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Producing and managing continuous change in an educational context: Liminal affective technologies and leadership

Abstract

Currently, municipal schools in Denmark face reforms and political demands for organizational change (EVA, 2015). The perception is now commonly held that it is necessary to radically rethink the entire set up of the institutional school towards a more flexible, adaptable and co-operative organization (Irgens & Jensen, 2008). This paper explores an empirical case, where a school is implementing a device called 'flexible timetables' in an attempt to depart from former fixed structures and private teaching practices. By combining process thought and liminality theory, the paper offers a theoretical framework for understanding some of the dynamics and unintended consequences of this transformation process. In so doing the paper calls attention to some important limits to the vision of flexibility and openness that informs this program of organisational change and subjectivity. Flexible timetables are conceptualized as a liminal affective technology (Stenner & Moreno-Gabriel, 2013), designed to disrupt structures supporting former institutional practices, and to engender circumstances that are describable in terms of liminal experience. We use the concept of liminal affectivity to describe the collective atmosphere of ambivalence and volatility that is summoned through the intervention. We also draw attention to certain unexpected side effects, as when the participants experience themselves both paralysed by the ensuing paradoxes, and captured in dynamics of polarisation (Greco & Stenner, 2017). The paper proposes the concept liminal affective leadership wherein the use of the technology is framed as a continuously sensitive balancing of the volatile liminal affectivity that it induces.

Introduction

This paper develops a number of themes familiar to readers of *Subjectivity* since the Editorial of its inaugural issue (May 2008) specified the need to theorise three fundamental issues pertaining to subjectivity: its 'situatedness'; its organisation by collective 'assemblages'; and its basic ontological structure as an embodied flow of experiential events (see Blackman et al, 2008, 22, 1-27, p.14-16). *Subjectivity* has championed process thought as a rich basis for theorising these issues and the inaugural issue contained papers on A.N. Whitehead by Paul Stenner (2008, 22, 90-109) and Isabelle Stengers (2008, 22, 38-59). The current paper furthers the development of a process account of the psychosocial (see Motzkau, 2009, 27, 172-195, Debaise, 2013, 6, 101-111, Lara, 2017, 10, 104-122) and illustrates it with an example drawn from the field of education. In so doing it also speaks to the journal's longstanding concern with affectivity, building in particular upon Stenner and Moreno's (2013, 6, 229-153) account of affective technologies in liminal circumstances. This approach to the study of affect offers an account of subjectivity not limited to, but also not exclusive of, individual interiority and discourse. Building on discursive studies, our approach treats subjectivity as a socio-cultural and affective phenomenon, always embodied and socially embedded, and we attend to some

of the experiential implications of an organizational context tending towards flux (Blackman 2012, Cromby & Willis 2016, Stenner & Moreno-Gabriel 2013).

Background: Organisations in flux

An overarching rationale in organisations today is that they must be prepared to transform and adapt on a regular basis in a fast changing world (Andersen & Pors, 2016). In line with a broader perceived crisis within institutions in general (Deleuze, 1992), they are perceived by reformers as inflexible and outmoded. A core assumption is that re-modelled organisations must avoid ossification into fixed structures and established patterns. The organisation is rethought as a fluid network that must be vivid, responsive, vibrant and open: less a system of fixed roles than a dynamic evolving professional community. This paper focuses more specifically on efforts to introduce change to fixed structures within municipal schools in Denmark as part of a school reform (MMA, 2013). To meet the aim of enhancing students' learning outcomes, the perception is now commonly held that it is necessary to radically rethink and fundamentally re-organize the way in which the school functions as an institution (see e.g. Bjerg & Staunæs, 2014; Falkenberg, 2017; Hall, 2017; Juelskjær & Staunæs, 2016).

The way to lead and organize such change in a Danish context is largely inspired by School effectiveness research (OECD, 2013; Robinson, 2015). In this context, the School Principal is envisaged as a leading change agent tasked to enhance learning capacity by means of experimenting with various organizational technologies in a rebuilt organizational infrastructure (Fullan, 2014). From this perspective (e.g. Fullan, 2014, p. 1 & 116), the transformation process necessitates a disruption of teaching and management practices that had previously been taken for granted. This disturbance – undertaken by 'leaders' - is expected to increase the emotional arousal of those involved, necessitating the management of emotions.

Flexible timetables

Drawing upon empirical material from ethnographic work conducted by Dorethe Bjergkilde as part of a PhD (2021), this paper concentrates on a specific technology: the case of *flexible timetables*. The basic idea of flexible timetabling is that students' learning processes are foregrounded and are not to be determined by the structural constraints perceived to be imposed by conventional timetables. Essentially, the leaders propose that a flexible timetable must be collaboratively re-written on a regular basis. The flexible timetable thus initiates a break with traditional timetables, which give the basic temporal and spatial structure of the school year in advance (BK, 2015). With flexible timetables, it seems possible to allow for learning processes and projects to go on during the school day without unnecessary 'disturbances' from what has been scheduled on the basis of the clock-time of the timetable. Since the aim is to avoid learning processes being structurally determined in advance, the new timetable must be flexible enough to change along with learning goals and activities. The way flexible timetable is set up in practice varies from school to school, and many schools have experimented locally with them.

