inform the selection of materials and procedures and establish the criteria for formal evaluation. The evaluation needs to take into account the impact on students' learning, which is the core criteria for the effectiveness of any professional development programme, organisational support, and the outcomes of teachers' learning and their level of use (Hall & Hord, 2011). The implementation plan further draws on a scheme developed by Eggertsdóttir (1999) in an action research project with 19 teachers in five compulsory schools to implement the storyline method.

	Teachers	Leaders
Consultants and leaders in BL	Year one: in/or out of school (cluster of schools) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Two days course before school starts in August - Five workshops over the school year (4 hours) - Eight classroom observations, with follow up meetings Year two: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One day course before school starts in August - Five workshops (4 hours) - Six classroom observation, with follow-up meetings 	Year one <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Two-day course in June - Five whole-day courses over the school year - Attend all programs BL teachers go to - Eight classroom observations and reflection follow-up meetings - Eight phone or skype meetings with a CSD consultant from UNAK Year two <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One-day course in August - Four whole-day courses over the school year - Attend all programs BL teachers go to
	Teachers both years – in school support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular year group meetings - Regular key stage meetings - Access to Moodle (teaching plans, talkboard, ...). - Materials on literacy - Practical handbook - DVD “Glimpses of good practice” - BL newsletter - Classroom visits, - Visits between schools 	Leaders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Get all material teachers get and materials used in workshops - Get material about leadership, - Run most workshops for teachers, supported by CSD consultants
CSD Consultants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Always conduct in-service days in June and August - Visit each school twice a year, visit classrooms, meet with teachers, leaders and headteacher. - Stay regularly in contact with leaders in each school <p>Occasionally a leader may be employed elsewhere (LEA or next school). Those schools appoint a contact person who organizes BL related events.</p>		
Head teachers <p>No planned involvement so far. They organise the initial introduction to staff, which usually takes place at the end of the school year prior to the first year of implementation. They oversee the formal agreement with SDC at UNAK, meet with the CDS when they visit the schools and are expected to support the implementation process and BL teachers involved, and meet regularly with the the school’s development leader.</p>		

Figure 1. The structure of the BL professional development programme

As mentioned earlier, this paper is intended to be a critical investigation of the structure and effectiveness of the BL professional development programme described in figure 1. To this end we will analyse the programme in light of some of the current literature on school improvement and professional development and report some preliminary findings from six case studies in participating schools about its effectiveness.

In line with the above aim the following questions are addressed:

1. Where does the BL professional development programme stand against the current school improvement and professional development literature?
2. How well has it served its purpose to change the skills and behaviour of teachers?

A study of Beginning Literacyⁱ

In 2011 a team of researchers and masters students affiliated to the University of Akureyri School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the University of Iceland School of Education launched a study on literacy education under the banner of BL. The main aim of the study was to investigate BL as an approach to literacy education and literacy education taking place in BL schools in light of international research knowledge, and shed light on how new approaches, such as BL, might be introduced, implemented and sustained. Furthermore, the aim was to analyse Icelandic literacy policy, build capacity for literacy research, contribute to knowledge on literacy education and advance its development in Icelandic primary schools.

The design of the study is based on case studies and an on-line questionnaire survey. The case studies have been conducted in eight schools (thereof two pilot schools). They address the two main strands of BL, i.e. teaching and learning and professional development. The teaching aspect includes teaching plans, teaching organisation and teacher behaviour as the basis for pupils' learning experiences and outcomes in the key areas of literacy. The research methods for this strand are focused classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with the observed teacher(s), selected pupils and parents.

The professional development strand addresses the professional development of participating teachers, leadership and collaboration, and the building of learning culture and support within the BL schools; the knowledge and understanding of the development project, conceptions of its value for the school, the school's support and resources allocated to the BL-programme and plans and actions to sustain positive outcomes. The research methods for this strand comprise a semi-structured focus-group interview with BL teachers about their professional development, and individual interviews with development leaders, head-teachers and the CSD consultants.

The on-line questionnaire survey was sent to class-teachers in years 1–4 and development leaders (N=571), and to head-teachers in all BL schools (N=68). For comparison the questionnaire was also sent to teachers in the same years (N=345) and head-teachers (N=53) in schools that have not taken on BL. All in all the survey was sent to 75% of Icelandic primary schools.

Professional development in Beginning Literacy: Theory and practice

In the following section we attempt to answer the two questions raised in this paper about the professional development aspect of BL:

1. Where does the BL professional development programme stand against the current school improvement and professional development literature?
2. How well has it served its purpose to change the skills and behaviour of teachers?

