

# Why all this talk about change?

by

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# Abstract

<b>Title:</b>	Why all this talk about change?
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<b>Keywords:</b>	Organizational Change, Sense-Making, Organizational Change Cynicism, Functional Stupidity, Public Sector
<b>Aim:</b>	The aim of this study is to give an understanding of employees' interpretations of working in an organization undergoing changes
<b>Methodology:</b>	The research is conducted with qualitative methodology with an interpretive perspective
<b>Theoretical Perspective:</b>	The thesis is based on existing literature regarding organizational change, process perspective, sense-making, organizational change cynicism and functional stupidity
<b>Empirical Foundation:</b>	The research is based on a case study of public schools within Lund's Municipality
<b>Conclusions:</b>	Employees interpret change as a necessity, however not all changes are necessary. All the talk about change leads to stress and confusion. Functional stupidity can help employees to cope with changes

*We would like to thank the teachers in Lund's Municipality who gave their time to be a part of this study*

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Today organizations seem to come terms with that they must change in order to stay profitable (Kotter, 2012, Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). This is a result of constant competition, as organizations believe that they must change to stay competitive in order to survive (Kotter, 2012; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Kotter (2012) explains that the need for change is increased by competition and globalization and Tsoukas and Chia (2002 p. 567) argue that “change is the normal condition of organizational life”. Beer & Nohria (2000 p. 133) goes even further and describes it as organizations “must either change or die”.

Sveningsson & Sörgärde (2015) argue that organizational change is an area characterized by great optimism, and new radical and comprehensive change programs are launched daily in organizations. According to Sveningsson & Alvesson (2016, p. 103) “it is popular to highlight different kinds of change” and the authors state that organizations need to master adjusting to change. Furthermore, the authors illustrate that the way of managing change has developed into huge industry. Sveningsson & Sörgärde (2015) discuss that perhaps it is naturally to be almost too optimistic when talking about the need for change, and it is not always as justified to change as it may seem when reading the literature relating to the field. It is rare to see any researcher who discusses the importance of being careful about changes, and carefully reflect on the value of engaging in intractable changes with uncertain outcomes (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2015).

Beer & Nohria (2000) state that change is in general seen as something necessary and positive. Furthermore, the authors argue that the general understanding is that organizations must be alert and willing to change. However, there are contradictory advices for management about change. Organizations are being advised to either to change or they will perish (Kotter, 2012) and at the same time they are advised to avoid the risks which implementing a quick and excessive change can cause (Bruch & Menges, 2010). It is common for organizations to launch change efforts, which often demand plenty of time and energy from managers as well as employees (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Alvesson and Sveningsson (2014) describe that change can lead to major consequences, both positive and negative, for individuals, for

society and the organizations. Nevertheless, there is a critical discrepancy between all the talk about change and what truly happens in organizations, and it has been argued that the change industry tends to exaggerate all the talk about change. This has influenced how change is discussed and interpreted within organizations (Alvesson, 2013). This makes us wonder how all the talk about change is perceived by the employees?

The aim of this study is to give an understanding of employee's interpretations of working in an organization undergoing changes. We believe the perspective focusing on how employees interpret changes needs more consideration and examination. The current literature often looks at employees as only means to an end; they should be ready, committed and open for change (Choi, 2011). However, we argue that the literature does not take the way employees interpret change into adequate consideration.

We believe employees' perspective is important to consider, because despite the need to change due to increased competition and globalization, change is not easy. Around two-thirds of all change projects fail (Beer & Nohria 2000; Burk & Biggard, 1997) and it has been suggested that the number of failures could be even higher (Burnes, 2004). There are several reasons for why many changes fail, although often it is the implementation that causes the change to fail rather than the change initiative itself (Klein & Sorra, 1996; Kotter, 1995, 1996; Schein, 1987, 1999).