Conceptual framing: Process thought and liminality

‘Flexible timetable’ might be conceived in summary as: a) a means for disrupting the logic that provides the spatial and temporal infrastructure for the existing teaching practices that have been judged to be problematic, and; b) for installing a new means for ordering time and space in a more responsive and open manner. In the innovative theoretical framework offered by (Andersen & Pors, 2016; Bjerg & Staunæs, 2015; Juelskjær, 2011; Staunæs & Bjerg, 2017), ‘flexible timetable’ would be considered as a potentialization technology.

Potentialization technologies – including things like e.g. managerial performance arts and steering labs – serve to create new possibilities for action, and new horizons for thought.

According to Andersen & Stenner (2019), they function as immune mechanisms by dissolving organizational structures perceived to hinder a fluid ideal. Consistent with this view, the use of flexible timetable in our case will be seen not only to initiate new potential actions, but to alter the very structure of the organization, disrupting the ‘old’ work practices of the teachers.

A key aim of this paper is to illustrate the relevance of thinking of these processes of transformation through the lens of recent liminality theory (Greco & Stenner, 2017; Kofoed, 2004; Kofoed & Stenner, 2017; Staunæs & Bjerg, 2017; Szakolczai, 2009; Thomassen, 2015). The concept of liminality comes from the study of rituals within anthropology (Turner, 1967), but it has much broader – indeed transdisciplinary and ontological – relevance (Stenner, 2017). Van Gennep in 1909 (1960) first used the word ‘liminal’ to designate the middle phase of a rite of passage known as ‘transitional’ rites. As Stenner (2017, p. 176) puts it:

Van Gennep’s chief insight was twofold. First, it was to recognize the extent to which these thresholds and transitions at the joints between worlds are the occasion for the ceremonials he called rites of passage. Second, it was to recognize that these ceremonials have a distinctive pattern suited to this fact... Namely, there is a three-phase order that begins with preliminary rites (also called rites of separation), moves through the liminal rites (also called rites of transition), and ends with postliminal rites of incorporation.

In the liminal phase of transition, those going through the ritual are in an unusual condition of ‘becoming’: they are no longer what they were, yet not yet what they will be. Liminality thus evokes ‘a sensitive juncture of transition’ (Stenner, 2017) as it is happening. The concept is therefore designed to point precisely to situations of potentiality in which, as Thomassen (2009) puts it, ‘what happens’ might take many different courses, but the actual outcome is uncertain (Szakolczai, 2000).

When liminality is understood as a *sensitive juncture of transition*, the Danish efforts to transform the school system can be grasped as an effort to stage-manage a transition that will involve the generation of experiences of liminality. Although this idea of ‘experiences of liminality’ certainly follows Turner and others in extending the domain of the liminal beyond its home territory of ritual, Stenner points out that van Gennep himself used the word liminal – not just to name a transition rite – but also to designate a quite special type of situation in

which those involved ‘waver between two worlds’ (Gennep, 1960, p. 18). It is precisely this hesitant ‘wavering’ – an experience that Turner famously captured with his definition of the liminal as a condition ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner, 1967) - which van Gennep designates with the word ‘transition’ and hence with the ‘liminal’. Any ‘becoming’ or change of condition involves an experience of liminality to the extent that it has the effect of ‘disturbing the life of society and the individual’ (Gennep, 1960, p. 13).

From the broader perspective we are adopting, ritual can be seen as merely one form of cultural ‘technology’ through which experiences of liminal transformation are summoned, managed and channelled. Stenner and Moreno (2013), call these cultural forms ‘liminal affective technologies’ (see also Greco & Stenner 2017) and Stenner 2017, Stenner and Zittoun, 2020). From this perspective, potentialization technologies can be seen to acquire a distinctively liminal quality and vocation (see Andersen & Stenner, 2019, pp. 12-14). ‘Flexible timetable’ by disrupting the logic of existing teaching practices, exposes the embodied practices of school life to a relatively *de-structured* liminal space/time in which the participants ‘waver between worlds’ because they are neither what they were, nor yet what they will become (Kofoed & Stenner, 2017). Furthermore, unlike in rites of passage which involve a temporary suspension of ‘structure’ to enable passage from one clearly defined social state or status to another (e.g. from single to married), the educational transformation we are considering involves a passage from a relatively clear organisational pattern to a new model that is itself inherently hesitant, wavering and open to permanent unpredictable change. That is to say, the envisaged shift is from the school *qua* institution with clearly defined roles for teachers and pupils, with clearly differentiated subject-disciplines and levels, classes and classrooms etc., to the school as flexible cross disciplinary work in progress.

The Flexible timetable conceived as a liminal affective technology in this paper functions to disrupt structural arrangements which are perceived to be unnecessarily constraining, and to facilitate the generation of enduring liminal circumstances. The aim is not for a temporary phase of liminality followed by a renewed stability, but for an indefinitely protracted experience of liminality. Framed in this way, a key role of the school leaders is to *manage the liminality* that is summoned through their interventions. We show that the management of liminality is in large part a question of managing the volatile feelings that are typical of liminal situations and that we call *liminal affectivity* (see Greco & Stenner, 2017, Stenner & Andersen, 2020). In Staunæs’ terminology, the increased affective intensity and quality in liminal situations calls for forms of ‘affective leadership’ whereby the affectivity is strategically cultivated and managed (Staunæs, 2011). Another aim of this paper is to develop this concept of liminal affective leadership building upon observation of the school leaders in our case, as they engage in a processual work of summoning and managing ambivalent and opposing feelings that are played out among the teachers (Bjergkilde, 2019). As we shall see, within this processual work of leadership, liminal affective (and other) technologies shape, form and ‘colour’ the emergent social reality, by re-iteratively re-framing and re-actualizing it in interaction with the involved participants.