We do not address the questions separately, one after the other, but simultaneously as the analysis unfolds. The analysis is organised around the following main themes:

1. Change as transformation of culture
2. The process of change and professional development
3. Communities of professional learning and knowledge creation
4. Criteria for success and evaluation of outcomes

Beginning Literacy as transformation of culture

To analyse the kind of change BL constitutes, we draw on David Hargreaves' (2003) notion of real change in teachers' practice and student learning as knowledge creation, knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing. As most writers, Hargreaves places the process of teaching and learning at the heart of education and educational change and regards it as central within four related concepts: intellectual capital, social capital, organizational capital and leverage. Hargreaves distinguishes between improvement as incremental innovation as opposed to radical innovation that leads to the transformation of culture and practice. What educators too often regard as improvement, Hargreaves argues, rests on incremental innovation where educators swim with the tide and tinker with existing structures and practice without profound cultural changes. Transformation, on the other hand, Hargreaves sees as radical innovation where participants swim against the tide and challenge existing practices in order to bring about profound cultural changes.

Michael Fullan (2007) makes a similar distinction between change as modification of structure and arrangements on the one hand and sustained changes in culture and practices on the other. Fullan argues that creating enduring cultural changes in schools requires simultaneous changes in curriculum and learning materials, teaching practices and the assumptions and values on which teachers build their practice.

One way to evaluate BL against Hargreaves' and Fullan's criteria cited above is to compare it to what is known about existing practice of literacy education. Unfortunately, such research is sparse in Iceland but the little there is indicates that the implementation of BL goes against conventional conceptions of literacy education, teaching arrangements and pupils' learning. A study by the University of Iceland Social Science Research

Institute, conducted for the Ministry of Education and Culture (Leiknisdóttir, Guðmundsdóttir, Björnsdóttir, Jónsdóttir, & Jónsson, 2009), indicates – despite unclear and somewhat confusing definitions of literacy terms and teaching methods – that formal teaching of literacy is confined to the first four years of the primary school and is virtually non-existent from there on. In his study of the teaching of Icelandic in years 5–7 of the primary school Sigþórsson (2011) came to similar conclusions. The results of Leiknisdóttir et al. (2009) also concluded that literacy education in years 1–4 was highly traditional and mainly confined to teaching reading by means of phonics, but to a small extent aimed at literacy as it is defined by BL.

Óskarsdóttir (2012) got similar results when she investigated teaching and learning in six pre-primary and seven primary schools in Reykjavík in 2007 and 2008, by classroom observations and interviews with teachers and children. Although no formal teaching of reading took place in the pre-primary schools, children were taught the names of the letters in the alphabet and tested on their recognition of the names of both lower-case and capital letters. This seemed to be taken for granted as a preparation for the teaching of reading that started in the first year of the primary school. There the letters were introduced by the teacher one by one, starting from the beginning of the alphabet. A new letter was introduced every week, usually on a Monday and practiced throughout the week.

Another source of evidence about this is the experience of the founder of BL, derived from her work with schools as a consultant, and the experience of the current CSD consultants from working with some 68 BL schools over the last eight years. In light of that evidence we suggest that BL as an approach to literacy education is a radical change that swims against the tide of mainstream practice of literacy education in Icelandic schools and therefore needs to be regarded as transformation of culture and practice that requires considerable knowledge creation in the participating schools. This has gradually become clearer as findings from the BL research have unfolded. Furthermore it can be argued that in the beginning the BL professional development programme has underestimated this, or to put this the other way around, overestimated the existing conditions for implementation and sustenance, both pedagogical and structural, in the participating schools.

The process of change and professional development

The abundance of literature on the process of educational change and professional development shares a number of features. In order to capture this in the following section we draw on Hall and Hord's (2011) synthesis of the principles of change to form a framework for our analysis.

School improvement and student learning

Most researchers emphasise that school improvement is an organised learning process within a school (Hall & Hord, 2011; Louis, Wahlstrom, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010) where the aim is to create knowledge and transform culture (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves, 2003). Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1994) aptly capture the essence of this in their definition of school improvement as a planned and sustained effort to change the internal conditions of a school in order to create lasting conditions that support successful learning and strengthen the schools' capacity to manage and sustain change. Most writers who discuss educational improvement reiterate that the primary purpose of school improvement is to enhance the quality and outcomes of pupils' learning and that this should therefore be regarded as the main criterion for the success of school improvement efforts. The role of school improvement to reinforce the organisational infrastructure of school – important as it is – should therefore be regarded as a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

There is no doubt that the main intention of BL is to enhance children's literacy education (Eggertsdóttir, 2009) and that the professional development programme is regarded as a means to that end. Unfortunately, however, as we will point out in a later section of this paper, there is still little hard evidence about the impact of BL on pupils' proficiency in reading or other literacy related competences. We know from interviews with teachers, development leaders and consultants that those who are able to compare BL with their former way of teaching almost unanimously maintain that BL has created more flexibility and variety in teaching methods, materials and pupils' work. They also maintain that pupils are generally more motivated and positive towards their learning. It is also evident from the BL model (Eggertsdóttir, 2009) that it is not entirely preoccupied with teaching, but addresses literacy education from a child-centred perspective of inclusive education, children's right to have a choice in their learning, and learning competences such as metacognition, collaboration and creative thinking.