In recent year, a rising number of researchers have claimed that several change efforts fail as a result of management's tendency to underestimate the essential role employees have in the change process (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993; George & Jones, 2001; Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; Hall & Hord, 1987; Isabella, 1990; Lau & Woodman, 1995). Ashforth & Mael (1989) state that people are more inclined to comply and agree with change initiatives when they identify themselves with the organization. The way people make sense of situations is contingent on how they view the world, and how they view themselves with the change and the situation (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000). Researchers find that the significance of sense-making among employees is a critical component for a favorable outcome (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). This is due to the fact that people's behavior changes depending on how they make sense of a situation or a specific context.

When there is a lack of a general understanding of the change initiative, there is a higher risk that the change will fail (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). Furthermore, the authors

explain that a successful change is more likely to be implemented when there is urgency for change. The strategy needs to be always shaped individually by every detail as one strategy does not work well in every change project (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). One should have a deep understanding of the issues which are involved in the change, in order to have an effective change management (Heracleous, 2003).

In recent years, researchers have assumed a micro-level viewpoint towards change, and concentrated on the people within the organization (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999). These researchers argue that organizations only change and function as a result of the people who belong to the organization, and the only way to achieve a lasting successful change is when people change the way the work in accordance with the change (Jones, Jimmieson, & Griffiths, 2005; Meyer, Srinivas, Lal, & Topolnytsky, 2007; Weeks, Roberts, Chonko & Jones, 2004). Consequently, in line with this concept, organizational change evolves around the employees (Porras & Robertson, 1992; Tetenbaum, 1998). There is a great deal of research conducted about employees and their readiness, commitment and openness to change as well as their cynicism about organizational change (Choi, 2011). However, little research has been conducted about how the several change initiatives are interpreted from the perspective of the employees.

An interesting context to study the employee's interpretation of this is in schools, since schools in recent years have been subject to many changes and it is often the principals and the teachers who have to respond to these ambitious demands for change (Andrews & Rothman, 2002). A critical factor for success is the teachers' attitude towards change, as well as their readiness to be involved in the change (Day & Gu, 2007). Yet, change efforts in schools are generally met with resistance, and a teacher's willingness or unwillingness to change can decide if an initiative will be successful or not (Zimmerman, 2006). It has been argued that a majority of teacher in fact "simply want to hear nothing of reform, innovation, new forms of teaching and so on" (Terhart, 2013 p. 487). Furthermore, the author argues that the teachers feel forced to engage in reforms and development processes, as the decision makers and the teachers are miles apart (Terhart, 2013). In addition, Fullan & Hargreaves (1996) warned that a lot of change efforts in schools essentially prevent teachers from developing and growing in their work. Schools are no exceptions from the low success rates of change projects, and most change efforts in schools fail (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Resistance to change is one of the major reasons why changes in school are unsuccessful, and

therefore it is crucial to discover how teachers experience and feel about change, before any efforts can be made to overcome the resistance (Zimmerman, 2006).

The following research question will guide us in our study:

- How do employees interpret working in a changing organization?

By answering this question, we believe we can contribute to the organizational change theory with additional knowledge and developed insights regarding the significance of understanding employees' interpretations of working in an organization undergoing changes. The current literature claims that organizations need to change in order to survive, yet little research has been conducted regarding how employees interpret changes or if this need for change can be damaging. Furthermore, there is a critical discrepancy between all the talk of change and what truly happens in organizations (Alvesson, 2013). We will contribute with how the employees interpret all this talk of change. In regard to what is stated previously, it can be concluded that employees are subject to changes in various forms. In addition, it has been argued that the employees play a major role in whether the changes are successful or not, and a reason why many change initiatives fail. Therefore, we believe it is important to investigate how the employees interpret working in a changing organization.

## 1.2 Thesis Outline

*The first chapter of the thesis* will introduce the reader to the topic of organizational change. Furthermore, the chapter will problematize the subject of the thesis and introduce the background of the topic. The aim of this thesis will be discussed in this chapter and will be empirically and theoretically grounded.

*The second chapter* will present the methodological choices and the research design. It will offer an in-depth explanation of the data collection, sample and analysis process and lastly a discussion of the importance of reflexivity will follow.