Particular attention in this paper is given to a case of attempted school transformation in which a flexible timetable was initially put to use, but later withdrawn and modified due to resistance among the teachers. We will analyse this unintended effect in terms of the notion of ‘liminal hotspots’. Liminal hotspots are situations in which people get ‘stuck’ or otherwise embroiled in enduring situations of transition (Greco & Stenner, 2017; Kofoed & Stenner, 2017; Motzkau & Clinch, 2017; Nissen & Sørensen, 2017; Szakolczai, 2017). Liminal hotspots may involve the navigation of what Greco and Stenner (2017) describe as three of their most hazardous features: paradox (which is connected to the ‘both / and’ logic of liminality which gives rise to many mutually incompatible propositions and directives), paralysis (essentially, a blockage or inability to ‘move on’) and polarization (a tendency to escape liminal paradox and paralysis by concentrating on just one of the components of the paradox or splitting into hostile factions). We will see how polarization, in the case dealt with here, involves a modification of the ‘communitas’ - an informal collective and unstructured bond, as described by Turner (1982) - formed among the teachers. The communitas, we will suggest, ‘hardens’ into a teachers-versus-leaders polarity which in this case led to a rejection of the flexible timetable.

The experiences associated with these unexpected side effects lead to a retrospective learning process among the school leaders, which helps us pinpoint two key aspects of liminal affective leadership: a continuous sensitivity to liminal affectivity which enables an alert ‘balancing’ of any disruptions induced by the liminal affective technology, and an attentive framing of the technology which affords some sense of visibility to the ongoing interactions between technologies and people. The paper elaborates on how liminal affectivity becomes an important transformer for new emerging subjectivities and ways of organizing.

Methodology and empirical material

The empirical material collected by Dorethe Bjergkilde (2021)¹ in this article stems from two main studies of municipal schools in Denmark, which are experimenting with different technologies to potentialise change, including flexible timetables. This includes: 1) Ethnographic fieldwork (including interviews and observations of school leaders of various kinds, teachers and coordinators, facilitators and counsellors of professional and transformational processes) conducted between 2015 and 2018 in a school (name and location undisclosed) as part of a PhD; 2) A project carried out for the Danish Ministry of Education in 2018, involving interviews with two Principals (NLF, 2018).

The main case in this paper is based on 1) (i.e. the ethnography), although we refer to data from 2) in the last part of the analyses. This school experimented with flexible timetables, which were at first changed every week. The intention, after a month or two, was that the timetable should change every third week. This experiment was not successful and was

¹ This empirical study received ethical clearance from Datatilsynet (Data supervision in Denmark) and Aarhus University the 6th of October 2016

stopped after about 4 months. The school has a modified flexible timetable today, which changes 4 times a year, though in principle is changeable at any time. The interviews and observations were carried out before, during and after the event, (including retrospective evaluations collected since 2017/18). The logic behind the introduction of a flexible timetable was to provide the teachers a) with the flexibility to better focus on specific courses, projects or trips, which would promote student's learning processes, and b) with enhanced capacity to arrange cover between teachers in case of sickness etc. To enable these improvements, the intention was to disrupt the existing structural arrangement whereby each course or class was connected to one teacher. The flexible timetable affords and encourages teachers to develop shared responsibility for classes and hence flexible corporation among themselves, in part by making more visible what other classes are doing, when and where.

The present focus of our analysis of this data is on the ways in which the transformational processes initiated by the introduction of flexible timetable were played out and experienced, both in real time and in retrospect. We are particularly interested in the social dynamics at play in the management of liminal affectivity, and how these dynamics influence the outcome of the implementation. Therefore, we focus particularly upon events during which the liminal affectivity becomes most evident and problematic, and we follow disruptions, uncertainties and indecisions which offer insight into the transformation process (Brown & Stenner, 2009). Part 1 explores the use of a flexible timetable to disrupt existing structures of teaching practice with the aim of freeing up possibilities for a more flexible future school. We show how certain volatile and ambivalent processes lead to new relations and positions which ended up obstructing the implementation of the flexible timetable. Part 2 develops the concept of liminal affective leadership by exploring how these processes and technologies require the continuous management of liminal affectivity.

Analysis part 1

Devising a liminal occasion: Initiating a rupture with the past

We begin the analysis with two extracts of empirical material from a school, which is about to implement a flexible timetable. The following quote is from the Principal, who elaborates on the implementation process. The Principal describes how the introduction of the flexible timetable was intended to *obstruct* the prior teaching practices. This Principal also explains their rationale for a *rapid* introduction of this device, despite the expectation that this may prove problematic with the teachers:

Obstructions have been a regular strategy. Like saying, if they come from here and are going there, I have to push them out there, to prevent them from going back to their old praxis....when they get tired and powerlessness arises, and they want to go back.[...] You need some tools to make people move. It is an obstruction to initiate flexible timetables and start right away after the holiday. Some people would say it is not possible so quickly. However, it has some implications, if you don't. Then you miss a quick gain, which we presume are good to both students and teachers.