The interrelationship between change and professional learning

The interrelationship between educational change and professional learning is widely accepted among researchers and writers of school improvement. On the other hand, learning to implement change is not a linear or a one-way process where people learn first and then change, but a reciprocal process where learning constantly takes place as the change process unfolds (Reeves, 2009). In that sense Hargreaves' (2003) notion of change as knowledge creation and sharing is appropriate. Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1994) apply the same notion by saying that there is no school improvement without professional development and no professional development without school improvement, and in the same vein Guskey (2000) maintains that professional development is an "ongoing, job embedded process [where] every day presents a variety of learning opportunities" (p. 19).

Hall and Hord (2011 pp. 147–154) identify a number of necessary interventions to support professional learning and successful change. These are: 1) Creating and communicating a shared vision of the change, 2) planning and providing resources, 3) investing in professional learning, 4) monitoring progress, 5) coupling of continuous assessment of needs and assistance to meet those needs, and 6) creating internal conditions supportive of change.

The organisation of professional development within BL is in most ways consistent with the above notions of the integration of professional learning into the change process and interventions to facilitate the change process (figure 1). The learning process for both teachers and development leaders starts already at the initiation stage of the change (cf. Fullan, 2007) and continues for teachers throughout the two years of implementation in the form of courses, workshops and classroom observations with follow-up meetings with development leaders for reflection. The education of development leaders follows a similar schedule where they attend whole-day courses spread over the time of implementation, participate in all teacher activities, conduct classroom observations with follow-up meetings for reflection, and have regular phone or Skype meetings with the CSD consultants. In this learning process the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of BL are communicated along with the practicalities of applying the method in order to build a shared vision and understanding of this among teachers, development leaders and head-teachers. There is also extensive work with head-teachers and development leaders on planning and providing resources and creating internal conditions.

Our data indicate two critical points in the learning process and interventions described above. Firstly there is no intentional, planned learning (cf. Guskey, 2000) directed at head-teachers and they do not necessarily take an active part in the leadership development inherent in the BL. The second critical point to raise here is indications of rather weak monitoring of progress and recording of relevant data as the BL implementation unfolds.

Change takes time

It goes almost without saying that accepting the above assumptions of learning and change means that change takes time. This is often vastly underestimated and theorists such as Hall and Hord (2011) and Fullan (2007) assume that it takes at least three to five years to implement change to the point where it can be regarded as transformation in Hargreaves' terms. These authors also argue that this underestimation leads to an overload of change initiatives resulting, among other negative consequences, in teacher resistance and even burnout, and they claim that it is among the most prominent reasons for the failure of many change efforts (see also Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

There are somewhat mixed results about whether the two-year implementation period of BL is sufficient or not. Some teachers have asserted in interviews that they have mastered the BL methods in this time, even though they have described a demanding

and stressful period at the first stages of implementation. In some schools, at least, both development leaders and consultants have raised doubts about the depth of implementation and some teachers' level of use (see Hall & Hord, 2011). In one school the development leader doubted that all the teachers made sufficient use of all the variety of methods that BL embraces, and feared that they "got stuck" in becoming good at one or a few methods. This leader doubted whether the two years of implementation were enough and suggested that the relationship with the CSD consultants was cut short too suddenly. The CSD consultants have raised similar doubts and questioned whether the two-year time span is long enough to acquire proficiency in all the BL methods and build the necessary infrastructure to sustain prolonged use of the BL methods. At least one of them has raised concerns about teachers "leaking out" of the programme when they no longer enjoy the support of workshops, observations and reflective meetings with leaders. The CSD consultants have raised the possibility that the implementation period should be prolonged to three years instead of two. Recently, they have also offered schools three options for extended support when they finish the two-year implementation: 1) to assist them with making a plan for the future development of BL; 2) to educate a second development leader to team up with the original one and 3) to pay the schools some supportive visits to consult them on the continuation of BL. This has been rather well received in the schools.