*The third chapter* will introduce the reader with organizational change theory which is relevant in understand this study. The chosen theory will enable the authors to analyze empirical data and draw the right conclusions in the discussion of this thesis.

*The fourth chapter* will present and analyze the empirical material concerning how teachers interpret working in a changing organization. Change interpreted from three different perspectives will be presented.

*The fifth chapter* will present a discussion based on empirical material, analysis and theoretical framework. The authors will discuss how employees interpret working in an organization undergoing changes.

## 2 Methodology

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### 2.1 Qualitative Research

According to Merriam (2002) reality is socially constructed, and people encounter different realities as a result of their own constructions and interpretations of their surroundings. Consequently, we believe that the best way to conduct our study, and to understand interpretations of employees, is to do a qualitative case study. Merriam (2002) states that qualitative research is an attempt to understand circumstances in their uniqueness, as a part of a specific context and the interactions within. Furthermore, when conducting qualitative research, it is essential to understand the significance with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by people in interaction with their environment (Merriam, 2002). Finally, qualitative research enables us to get a comprehensive understanding of teacher's interpretations and sense-making of their role.

In qualitative research, it is crucial to establish a scheme of how the study in focus should be outlined (Backman, 1998). Considering that there are several approaches to this type of research, the methods are not determined, and an outline has not been defined (Bryman and Bell, 2011). For this study, it is going to be essential to understand different individuals' insight and understanding regarding one key phenomenon. By conducting a study that looks for resemblance and/or discrepancy among the answers from our interviews, we have facilitated for this. Consequently, our empirical material is supported on one central source; interviews.

### 2.2 Research Design

For our research, we will use the interpretive paradigm, due to the fact stated by Burrell & Morgan (1979) that all social scientists create explicit or implicit presumptions in agreement

with the nature of the social world, and these presumptions affect how they conduct their study. The paradigm set forth that social reality is the result of the subjective and intersubjective experience of individuals (Morgan, 1980) and intends to comprehend the fundamental nature of the world (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Our understandings are depended on employees' interpretations within an organization. Since the interpretative paradigm questions if "organizations exist in any real sense beyond the conceptions of social actors" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 24) examining the field from individual's subjective experiences are therefore suitable for our research. Qualitative research also goes hand in hand with the interpretive paradigm, since qualitative research essentially is interpretive, meaning that the data is interpreted by the researcher (Wolcott, 1994).

Interpretations and explorations of several contexts is the base of our research. Our interviews lead to an understanding of the environment the people we interview work in and how they experience it. Because our study is based on questions of how people comprehend experiences within a change setting, it is vital for us as researchers to carry out comprehensive analysis of our empirical findings. As Merriam (2002) suggests we will be mindful that we, as researchers function as primary tools for the data collection and analysis, and are individually subject to create knowledge and sense-making from our own understanding of the attained insights. This position impact and choose the design of our research and how we are going to conduct it (Merriam, 2002).

Throughout our thesis we hold a social constructed reality, a fact that will affect our research strategy. When carrying out qualitative research, the world is viewed as socially constructed by actor's interactions (Merriam, 2002), which is something we comprehend and acknowledge. Furthermore, we regard that there are numerous realities and no absolute truth, since individuals are involved. Considering our research will be based on our curiosity concerning sense-making of employees, our intent is to research how employees understand their surroundings and their specific social contexts, as suggested by Sandberg & Targama (2007). This approach highlights the fact that reality can vary and is continually changing, and one suitable way to understand it is to make sense of actor's individual subjective understandings and meanings.

## 2.3 Presentation of the Case

For our study, we use a targeted selection and the participants have been selected based on the applicability of their interpretations in relevance to the study. Merriam (1994) states that a targeted sample is based on what the researchers intend to make sense of and explore. In addition, Bryman (2008) explains that a targeted selection cannot create a universal result; hence it is solely showing the present understandings and outcomes. Chain sampling is used in our study, which Bryman (2008) describes as when the researcher starts with contacting a small number of people, who can link the researcher with other contacts. Furthermore, due to the limited time frame we used a convenience sample, which is explained by Bryman (2008) as using the people who are available to the researcher.