In this extract the disruption of ‘old praxis’ is presented as a ‘regular strategy’. The basic aim is a transformation pictured in terms of taking the teaching staff from ‘here’ and delivering them to ‘there’. This transformation is no mere spatial movement, however, and is better conceived as a temporal vector in which ‘here’ signifies a present soon to become past and ‘there’ signifies an aspired for future. It is clearly anticipated that there will be resistance to this change. This resistance to disruption is understood to be affective in nature (a tired sense of powerlessness is anticipated, and a negative tendency to assert ‘it is not possible’). This in turn is framed in terms of an expected inertia exerted by the past, something that can be prevented only through the use of ‘tools to make people move’, to exert a ‘push’. The flexible timetable, in short, is here described as a tool for disrupting the past. The entire project is justified on the basis of the higher good towards which it aims: a ‘good to both students and teachers’. This discourse echoes the literature of innovation, which for several years has been occupied with similar processes, where people are disturbed out of their equilibrium state (Engholm Jensen, 2008; Onarheim & Biskjaer, 2017; Onarheim & Wiltschnig, 2010). This way of approaching innovation posits the necessity of an extrinsic motivation to trigger transformation: an external shock may send a system beyond its equilibrium and hence precipitate a change (Vaaben, 2013, p. 108). Part of this discourse is the construction of the school organization as an organism. The Principal goes on:

If you think of an organization as an organism, which keeps on showing signs of breakdowns and restorations. That is the place where leadership happens. That is where you make developments. [...] I do think it is an intuitive feeling of ‘where is there something important going on’, and it shifts between frustration and excitement. [...] I have said many times at meetings that someone will get upset, get a stomach-ache or get angry. It is not a sign the process is wrong. It is evidence that we are moving towards where we should be, and that we will come out on the other side.

In this data extract the Principal again underlines the affective dimensions of the new circumstances engendered by the intervention, but this time pointing to an ambivalent oscillation which ‘shifts between frustration and excitement’. Note that in the previous extract, the affective quality described was feeling tired and powerless, neither of which is quite captured by the poles of ‘frustration and excitement’. It is notable that the Principal also identifies uncomfortable bodily feelings or symptoms like stomach-ache, as well as anger and upset. The Principal explains that these symptoms and negative affects are not a sign that ‘the process is wrong’, but on the contrary, ‘evidence’ that the intervention is working, and that this ‘is the place where leadership happens’. We can say that these uncomfortable feelings are the very material with which the leaders are working as they engage with liminal affective leadership in the context of this self-devised liminal occasion. Inspired by Staunæs & Juelskjær (Staunæs & Juelskjær, 2016, p. 78) we can here see how uncomfortable feelings are reframed and revitalized (as ‘psychological ontologies’) as material for a technology of transformation. Far from being accidental by-products, these feelings are strategically framed and created, managed and worked upon as part of the liminal affective technology with the flexible timetable at its core. When the key to transformation is seen to lie in the generation and management of these uncomfortable feelings, what might be construed negatively as a

kind of chaos comes to be welcomed despite certain unpredictable and, as we shall see, occasionally uncontrollable aspects.

If we read these extracts in the light of liminality theory, the ‘obstruction’ introduced by the flexible timetable appears as functionally equivalent to what Van Gennep called a ‘rite of separation’. It is a device for introducing a *separation* whereby previously normal school practices are separated from the present and reconstructed as belonging to the past. As we have seen, effecting this separation of present from past is something difficult, and resistance is expected. Teachers are likely to attempt to cling onto their past with great affective force, not least because it is difficult for them to envisage any clear and positive features of the future towards which they are being steered. Teachers are effectively thrown into a ‘betwixt and between’ in which they are prevented from being as they were in the past, but are not yet what they will become in the future. This liminal occasion, as is typical, is hence characterised by a strong sense of affective ambivalence and volatility (i.e. ‘liminal affectivity’), but this affectivity is the very material that is sought and worked upon by those who have engineered the situation. Through application of the liminal affective technology, teachers are guided into an affectively ambivalent process of transformation.

Navigating in liminal circumstances: encountering paradox and paralysis

We have suggested that the flexible timetable was used as part of a ‘technology’ to initiate a liminal process. This section examines some of the issues that arose around the management of the unfolding series of events that composed this emergent liminal occasion. We have already noted affective ambivalence and volatility as a first feature. This corresponds to what Greco and Stenner (2017) describe as the feature of *paradox*: a feature which expresses the distinctive ‘both / and’ nature of liminal situations (which Kofoed and Stenner (2017) describe as *both* ‘both and’ and ‘either or’). In the section above, the leader described a paradoxical form of affectivity which oscillated between frustration and excitement, but also included embodied feelings like tiredness, powerlessness and stomach-ache. This indicates not just a quantitative increase in affective intensity but also an unpredictable qualitative process of volatile and ambivalent feelings, which can shift either way and can be more or less beneficial for the intended transformation process. Through playing with and exploiting the resonances between different forms of feelings, leadership becomes a matter of moving people into different situated practices. But this process can be met with resistance and can backfire. In the following data extract a coordinator describes how the teachers found the intervention frustrating and incapacitating:

There can be resistance among the teachers against some initiatives like flexible timetable. It frustrates many people at the moment. People complain a lot. But there is not a resistance against what is going on generally, it is more the small elements (...) Flexible timetable has turned it all upside down (...) It is confusing (...) I cannot plan anything ahead or prepare my teaching, because I do not know what I am teaching next week (...) We cannot prepare our teaching material together (...) The people who plan the flexible timetables are behind and stressed out (...) If we were going on trips the timetables are changing. They are changing the whole time (Interview coordinator year 1).