Tri-Level responsibility

It is widely accepted in the literature that while the change process has to take place within the school, neither school nor teachers are islands, but parts of a national and local education system (Ahearn, 2000; Creemers, 1996; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011; Hopkins, et al., 1994). Creemers (1996) for instance makes this point in his model of school effectiveness where the outcomes of each and every student are seen as a result of an interplay between various layers of the education system from the national system through local authorities, individual schools and classrooms. Fullan (2010) has termed this as a tri-level system of mutual responsibility of national and local educational authorities and individual schools. Similarly, Ahearn (2000) has described a model of professional accountability to ensure that all children benefit from their educational experience by an integration of system standards, inputs and processes by local authorities and student learning outcomes at the school level. Hall & Hord (2011) also emphasise the importance of external change facilitators. It follows from the emphasis on tri-level responsibility that authorities – be they national or local – are not only to be seen as providers of "educational service" but also as change agents. It has long been recognised, however, that policy or mandates do not by themselves change practice, but when mandates are accompanied "by continuing communication, ongoing learning, on-site coaching, and time for implementation, it can work" (Hall & Hord, 2011 p. 15).

Unfortunately accountability for system standards is largely absent in the Icelandic education system, apart from the National Curriculum guidelines mentioned earlier.

Strangely enough, the prioritising of literacy in the National Curriculum has not been followed by an implementation policy and there is little consensus on how to go about literacy education at any stage of the compulsory school. The implementation of Beginning Literacy is therefore built on a tri-level partnership between university, local educational authorities and schools. In most cases the funding for the implementation comes from the local authorities, but individual schools are responsible for other resources, such as allocating time for teachers to attend workshops and providing teachers to stand in while colleagues are away for workshops or courses. The CSD provides all material and the expertise of the consultants. There is a unanimous agreement in the interviews that this has worked well and the collaboration with the CSD consultants is highly regarded.

Individual and organisational development

While it is a common notion that that “the school is the primary unit for change” (Hall & Hord, 2011 p. 9) the importance of individual teachers must not be overlooked. Guskey (2000), Hall & Hord (2011), and Sparks & Hirsh (1997) make the case for professional development as a systemic approach that addresses both organisational and individual development. They maintain that if the professional learning of individuals is not encouraged and supported at the organizational level, change efforts will fall flat, be they internally or externally initiated. The importance of teachers and classroom practice is further emphasised in the findings of a large-scale research project in Queensland in Australia. The main finding of that study is aptly captured in the book title: *Teachers and schooling making a difference* (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006) and the authors assert that teachers are the main agents of shaping what they term as “productive pedagogies, productive assessment and productive performance” (pp. 22–23). The importance of job-embedded professional learning is further underscored by Kyriakides, Creemers & Antoniou (2008) in their study of 52 Cypriot primary school teachers. In their findings, Kyriakides and his colleagues identified a hierarchy of five types of teacher behaviours where teachers move from relatively simple methods of direct teaching to more complex teaching approaches and increased ability to differentiate their teaching. An important aspect of their findings – although they strike a cautionary note about its generalisation – was that the advancement of these teachers’ proficiency was largely dependent on job-embedded professional development that took place in their schools.

Hall and Hord (2011) add an important perspective to the importance of individual learning and consequent behaviour when they describe profiles for eight “levels of use” to classify how people act on and apply innovations. Their levels of use range from *Non-use* at level 0 through level II to *Renewal* at level VI (Level IV is divided into A and B). At the non-use level people are learning and preparing for the use of the innovations. Use begins at level III as “mechanical ... short-term, day-to-day use” (p. 94). At this stage, the user has little time for reflection but is “primarily engaged in a stepwise attempt to master the tasks required to use the innovation, often resulting in disjointed and

superficial use” (p. 94). To reach level VI the user has to go through the levels of *routine application* and *refinement* (levels IVA and IVB) and level V, where he integrates his own efforts with the innovation, often in collaboration with his colleagues to “achieve a collective impact on clients” (p. 94). Level VI is characterised by *renewal* where the user re-evaluates and modifies his use of the innovation, explores new developments and sets his own goals to increase the impact on clients. Hall and Hord (2011) also emphasise the importance of assessing teachers’ levels of use and describe various methods to do so.