To carry out our research we first searched for an organization, which has faced many changes. We choose to focus on teachers in Sweden, since they according to Lundahl, Erixon Arreman, Lundström & Rönnberg (2010) have been subject to several changes and reforms during the last years. The authors argue that a reason for the many changes as been “a need to adapt education to rapid changes in working life” (Lundahl et al., 2010 p. 54). Another major change has been the Education Act (2010:800) which came into effect July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011. This act, among other things, introduced a new grading scale and knowledge requirements. The act also introduced a teacher certification requirement, which means that all teachers in Sweden need to be certified by the Swedish National Agency for Education to be entitled to permanent employment or have the right to set grades (Skolverket, 2017). A study made by the Swedish National Agency for Education illustrates that teachers believe the new Education Act (2010:800) is clearer compared to the previous education act. However, they feel that it is harder in practice to grade the students with the new grading scale. Furthermore, four out of five teachers experience that the reform contributes to a lack of time to do their work, and increases their stress levels (Skolverket, 2015).

An additional element that has affected teachers in Swedish during the last years is the PISA debate. PISA, short for Program for International Student Assessment, “*is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students*” (OECD, 2017). In 2012 Sweden had the worst result development of all OECD countries and the Director-general for the Swedish National Agency for Education commented the results by saying “The situation is serious when it

comes to the development of knowledge in school” (Skolverket, 2013). This has led to a huge debate regarding the Swedish school, and the debate is still ongoing (Örstadius & Delin, 2016; TT, 2016).

As depicted above, public schools have during the last couple of years been subject to many changes, consequently we thought Lund’s Municipality was a suitable area to carry out our study. Lund’s Municipality consists of nine urban areas where around 119 000 people live. Lund City is the administrative center of the municipality and the city is shaped by its university, which has 40 000 full time students and thousands of researchers. The City of Lund is one of the biggest employers, alongside the Skåne University Hospital and Lund University.

Lund’s Municipality is a politically governed organization, including the Board of Education. The political majority in the municipality has often changed (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2017). Since political parties tend to have different opinions regarding their aspirations with schools (Rosén, 2013) political reforms concerning schools usually occur when there is a new political majority. A consequence of those constant changes in politics is that directives from the Board of Education also shift (Lunds kommun, 2017b) and the public schools in Lund Municipality are therefore subject to many changes. There are 57 different comprehensive schools in Lund municipality, 46 of these are public and 11 are private (Lunds kommun, 2017a). We decided to contact all comprehensive public schools in Lund’s Municipality and interview teachers to gain an extensive understanding of how they interpret working for an organization subject to changes. We emailed the principals of the comprehensive public schools, who then put us in touch with the teachers available during the time period we suggested. In total we interviewed eleven teachers from six different schools.

## 2.4 Data collection

The interviews were conducted over a three week period. We held semi-structured interviews, supported by an interview guide. The reason for having semi-structured interviews was to have an opportunity to prepare the questions in advance, and also react to the answers given by the people we interviewed, and ask them to develop further, as suggest by Merriam (2002). Furthermore, May (2001) states that semi-structured interviews are an advantages when there is an uncertainty what the people being interviewed will answer. This gives the researcher an

opportunity to get a comprehensive view of subjects they think are interesting, and ask other questions. The answers offered context for follow-up questions, which facilitated more explanation and higher level of understanding, as recommended by Kvale (1996). This particularly contributed to us understanding of how teachers make sense of their experiences. May (2001) states that another advantage with semi-structured interviews is the possibility to conduct the interviews like a normal conversation. This can make the interviewee feel more relaxed and willing to share more, compared to a structured context.

We requested to conduct all the interviews in the schools of the participants, their natural setting. As recommended by Rossman & Rallis (1998) this was to ensure they felt as comfortable as possible, and to receive as useful observation and analysis as possible. While conducting the interviews, we made sure to not ask leading questions, which could alter the answers of the participants. During the interviews we did not aspire to achieve actual conclusions regarding the researched phenomenon. Instead we wanted to develop knowledge and sense-making by social and contextual understanding, and to understand the research phenomenon from the participants' view, as suggested by Merriam (2002).