As we can see in this extract, events and processes relating to the technology are becoming confused and entangled. This not only raises the affective intensity within the school, generating a circulation of stresses and frustrations, but it also creates a situation of constant change ('changing the whole time') in which, paradoxically, *nothing changes*. The result is a predicament akin to paralysis (Greco & Stenner, 2017) in which 'I cannot plan anything ahead', 'I do not know what I am teaching next week' and 'we cannot prepare our teaching material'. This coordinator has lost any sense of direction or orientation. The flexible frames appear to have reduced learning processes to a blur, and this despite the express purpose to put them at the very centre. The main purpose thus dissolves into paralysing paradox as the constant change overshadows the teaching and learning objectives. The affective energy appears to accumulate into nothing but a frustrating blockage, leaving the teachers suspended between frustrated despair and some sort of acceptance, neither settled nor completely turned off.

Unlike a conventional rite of passage with a familiar structured format overseen by a master or mistress of ceremonies, in the case we are dealing with any sense of a structural frame dissolves and there is no clear end to the emergent liminal process. Certain coordinators are supposed to set up the temporary structure of the flexible timetable, but that act is articulated as difficult and stressful, and the leaders are not spoken of as central in this matter. The extract below gives a sense of the perceived lack of adequate leadership for managing these circumstances:

We had flexible timetable for 2 or 3 months, I think. But if you want something to work, you have to recruit people who are capable of it. Yasmin and Tommy were not the fastest, neither regarding IT and they had to learn many new things. And they never got a chance. They were taught on the Friday and we needed a schedule on the Monday, right. We were always behind (...) It was a very emotional time (...) It became obvious who were selfish and who thought of the collective. It became obvious who wanted to make it as easy as possible for them self (...) But it did not work for us. It was frustrating." (Interview coordinator)

This extract also indicates a tendency for the affective energy that has been diffusely gathering to be concentrated in the direction of figures to whom blame can be attributed. Fingers begin to point at those recruits who are 'not the fastest' or who appear as 'selfish'. Two coordinators, Yasmin and Tommy, are singled out, and since they are 'change agents' responsible for coordinating the timetables, they serve well as 'lightning rods' for the teachers' frustration (Bjerg & Bjergkilde, 2016; Bjergkilde, 2019). In this extract, the coordinator provides them with the excuse of having limited time to absorb many new things, but nevertheless their trajectory towards potential scapegoat-hood is palpable (Kofod & Stenner, 2017). Also striking here is the manner in which the teachers' willingness to cooperate is foregrounded: if the new vision of schooling is to be successfully implemented using the flexible timetable individuals must selflessly sacrifice their energies to the collective. The technology produces, demands and enforces mutual dependence and corporation among the teachers, who must contribute to accumulating a positive collective energy in the face of inevitable frustrations.

Navigating in a liminal occasion: polarization of communitas during suspended transition

In the following extract, the liminal experiences set at play accumulate into a decisive event which the feature of *polarization*. This event appears to be a sort of maximization of the propensity for becoming affected, and it in turn sets off newly emerging processes:

Instead of looking at ourselves, the frustration was directed towards the management. The other teachers said “it was stupid the leaders forced flexible timetables on us, it was no use etc.”. The leader 1 tried to close down the complaints, but it was still going on in the hidden. There was a bad atmosphere. They tried to shut down the complaints, but they did not quite succeed. It went on for a while, and then we wrote a joint letter, but it was not done collectively. Then the leaders were called in for a meeting. They came, listened to what we had to say and acknowledged it. When they left, the focus on the flexible timetables disappeared. All of a sudden it was about lack of batteries for the computer mouse, for the keyboard etc. It turned into a mega ‘complain club’ complaining about everything, what was wrong (...), We were going full blast. Everything was their fault. (...) The problem was it was not a joint letter. Not everybody was present when it was written. I did not agree with everything. Frank started the letter. Then he could get rid of his frustrations without saying it out loud. And then Jens presented our common point of view to the leaders. They came to the meeting and they were just supposed to listen to us. Then came the whole rigmarole. We lack appreciation, we lack visits from the leaders at meetings, we lack electronic devices etc. etc. etc. The smartboard does not work. Things that the leaders had nothing to do with. It was like there was a whole group of complaints which went off, even though it was supposed to be a meeting concerning flexible timetables. Later on the leaders invited the teachers for a meeting, where they referred to a joint responsibility. The teachers were also responsible, the leaders argued. But the teachers were just fed up.....really fed up with all kinds of frustrations. They did not listen. They did not take anything in (Interview with coordinator).