We have already described how BL addresses, in various ways, the professional learning needs of teachers at the individual level (figure 1). Nevertheless it is reasonable to reiterate doubts raised in an earlier section of this paper about whether the professional development manages to build a robust enough infrastructure at the organisational level to sustain the change after the end of the two-year implementation period. A point to consider here is the fact that BL only addresses the first two years of the primary schools and therefore only impacts on a relatively small number of teachers of each school. What happens after that is unclear. Our interviews indicate that in many cases teachers follow their classes for three or even four years and BL teachers bring with them at least some of the BL methods up to years three and four. This, however, differs from one school to the other. In one school, the development leader indicated that already in year three in her school organisation and the timetable was not flexible enough to allow for full use of BL, but in a second school the development leader described a completely different picture where the BL model had been successfully adapted to years three and four without any organisational obstacles.

Unfortunately, the BL schools do not seem to apply any systematic assessment of their BL teachers’ level of use so caution is needed in conclusions drawn from that. Two findings from other parts of the BL study might shed some light on this. The first one comes from an analysis of six screening tests applied in years one and two in all BL schools in order to detect gender and school differences in results (Ólafsson, Haraldsdóttir, & Sigþórsson, 2014). This analysis indicates that there is little within-school consistency in pupils’ performance between years, resulting in little or no correlation between the average performances of the same year cohort in a given school between years. On the other hand the average performance of year two was generally highly correlated with the groups’ performance in the year before. Given the fact that all the teachers have taken part in the same professional development programme, this finding raises questions about the consistency of their level of use.

The second finding comes from one of our masters students, who is the development leader in one of the BL schools (Björnsdóttir, 2013). She did an action research where she worked with nine of her colleagues who taught in years 2 and 3 to develop their use of writing frames (Lewis & Wray, 1996) to promote pupils’ writing skills. Her pre-assessment of the participants’ practice revealed limited purposeful teaching of writing and reflected to a small extent the emphasis on writing in BL. She also found that during the research

period the teachers made good progress but needed considerably more support than she had anticipated in using some important methods of BL, such as modelling, scaffolding and organising heterogeneous learning groups. Björnsdóttir's findings inevitably raise questions about the level of use, at least as regards writing and the pedagogical skills mentioned above, of the participants in her research.

Leadership

The literature on professional learning and school improvement is almost unanimous about the importance of leadership (Gronn, 2002; Hall & Hord, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Harris, 2005; Louis, et al., 2010; Muijs & Harris, 2003). For example, one of the main findings of Louis et al. (2010), after an extensive study of school leadership, was that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning" (p. 9). Louis et al. further concluded that improving student achievement is virtually impossible without talented leadership. Their explanation is that the impact on pupils' learning is dependent on a number of school variables, each of which has only a limited impact by itself. Therefore, synergy across relevant variables is needed to obtain large effects, and among all the actors of school improvement school leaders are in a key position to forge such a synergy.

Leadership, however, is by no means a single person activity and the importance of distributed and collective leadership is a recurrent theme in the leadership literature. Louis et al. (2010) conceptualise such leadership as a "network of influence and control" (p. 20) that informs decisions of members and stakeholders. Their perspective focuses on the combined effects of leadership and contributions of different groups of the school community, such as administrators, teachers, students and parents, and they conclude that impact on classroom conditions and student learning is not least realised through leaders' influence on teachers' work conditions and motivation.

In a similar vein Bennett, Wise, Woods & Harvey (2003) describe distributed leadership as a result of collective behaviour within an organisation aiming to create the opportunity to move from hierarchal leadership, where one leader holds the leadership of an organization, to collective models where expert knowledge is spread among people and groups (see also Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Spillane, 2006).

The leadership of teachers is a key aspect of leadership as a collective endeavour of the school community. Lambert (2003) defines such leadership as purposeful and collective learning that needs to address various groups of the school community, such as teachers, pupils, and parents, and aim for skilful involvement of these groups based on their understanding and proficiency. Harris (2003), in her summary of teacher leadership, suggests four dimensions of teacher leadership that are helpful for this analysis. The first one relates to how the principles of school improvement are brought to bear in individual classrooms; the second focuses on the responsible participation of teachers in improvement efforts and their sense of ownership; the third dimension is the mediation

role of teacher leaders where they see themselves as sources and mediators of information and expertise, but are at the same time ready to draw upon additional resources and seek external assistance; the fourth, and in Harris's view probably the most important one, is "forging close relationships with individual teachers through which mutual learning takes place" (p. 316). Harris also underscores that leadership roles do not draw teachers out of their classroom and she sees teacher leadership as primarily concerned with empowerment and agency of expert teachers who are first and foremost classroom teachers that are able and willing to take on different leadership roles at different times.