While conducting our research we have made sure to comply with the ethical principles regarding our data collection. These principles are critical to acknowledge, ensuring that the study do not cause any harm towards our research organization or any of the participants in our interviews. The principles require assuring the voluntary participation, privacy, learned agreement and anonymity (Bryman, 2008). Before starting the interviews, we asked for permission to record the interviews, promised the teachers anonymity and that their participation was voluntary and could be ended at any time. Throughout the thesis, we only refer to the participants as teachers, since we believe it is not important for the study or for the reader to know additional information of the participants. The teachers had between 4 and 40 years of experience of the profession, teaching various classes and age groups in comprehensive school.

## 2.5 Data analysis

The analysis of our empirical material was done alongside the collection of data, as is necessary in qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). After every interview, we had a brief discussion regarding what we found interesting during the interview. When analyzing

the data we had collected, we made sure to keep in mind the biases we potentially could have. Hence it was critical to make sense of the teachers own connotations, and not be controlled by our interpretation, biases and presumptions. We also understand that both researchers and participants have personal ideas and preceding understandings. Therefore we followed Alvesson & Sköldbberg's (2009) advice to go in depth and search for the less apparent.

To accomplish this, we started the analysis of our data by carefully reading and going through the notes we had made during the interview, as well as transcribing the interviews. While undertaking this, we followed the advice of Bryman & Bell (2005) and took notes of what we found most interesting and significant. Both researchers read through all the data very meticulously, and simultaneously we documented intriguing aspects and quotes, while considering the research question. The next step was sorting and categorizing the notes, as well as identifying patterns and recurring themes. Identifying recurring themes was useful, since it according to Merriam (2002) results in a greater reliability and validity. During the analysis, we interpreted data and themes which allowed us to make connections to our research question, as suggested by Backman (1998).

The research has had an abductive approach, and as explained by Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2009) this has made us free to go back and forth between our theoretical framework and empirical material. The empirical framework has been refined consecutively during the research process, and chosen literature and theories have been amended, contingent upon themes and discoveries in the data.

## 2.6 Reflexivity

In order to create a credible thesis, with a high level of reliability, we have adopted a reflexive standpoint and we are critical to our discoveries, as suggested by Cresswell (2003). As a result, we have followed the advice of Ahrne & Svensson (2011) and pursued a detailed explanation of the research process as possible. Furthermore, in order to be reflexive, we have considered how our background can influence the result of our research. For example, both researcher have been students and gone to comprehensive school, and have preconceptions regarding how it is to be a teacher and how schools operate. To minimize our biases, we have in agreement with what Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2009) suggest, undertaken a critical viewpoint towards them and their impact on the research process.

When conducting qualitative research there are no absolute truths or realities, which we are aware of. Furthermore, our thesis consists of a large number of information that enables subjective understandings and comprehension. Therefore we have, as suggested by Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2009) thoroughly observed the interviewees and the social context and comprehensively analyzed our data to grasp the deeper meanings and not fixate on facts or random relationships.

We are aware that one central problem with qualitative research is that the participants can answer questions the way they think the interviewers wants them to be answered. Thus, as advised by Merriam (2002) we did not accept the empirical material, instead we acknowledged the subjective takes and presumptions of the participants, including our own. When conducting the interviews, we were aware and mindful of how we formulated our questions, for example in what order we asked the questions and how we addressed them.