This data extract gives an indication of how liminal processes, despite their creative potential, can become “deeply distressing” and “suffering-producing” (Szakolczai, 2009) for those swept up in them. The extract describes how the leaders had tried to ‘shut down’ and ignore a phase of complaint and dissatisfaction amongst the teachers, but that this reaction merely worsened the “bad atmosphere”. Eventually, initiated by Frank, the teachers wrote a letter of complaint that led to the calling of a meeting in which the leaders would listen to the concerns of the teachers. The aim of the meeting was to protest specifically about the flexible timetable, but instead of maintaining this focus the meeting led to the expression of multiple frustrations from the teachers, and complaints which went off. This account from a coordinator laments the loss of focus and the concentration on multiple irrelevant complaints, and traces it to outbursts of frustration and a lack of coordination (‘the problem was it was not a joint letter’). Predictably, the leaders responded to this unilateral and unbalanced complaint by calling another meeting in which they stressed the need for ‘joint responsibility’, but by this point the polarization into teachers *versus* leaders had become potent enough that the teachers ‘did not take anything in’. Drawing upon Bateson’s concept of schizogenesis, Greco and Stenner (2017, p. 8) conceptualise polarization as a way of escaping a liminal “predicament of indeterminacy” by firming up just one side of a paradoxical situation in which different affective potentials vacillate in a volatile manner. Akin to intrapsychic ‘splitting’, polarization thus simplifies a psychosocial situation of liminal paradox into a clear

‘this’ or ‘that’ or, in this case, an ‘us’ and ‘them’ where ‘they’ are always to blame for ‘our’ problems.

This transformation emerges both in the ‘in-between’ of humans (Szakolczai, 2009) and in the ‘in-between’ of humans and technologies. Where the technology before was articulated as frustrating but tolerable, it is now condemned by the teachers, and this condemnation emerges from a shifting social form of feeling. The technology, in a sense, sets off processes it cannot control, and these become entangled with other practices and electronic devices (smartboards, etc), forming new positions among the teachers and leaders in the process. It is as if the affective energy has ‘overheated’ and is gathering around material devices and the leaders, producing frustrations out of the former and scapegoats out of the latter.

Turner (1982) used the concept of *communitas* to describe the enduring shared ‘we feeling’ generated amongst celebrants of a rite of passage. In situations of polarization, that ‘we feeling’ is set against an outgroup and can acquire hostile connotations. In a sense, polarization is a botched form *communitas* which becomes thoroughly divided and antagonistic and gathers around unsolved frustrations. Kirkeby (Kirkeby, 2014, p. 12) writes that *communitas* is the actual ‘breeding ground or cradle’ for the organization’s death and rebirth. From this perspective we might say that this event of polarization contributed to ‘the death’ of the flexible timetable technology, as the leaders stopped using the technology 2-3 months after this event. According to Kirkeby (2014, pp. 203,266), *communitas* is an unstructured ‘invisible’ network which is bound by an ethos. Kirkeby (2014) argues that *communitas* enables leadership to be felt like a necessity, but in this case it becomes disconnected from the formal leaders and hence back-fires, generating shared resistance rather than followership. The circulating frustrations cluster and accumulate into a ‘bad atmosphere’ which – despite some tactical disagreements – unites the teachers, connecting, as it were, their mutual energies and, in the process, dissolving the liminal processes initiated by the leaders using the liminal affective technology. Szakolczai (2009) describes liminal processes as containing a ‘fermenting’ power whose dynamic can develop, transform and take off in unpredictable ways. The very source of energy which the school leaders attempted to convert into flexibility and enhanced learning outcomes ended up, we suggest, accumulating into a joint resistance.

Analysis part 2

Leading in circumstances of permanent liminality

As noted above, in traditional rites a phase of liminal passage is followed by guidance and integration into new forms and structures. In our empirical case, no workable future arrangement is offered to experience. In the midst of the intervention, the frequent changes to the school timetable generated liminal processes experienced as continuous and ‘permanent’ by the teachers (Szakolczai, (2000). The intervention is thus perceived to fail, and the old practices of the teachers do not transform into the intended new flexible arrangement. The event described above thus led to a re-thinking of the intended transformation process which

had consequences for future technologies and leadership. Experimenting with change technologies like the one we have described has become normal practice in the last few years, as prompted by reforms to the educational system (BK, 2015; MMA, 2013). National reports have questioned the efficacy of the interventions urging renewed attention to the processes involved (VIVE, 2018a, 2018b). The following section draws upon empirical material collected 1-3 years after the above case in which school leaders offer retrospective accounts of what they have learned. We use this material to further develop our account of liminal affective leadership.

Re-framing technologies: articulation of liminal affective leadership

For a couple of years, we have been of the opinion that if everything is flexible, like flexible timetables, and we are not limited by a structure, we would obtain the best possible learning outcome. However, it created a violent storm among the teachers, a tremendous insecurity and a fierce unpredictability. [...] Now we only change the main timetable 4 times a year. We do have some days within that period where we allow everything to be flexible and fluent, but it is up to the teachers to plan it. [...] Sometimes we have to experience and learn before we can see the consequences. Cultural change must be framed and supported structurally, as it creates unrest and insecurity. When you experiment with timetables, you experiment with the DNA of the entire school (Interview with Principal).