Leadership development is a prominent element of the BL professional development programme. As we have described earlier in this paper a development leader is appointed in each school. They may be class-teachers, special education teachers or heads of department who take on the additional roles of leaders. There are also examples of LEA advisers acting as development leaders, in some cases for more than one school. The leaders go through a professional development programme that addresses their leadership roles and they get extensive support from the CSD consultants during the two years of implementation. The development leaders' function is furthermore supposed to extend beyond the implementation period to play a central role in the induction of new teachers to the BL model and lead the sustenance of the BL model. Our data indicates that development leaders generally function well during the BL implementation period and that their leadership is highly regarded among teachers. Development leaders are also unanimous in their praise of the learning programme they are offered. The data, however, raises several questions, that are not fully answered yet, about the effect that development leaders' other functions in the school may have on how they conceive of their roles as a BL leaders and earn the approval of their colleagues. There are interview data to suggest that a leader who is a class teacher may be more hesitant in asserting his leadership and have a more difficult time earning the approval of his colleagues than a head of department or a special education teacher, not least when it comes to conflicts or turbulence that is inherent in change processes (van Veen & Slegers, 2006). On the other hand, a leader who is a class-teacher is likely to have a deeper insight into the realities of classroom teaching and be better equipped for his supporting role than anyone else.

Our data indicates that the function of the development leaders is more varied from school to school after the implementation period, when they do no longer have regular contact with the CSD consultants and the BL implementation programme is no longer a top priority in the school's improvement efforts. There are examples of leaders reporting that they are not given enough time for e.g. classroom visits and consultation, and they, along with teachers, have to compete for time with other improvement efforts, such as the induction of a new National Curriculum.

The head-teachers' leadership function is another issue that probably needs to be further addressed in the implement and sustenance of BL. As we have noted earlier (see figure 1), there is no direct intervention in their leadership function built into the BL implementation programme. They are supposed to collaborate with the development leader and meet with the CSD consultant but apart from that their leadership roles are less clear and they are seen more as providers of resources. The interviews with the consultants indicate that their leadership has been taken for granted and they need to be better made aware of the leadership practices expected of them. Some of them have become loosely detached, not least after the implementation period, and reliant on the development leaders, and they have confined their roles to that of administrators who plan and provide resources rather than that of protagonists of a professional learning culture (Sergiovanni, 2006). In some cases, not least when leaders were insecure of their leadership roles, head-teachers seem to have delegated responsibilities without the necessary backup and authority.

Related to the role of the head-teacher is the initiation stage (see Fullan, 2007) of the BL change process. This is normally to a large extent dependent on the head-teachers as this comprises the first steps of the collaboration between the schools and the CSD as well as the introduction of the programme to the teachers. Comments from the interviews with the consultants suggest that this varies from school to school and needs to be further addressed in the future as weak or insufficient initiation may have negative effects on the whole implementation process.

The most obvious aspect of teacher leadership in BL is the appointment and education of development leaders who most often are primarily classroom teachers. The leadership development of other teachers is probably more indirect. Teachers and leaders agree almost unanimously that through their participation and mutual learning in BL their self-confidence has improved, they find themselves as responsible participants of an important improvement that feeds directly into their pupils' learning and their participation requires more collaboration and teamwork of a problem solving nature than before. They also network more, with their university-based consultants and with teachers from other BL schools.

Communities of professional learning and knowledge creation

In recent years, researchers have developed the notion of a professional learning community (PLC) as a means of promoting schools' capacity of sustainable change and pupil learning (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Hall & Hord, 2011; Stoll & Louis, 2007). Most definitions of professional learning communities share a number of features. They emphasise the shared values and vision of the school community, intentional learning, infrastructure and conditions supportive of professional learning and practice. In their report of the EPLC (Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities) study in the UK, Bolam and his colleagues (2005) described PLC's

as characterised by “inclusiveness, shared values, collective responsibility for pupil learning, collaboration focused on learning and ... a sense of experiencing mutual trust, respect and support”(p. vi). They also suggested that the effectiveness of a professional learning community should be judged on three criteria: "its ultimate impact on pupil learning and social development, its intermediate impact on professional learning, performance and morale, and its operational performance as a PLC" (pp. vi–vii).

We have already cited Hargreaves’ (2003) notion of schools as knowledge creating communities where knowledge is created and transferred by teachers who are role models of what they expect of students, that is: “highly effective and adaptable learners”. By that means only, Hargreaves argues, schools will build the social, intellectual and organizational capital, both within schools and in networks of schools, that is needed for transformative school improvement.

In light of the above notions of the importance of PLCs, it is an inevitable question whether BL aims at and succeeds in transforming schools in the above sense. It is clear that the interventions of BL that have been described above resemble in most ways the characteristics of PLCs. BL has a clear vision of transforming pupils’ literacy education by means of professional learning, collaboration and collective responsibility for pupils’ learning, shared values and understanding of literacy and inclusive literacy education. However, as we have already discussed, we need further evidence of the outcomes of BL’s professional learning in terms of teachers’ level of use (cf. Hall & Hord, 2011) and its “ultimate impact on pupil learning and social development,” as Bolam and his colleagues put it (2005, p. vii).