## 3 Theoretical framework

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*The third chapter will introduce the reader with organizational change theory which is relevant in understand this study. The chosen theory will enable the authors to analyze empirical data and draw the right conclusions in the discussion of this thesis.*

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### 3.1 Background

In order to conduct our research, it is vital to understand what organizational change is. Research shows that the definition of organizational change is often neglected and academics most often have emphases on why and how organizations change instead of answering to the question what is change (Quattrone & Hopper, 2001; Lawrence, 1989). Organizational change is about transforming structures and operations. Furthermore management control systems undergo organizational changes when new tools are implemented (Quattrone & Hopper, 2001). Research implies that change originates from deliberate actions which are in line with organizational objectives and external reality (Quattrone & Hopper, 2001). However, “contextualism argues that change results from institutional pressures, isomorphism and routines” (Quattrone & Hopper, 2001, p. 403). Both conceptualists and individuals agree that change is a part of entity where something is identifiably changed from one status to another (Quattrone & Hopper, 2001). Furthermore organizational change is seen as a flexibility and ability to promptly adapt to different and new situation (Coleman & Thomas, 2017).

There are several reasons why organizations change. Researchers have explained that changes in top management often lead to organizational change (Haveman, Russo & Meyer, 2001). Furthermore Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) have a deeper and wider view on what triggers organizational changes. The authors explain that the pressure for change can originate from several directions, which are either environmental or internal pressures for change. The authors explain that environmental pressure can be treated under six headings: geopolitics, fashion, demography, mandates, reputation and hyper-competition. These can be exemplified by global warming, trends in the industry, boomers, high-velocity innovations, service failures and social responsibility (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). A similar view is shared by Alvesson & Sveningsson (2016 p. 15) who write that “Societal and cultural norms about what is politically and morally appropriate, pressure organizations in certain direction”.

It is important to understand that laws are imperfect and they change depending on the political situations and current norms. Organizations are bound to follow the legal requirements and are therefore inclined to change along with the political and legal changes (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016).

In contrast to external pressures, internal pressures that trigger organizational change can be listed as follows: company growth, managerial change, corporate identity, power and politics or integration and coordination (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). According to the authors, power and political pressure can be due to changes within an organization's management as well as due to internal conflicts which strive from power struggle. Alvesson & Sveningsson (2016) explain that political pressure can also be explained by deregulation. Furthermore the authors suggest that technological pressure also has a vital impact for organizations to change. New technology development and communication tools influences organizations to promote globalization even further (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). However, technology development can be seen problematic from the management perspective. It is not easy to convince people to accept new information technology systems, which can make their knowledge obsolete (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017).

Organizational change can also be seen as a value-adding behavior along with political, environmental and economic change pressures (Lawrence, 1989). The author explains the reason why organizations change is due to different stakeholders and their power struggle. A changing workforce can also explain organizational change as the employees' skills and their style to do their work changes. Strategy and structure of the company are forever evolving and leads to changes within the company (Lawrence, 1989). Since Lund's Municipality is part of the public sector, the next section will give a background of organizational change within the public sector.

### 3.1.1 Organizational Change in the Public Sector

Coram and Burnes (2001) argue that organizational changes in the public sector can be compared with organizational change in the private sector. However, research shows that there are differences between the private and public sectors that may influence an organizational change (Leslie & Tilley, 2004). These factors include the number of laws that the public sector must consider, the obligation to manage the funds from taxpayers as well as possible, and meet the needs of service and quality expected by both individuals and politicians (Leslie & Tilley 2004, Coram & Burnes, 2001). The municipal organizational

structure, which primarily deals with humanitarian activities, places strong demands on the civil servants and politicians working in the municipal sector to work towards developing them. These demands can also act as an obstacle to organizational changes in the public sector and complicate the opportunities for enhanced communication and information flow in the organization (Leslie & Tilley, 2004).

According to Larsson (2008) Furthermore, the author states that communication in hierarchical organizations differs from flexible networks and project-based organizations. The hierarchical structure can work more rationally, continuously and more accurately than the freer structure found in project-structured organizations, however it should be noted that the author does not demonstrate that one is worse than the other (Larsson, 2008). Communication in the hierarchical organization requires significant times-specific meetings where the roles in the organization are to be applied. According to Larsson (2008) this fact can make hierarchical organizations more viscous and difficult to change.