In this extract the Principal repeats the initial aim of using flexible timetabling to remove the limitations imposed by ‘structures’ and thus to foster flexibility by encouraging perpetual change (i.e. what we have summarized as the use of flexible timetabling as a liminal affective technology). They acknowledge that the desired outcome did not materialize due to a ‘violent storm’, and that as a result the use of flexible timetabling was scaled-back and placed in the control of the teachers. Where years earlier liminal affectivity had been welcomed as a sign of change to be worked with, here it is characterised in more extreme terms as a ‘fierce’ unpredictability and a ‘tremendous’ insecurity, to be handled with a different sensitivity. Speaking here with the benefit of hindsight, it is acknowledged that those overseeing the intervention had underestimated quite how disruptive the ruptures introduced by the technology would prove to be. Continuing with an organismic metaphor, they now compare altering the timetable with tampering with “the DNA of the entire school”. A new respect for the psychosocial impact of the changes is evident in this account, and a corresponding willingness to down-scale the transformation. Echoing Szakolczai’s (2000) warning about the potentially devastating consequences of permanent liminality, there is a call to ensure that any future interventions are “framed and supported structurally”. Kirkeby (2014) likewise argues that, in the absence of any experience of organizational identity and ethos, permanent liminality can lead to monotonous chaos in which any idea and vision of the school can dissolve. Using a slightly different theoretical vocabulary, Tor Hernes (2014) similarly urges that ‘real’ transition requires not just disturbance, but also a feeling of difference: if everything is changing all the time, then transformation becomes meaningless. Continuity and

change mutually constitute each other, and it is on behalf of the experience of continuity that transition matters (Hernes, 2014).

The concrete outcome of this ‘learning experience’, according to the Principal, is that the flexible timetabling is limited to 4 changes per year, coordinated by the teachers, and accompanied by certain specified days during which “everything is flexible and fluent”. In short, the practice is now to ensure a balanced combination of structure and liminal fluidity by installing periods of temporary liminality to accommodate demands for change, but without letting these totalize into situations approximating permanent liminality. It is instructive to view these new practical insights as developments in the capacity for liminal affective leadership. Such leadership is no longer simply about unleashing liminal affectivity by using liminal affective technologies to dissolve organizational structures. It is about creating conditions that afford *both* transformation *and* the experience of continuity (e.g. by limiting the flexibility of the timetable to 4 changes per year). This can be construed as a re-framing of the application of liminal affective technologies in a manner which allows, not just for phases of separation and transition, but also for some degree of re-incorporation into a work pattern that can become sufficiently familiar to ground a sustainable school identity and ethos. Liminal affective leadership becomes a matter of balancing and equalizing structural disruptions with a continuity that takes ‘human’ consequences into consideration. The following extract nicely illustrates this notion of a ‘balancing act’ which responds to the realization that unilateral desire for flexibility can stand in the way of other valued agendas such as cooperation and mutual preparation of teaching materials:

We tried to make flexible timetables. However, we found out we had made a compromise about something which was very important to us, and that is mutual preparation and corporation. We cannot be flexible and at the same time make sure the teachers can prepare together. It is like we stumbled into a balancing act. We cannot do it all at the same time. But neither can we predict what is going to happen” (Interview with group of school leaders).

The school leaders here underline the tensions between the agendas of increased flexibility and increased corporation, both of which had been the targets of various technologies over recent years. Although in principle these different agendas can be conjointly met, in practice, they became entangled to the point of ‘short-circuiting’ each other and hence show up as incompatible opposites. Instead of the desired scenario of the school successfully realizing *both* flexibility *and* corporation, they achieved *neither* flexibility *nor* corporation. The processes aiming at flexibility and corporation clashed and became ‘paradoxical’ because of their mutual temporal and spatial interference, and the teachers got caught up in the ‘noise’ between their different demands (Greco & Stenner, 2017, p. 7). The teachers describe themselves as having “stumbled into a balancing act”, evoking both the unexpected nature of this interference, and their unanticipated realization of its nature. This lesson in liminal affective leadership in turn opened up the possible solution of a ‘de-paradoxification’ by means of the balance of structure and liminality discussed above. These developments were doubtless difficult to predict because of the complex and emergent interactions between different agendas, technologies and humans that are at play during liminal occasions. This

point sharpens appreciation of how the removal of limits that is characteristic of liminal occasions is at the same time the removal of the temporal and spatial coordinates that - in separating diverse practical agendas - create the conditions of possibility for their mutual coordination via cooperation. This is the basis on which timetabling can be likened to the DNA of the school, and why altering the timetable serves as a structural disruption opening a liminal zone.

Balancing liminal affectivity: articulation of liminal affective leadership

Maybe we do not see the conflict in the little details, which turns out to be huge. We have not built in enough 'door stops'. We have to be aware of the smallest change all the time. If we do something which creates unrest between the parents, the teachers, we have to stop and think whether it is worth it. There have been too many times where we have made changes, where we have not involved the teachers. It is about acknowledging them (...) If they show up frustrated it does not help that they are met with rational explanations. You have to meet them in their feelings and go the long difficult way (...) We have to find out how we become aware of the potential 'bombshells' before they explode. Because we use a lot of time on something that could have been dealt with in 5 min.