A further point to raise here is that BL only directly addresses years one and two and in most schools indirectly years three and four as teachers commonly follow their classes for three or four years. Most of our data indicates very little impact of the BL on the culture of the schools as a whole and both teachers and development leaders have reported that even though they generally experience interest from their colleagues they have also heard sceptical voices about the interest and attention that BL attracts. If the “BL culture” remains confined to the youngest level (years one to four) of the school and does not result in similar investment in literacy education in the schools generally it is likely to be more vulnerable to staff turnover and other changes in the schools. It might also result in what Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) describe as balkanized teacher culture where teachers collaborate and associate with colleagues in particular groups rather than in the school as a whole.

Planning, criteria for success and evaluation of change

We have already noted that most researchers agree that the ultimate aim of school improvement is to contribute to high-quality teaching in order to address student learning, experiences and outcomes. Criteria for success must therefore take these factors into account (Gaytan & McEwen, 2010; Guskey, 2000, 2014; Hargreaves, 2003;

Killion, 2008; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; Zepeda, 2008). Most of these authors criticise that many professional development efforts lack thoughtful planning, evaluation criteria for all stages of the PD process and student outcomes and effective and rigorous evaluation to confirm whether they have been met. They argue that evaluation of professional development is too often superficial and subjective in addressing teachers' feelings and attitudes – or changes in that respect – rather than the change of their classroom practice and the outcomes of student. In the same vein, Guskey (2000) makes the case for criteria and evaluation for five critical levels of a professional development process: 1) the reactions of participants to courses and materials, 2) the learning of participants, 3) organisational support and change, 4) participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and 5) student learning outcomes. Killion (2008) makes similar comments on the need to 1) examine data about students' learning needs, and the learning needs of teachers in relation to that, 2) create goals for teachers' learning and students' outcomes, 3) conduct evaluation to determine whether goals have been met, and 4) generate theories of what works. Gaytan & McEwan (2010), Guskey (2014) and Killion (2008) all make the case for what might be called "backward planning" of professional development to ensure that pupils will benefit from it. Such planning begins by defining the end results of the professional planning process, namely student outcomes. Gaytan & Ewan (2010) and Guskey (2014) describe the backward planning process in similar terms, as comprising five steps: 1) goals about student learning outcomes, 2) definitions of new classroom practices, 3) needed organisational support, 4) learning goals for participants about knowledge and skills, and 5) professional learning activities to reach the goals of the first four steps.

The implementation of BL in many ways takes account of the planning steps described above. It is clear from the BL model that it addresses the various aspects of literacy in order to enhance the literacy education of pupils. It has to be noted, however, that there are no criteria for pupils' success built into the model, participating schools are not required to generate them and no such criteria exist nationally as a part of the National Curriculum or reading policies by authorities. Two tests for pupils are conducted six times during the first two years (Ólafsson, et al., 2014) and provide teachers with a tool for assessing the reading proficiency of individual pupils and planning their teaching accordingly. The first test is built on a Norwegian screening test (Tønnessen & Solheim, 2000). It comprises five sub-tests that address phonological awareness, decoding, word recognition, spelling, reading comprehension, and attitudes towards reading (Nasjonalt læremidlersenter, 2000, 2004). The second test is conducted six weeks prior to the end of year two and addresses four aspects of literacy: decoding, reading comprehension, fluency and spelling (Eggertsdóttir, Skúlason, & Guðnason, 2011). While these tests are a source of valuable information about the reading proficiency of pupils they are by no means a comprehensive assessment of all the aspects of literacy outcomes and learning competences that are addressed in BL. It is also clear from our interviews with teachers

that they do not commonly keep records or gather data of pupils' outcomes of learning where the tests fall short, but rely on subjective evaluations.

The BL model is quite clear on what practices teachers need to implement and what knowledge and skills they need to acquire to do so (Eggertsdóttir, 2009). This is also explained at length in learning materials for teachers and dealt with in courses and workshops that are explicitly organised to meet their professional development needs. Nevertheless there is not a consistent, ongoing evaluation within the BL schools of the steps of the professional development process. At the end of each of the implementation years, teachers and leaders answer an online evaluation survey conducted by the CSD. The main emphasis is on questions about preparation and lesson planning, aspects of classroom practice, liaison with parents and collaboration with the CSD consultants. This, however, is not compared with criteria of teachers' proficiency, such as the level of use (Hall & Hord, 2011) mentioned earlier in this paper. Moreover, teachers are not asked about their organisational support nor their assessment practices and recording of pupils learning, or their criteria and evaluation of pupils' learning outcomes.