## 3.2 Organizational Change Theory

Organizational change can be explained by several different theories. The four key theories are: teleological theory, life-cycle theory, dialectical theory and evolutionary theory (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). All of the aforementioned theories are unique and can be distinguished from each other. According to the first theory, teleological theory, organizations strive for purpose and ideal state by changing. This perspective sees change as a development, which moves the organization towards its final state without any particular direction. Weick (1979) explains that in teleological theory, goals are socially re-constructed and changed again according to new purpose.

The second theory, life cycle theory, claims that organizational change is imminent as organizations are part of external entities that have to adapt to the current situation (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). According to the author (1995, p. 513) the entity is affected by the “[...] life cycle of organizations, products, and ventures, as well as stages in the development of individual careers, groups, and organizations [...]”. The third theory, the dialectical theory, organizational change is explained by the assumption that there are different internal and external forces and values competing with each other. This results in changing organizational entity according to the dominating forces (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995).

Lastly, organizational change can be explained by evolutionary theory that sees change as a cycle of variation, selection and retention (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). Variations are viewed as something unpredictable and random (Aldrich, 1979; Campbell, 1969) whereas selection occurs due to niches and competition between organizations (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). Retention, the last part of the cycle, protects and maintains previous practices and ensures stability. Evolutionary change is gradual and irregular (George & Jones, 2007) and it aims to adapt to the current environment (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

According to the authors, episodic changes can be perceived to occur when an organization faces a problematic period and can therefore be considered a failure to implement, since they have to be done quickly without warning, and become something that destroys everyday activities. Episodic changes are rarely occurring and often deliberate from the management or the manager's side (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Czarniawska (2011) argues that episodic changes are problematic as these can cause concern and turbulence.

Continuous change, on the other hand, has no quick start or end because it takes small steps forward. It is adaptable and has a slow transition (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Furthermore, Czarniawska (2011) argues that continuous change is preferable, since employees need time to accept new things. However, Orlikowski (1996) states that continuous change processes are hard to detect which makes it hard to conclude when a change has happened. Since it is difficult to define and measure continuous change, is it hard to see if the change was beneficial. Thus, continuous change processes becomes hard to anticipate, manage, or analyze (Orlikowski, 1996).

Episodic change and continuous change are not mutually exclusive opposites, instead the viewpoints offer different understandings of the same phenomena. By using both approaches, a sharper view of change can be achieved (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

### 3.2.1 A Process Perspective towards Change

When doing research concerning the organizational change management field, many researchers discuss the difference between a planned and a process perspective regarding how to view change (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2015). Since the aim of this thesis is to give an understanding of employees' interpretations of working in an organization undergoing changes, change will be viewed from a process perspective. The reason for this is that a central characteristic for the process perspective, according to Weick (1995) is how people

perceive, interpret and understand a situation. Furthermore, according to Sveningsson & Sörgärde (2015) change is seen as the result of people's daily communication, talk, decisions and actions. For example, it can be an ambition from the management to adapt the organization to changes in the environment. However it can also be about political power struggles between different departments as to which interest should be prioritized, or an individual's' attempt to launch an alternative view of how the organization should achieve renewal (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2015).

According to the process perspective, organizational change is viewed as an ongoing process that takes place in relationships, where sense-making is a central aspect (Jian, 2011, Thomas, Sargent & Hardy, 2011) and the organization is continuously changing (Tsoukas & Chia 2002, Weick & Quinn, 1999). The process perspective puts great emphasis on understanding how individuals interpret and perceive situations, and there are usually no unanimous interpretations of how change is perceived and motivated. In particular, the process perspective examines how those involved in a change are viewing and relate to the process of change (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2015).

Sveningsson & Sörgärde (2015) states that it is of significance in the process perspective to build upon how those involved in and affected by changes experience the situation. One cannot assume that plans are implemented in the way they are formulated. On the contrary, the interpretations of these, as well as any change attempts, are made by those involved in the change, based on personal experiences, backgrounds, interests, wishes, dreams, hopes and identities (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2015). Consequently, it is important to follow the course of change and consider what impact the recipients, usually the employees, have on the change (Helms-Mills, 2003).