This final data extract shows how, from the retrospective perspective of this Principal, feelings are understood to be at the source of both positive transformations, and negative reactions. This adds a third dimension to our concept of liminal affective leadership: the need for a continuous and sensitive attunement to the effects of the affects produced by liminal affective technologies. Leading through use of negative or uncomfortable affects is presented as a delicate balancing act demanding constant awareness of "the smallest change" to feeling processes (Blackman, 2015). Again we see a new retrospective sensitivity which questions whether the 'unrest' created through use of the technology is genuinely "worth it". Here, we sense a 'balance' between a felt obligation on the part of the school leaders to respond to political rationales for reform (to meet learning outcomes, provide evidence, make evaluations etc. (Jyllands-Posten, 2018; MMA, 2013; Undervisningsministeriet, 2015), and respect for the teacher's processes of feelings. To avoid situations of paralysis and polarization, liminal affective leadership deems it necessary to "meet them [the teachers] in their feelings". This is because meeting "frustrations" with "rational explanations" will backfire and serve only to transform the frustrations into "bombshells". Instead it is important to recognize that two very different registers are and play and that it is crucial to "speak the same language" if those "bombshells" are to be defused. That language of affectivity is presented as a "long and difficult way", but taking this route will ultimately save precious time, because 5 minutes of affective "acknowledgement" – of seeing how "the conflict" can be in "the little detail" – will ultimately save the time that will be spent salvaging a situation that has deviated into paralysis or polarization. Liminal affective leadership, in this sense, is a matter of building in "enough door stops" to prevent these "little details" from becoming "huge" (ungovernable and irreversible). Sønderskov (2011) and Kirkeby (2014) share this view of liminal learning as involving processes of feelings which underlie more reflective cognition.

Conclusion

A first objective of this paper was to present ‘flexible timetables’ as a liminal affective technology: a device used to interrupt prior school practices and structures, and to summon a liminal occasion. By describing a case from the Danish education system, we have indicated how this can give rise to a distinctively paradoxical form of ‘liminal affectivity’ involving volatile and ambivalent feelings which exceed and re-assemble the individuals involved in unpredictable ways. Dislodged from its prior ordering principles, the paradoxical nature of liminal affectivity can tend towards paralysis of practice, on the one hand, and its polarization into ossified factions, on the other. These processes can be thought of as internal and emergent ways of managing a permanent condition of liminality in which constant change overshadows the actual learning process that was originally aimed for, bringing unexpected effects. The second objective was to describe a new form of leadership which grapples experientially with these circumstances unexpectedly generated by the unreflexive use of liminal affective technologies. We have presented liminal affective leadership as involving two aspects. First, a sustainable attentive re-framing of the intervention as something akin to applying a liminal affective technology. This reframing strives to balance and harmonize the structural disruptions induced by the technology with doses of structural stability or continuity, and thus to ‘de-paradoxify’ situations in which different practical agendas and projects have come to clash and short-circuit one another. Second, liminal affective leadership involves a continuous and sensitive attunement to the ambivalent, oscillating and volatile processes of feeling that are provoked and summoned by the liminal affective technology. Liminal affective leadership in an educational context is an ongoing process which has no fixed destination and offers no guarantees concerning outcomes. As one educational leader argues “We cannot predict what is going to happen”. In this sense liminal affective leadership becomes an ongoing issue, facing continuous challenges that must be re-solved over and over again, (Greco & Stenner, 2017). It can be said to embrace the paradox of permanent liminality whilst at the same time aiming to ameliorate its damaging effects.

As noted in the introduction, we hope the analysis we have offered contributes to some broader debates within the journal about subjectivity within social processes. First, it aims to go beyond an account of the ways in which established subjectivities are socially (re)produced and to focus on how pre-existing socially organised subjectivities can be strategically targeted for transformation in order to effect social change at the level of an organisation. Our illustration shows how a strategic effort to disrupt ‘old praxis’ can unleash the turbulent emotional potentials we have associated with ‘liminal affectivity’. This is not to suggest that affectivity was irrelevant to the subjectivities at play prior to the rupture. On the contrary, it is likely that in the ‘old praxis’ affect and discourse were mutually intertwined in a manner coordinated and equilibrated with an expected flow of events. We have thus presented the introduction of flexible timetables as a liminal affective technology designed to transform teaching practice and change teacher’s professional subjectivity by disturbing this equilibrium. Second, we have also noted how these interventions do not aim to institute a new

structural stability, but to establish and maintain an enduring situation of liminality in which teachers learn to expect the unexpected, and to respond accordingly with flexible innovations, and in which leaders learn to work with the subjective material of affectivity. In this context, uncomfortable feelings like stomach-aches and frustrations show up as the very material with which the leaders must work as they feel their way to steering volatile processes towards a (future) manageable dynamic flexibility. In this respect, these interventions are aiming at fostering the emergence of new forms of future-oriented flexible and vital subjectivity among the teachers modelled by new forms of liminal affective leadership. But this process is fraught with dangers and difficult to manage. The very same transformative liminal affectivity, orchestrated by the reforms, can reshape the whole teacher / school / leader / flexible timetable assemblage in unexpected ways. Our process approach has enabled an understanding of how liminal affectivity becomes a transformative energy in emerging actual occasions, which can gather in a nexus of occasions (Brown & Stenner 2009) and reconfigure relations in ways that were never intended.

Finally, it is important to add that our account is nevertheless partial and incomplete, speculative and subjective. Much more could and should be said both about the microscopic details and the broader political and economic context in which these school reforms are unfolding. Far from being a definitive analysis, we offer this paper as a provocation for further theoretically guided empirical explorations of the subjective dimensions of relationships, organisations and social systems that are increasingly being thrown into the flux of permanent liminality (Blackman 2012, Cromby & Willis 2016, Szokolczai 2017, Andersen & Stenner 2019).

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