Some concluding remarks

We are more than aware that the broad scope of this paper means that no deep analysis can be carried out of each theme, neither from the theoretical nor the practical points of view. In our minds, however, the broad scope is justified by our intention to give an overview and reach towards a synthesis of the professional learning theories on which BL draws and the practice we have seen so far in our research data. It is clear to us that both the theoretical aspects and the findings related to them need to be narrowed and deepened in subsequent analysis.

The BL model is a research-informed approach to literacy education. It is built not only on theories of literacy and literacy teaching but also on theories of learning and practices of inclusive schooling. Our data suggests that BL is radically different from previous practice in the participating schools. Such changes – however well-intentioned – do not fly on autopilot into classrooms and therefore BL incorporates a meticulously planned implementation programme that builds on collaboration and trust between participating schools and external partners (CSD) where networking between schools is also encouraged. The aim is to internalise new methods into the schools' life and work where teachers themselves become empowered agents of transformation and knowledge creation that in the long run will build the intellectual and social capital of the schools. Hargreaves' (2003) notion of leverage can also be applied to BL. In his terms, leverage arises out of the relationship between the effort invested in change by members of an organisation and the outcomes of that effort. Although implementing BL is obviously a demanding enterprise, the aim is that the outcomes are worth the effort; the outcomes of children's learning, the outcomes of teachers' learning reflected in their classroom

practice, and the outcomes of changes in the working environment and job satisfaction of teachers.

In most ways BL's professional development programme is consistent with the literature of professional development we have explored for this paper. It has a clear focus on pupils' learning and the necessity of integrating professional development with the intended changes in classroom practice. It acknowledges that change takes time and therefore a structured intervention programme has been developed for teachers' and development leaders. This programme seeks to integrate individual and organisational development and consists of courses and workshops, published materials on literacy and literacy teaching and practical suggestions for classroom work, consultation from university based consultants and school based development leaders. The professional development programme makes an effort to develop a learning culture within the participating schools built on a clear vision for literacy and literacy teaching, shared leadership, collaboration and shared responsibility for pupils' learning and networking between participations schools.

There are many indications in our data to support the effectiveness of this programme. The programme is highly rated by teachers, leaders and head-teachers for the effectiveness of the interventions described above and the collaboration with the CSD consultants. An online survey conducted at the end of each of the implementation years by the CSD provides helpful information but the programme falls short of consistent, ongoing evaluation on part of the BL schools themselves of the effectiveness of their professional development. That, certainly, is a point to consider as there seems to be a generally weak tradition for such programme evaluation in Icelandic compulsory schools.

Nevertheless, there are indications that the implementation time of two years is not enough, neither to fully implement the required changes in classroom practice nor to build a sufficiently robust infrastructure of improvement conditions in the schools to sustain and further develop BL. There are indications that the initiation stage of the BL change process differs between schools and that may affect the whole process. There are also critical points to make about the leadership function of head-teachers, their participation in the intervention programme for leaders and their role as change agents in their schools. Questions may be raised about the development of the development leaders' role when the implementation period has come to an end. The learning culture that is developed by the professional development interventions is also to a large extent confined to the first three or four years of the schools and we have little evidence of how literacy development is upheld in the schools after that.

As regards the use of the BL methods, teachers seem to have generally adopted the BL-model; they apply the main features or the interactive methods and follow the three teaching phases. The teaching is generally based on authentic literature texts (quality texts) and from testimonies of teachers who are able to compare BL with their previous methods we conclude that BL has had favourable effects on pupils' motivation and

increased the variety in children's learning tasks but decreased the use of blank-filling seatwork and rote learning. Our data indicate that almost all teachers we have seen in the classroom observations have reached at least levels III and IVA in teachers' use of the BL and we have also seen examples of higher level use. On the other hand, some data suggests that the use of the BL methods is varied and perhaps not consistent within schools to the extent one would expect after two years of implementation and in many cases some years of development after that. Unfortunately, the BL schools seem not to have developed methods for evaluating their teachers' level of use and the programme does not require such an evaluation of them.

There is also limited data on the impact of BL on children's learning outcomes. Screening tests conducted in years one and two provide valuable information but they do not give a comprehensive picture of all aspects of literacy; there are no pre-tests or other data from schools before they enter BL and no comparison with other schools not using BL. This certainly is a point to consider in the future development of BL.

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