Boje, Burnes & Hassard (2012) states that the processual perspective views change as a continuous, active and disputed process which “emerges in an unpredictable and unplanned fashion” (Boje, Burnes & Hassard, 2012 p. 133). The perspective takes an interpretative position to facilitate for the chaotic character of organizational change. According to Sandström (2000) change viewed from a process perspective has in recent years become a frequently adopted buzzword. The argument for this, according to the author, is that the world we live in is no longer viewed as something steady and constant. Rather, it has become more popular to examine organizations as accessible and dynamic systems (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Earlier, change was for the most part considered as rare instead of

something common. However, today, organizations are constantly changing (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

### 3.3 Individual's Perspective of Change

#### 3.3.1 Sense-Making and Shared Understanding of Change

Organizational changes are often very complex, challenging and time consuming. During a change process, it is crucial to comprehend how people within the organization interpret the change (Weick, 1995). Sense-making is a vital part to discuss and analyze when attempting to comprehend how members of the organization understands changes. The reason for this is that the sense-making perspective can be applied as an instrument to achieve an understanding of the individuals belonging to the organization (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013).

Sense-making is defined as the process where individuals give meaning to their experiences, and the perspective examine how employees create and recreate the organization (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013). The organizational sense-making perspective is described by Weick (1995) as a developing set of ideas with descriptive capabilities. The process perspective, mentioned previously, has according to Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld (2005) a main element of sense-making, because it focuses on the significance of individuals. Furthermore, Balogun (2006) argues that the people who are impacted by a change have a major role when determining and producing the results of the change. The way individuals make sense of what is happening will affect the result. Sense-making should not be viewed as stable and constant, instead it should be seen as changing a continuous process (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013; Sandberg & Targama, 2007; Weick, 1995).

During a change process it is critical that organizations form a shared understanding of the phenomenon (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Smircich & Morgan (1982) states that establishing a collective system of meaning regarding what the organization should be doing is vital in order to produce great individual and group results. Meanwhile it is also an individual and social process, people have their own perception of the world, although it is broadened and formed by others. This collective and shared understanding may emerge as important for changes to evolve and be preserved. Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep in

mind that individuals will make sense and understand what is happening differently (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Sense-making is a continuous activity (Weick 1995; Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000). However, these actions are usually about clarifying current understanding. In order for organizations to change or develop how employees make sense and understand of happenings, events that invite to reflection are needed (Sandberg & Targama, 2007).

### 3.3.2 Organizational change cynicism

If the way employees make sense and understand an organizational change differs from the actual content of the change, employees can react with cynicism toward the change (Dawson, 2003). Research concerning organizational change cynicism is relatively new (Cole, Bruch & Vogel, 2006) and the concept needs to be separated from skepticism. Even though both cynics and skeptics share apprehension about the success of change, their belief towards management's reason for the change differs. While skeptics "doubt the likelihood of success but are still reasonably hopeful that positive change will occur" (Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997 p. 48) cynicism can occur "if management has a track record of making promises it cannot keep or if the hype is simply unbelievable" (Fleming, 2005, p. 290). Thus, cynics are much less optimistic about the change. Abraham (2000) concludes that by being cynical to a change, it prevents the employees from genuinely participating in the change, which consequently ensures the failure of the change.

Organizational cynicism usually occurs when management is seen as "being unmotivated, incompetent or both" (Wanous, Reichers & Austin, 2000). It has been estimated that around two-thirds of all change project fail and that change does not necessarily lead to something better (Burk & Biggard, 1997, Beer & Nohria 2000). Failed change processes could explain why there is employee cynicism towards change initiatives (Thundiyl, Chiaburu, Oh, Banks, & Peng, 2015). According to Reichers, Wanous & Austin (1997) cynicism can be minimized by admitting mistakes when they occur, apologizing, and quickly taking appropriate corrective action. A two-way communication is critical factor to success in order for the managers to be aware of how employees perceive and interpret the change. By addressing people's fears it can help them to overcome their concerns and help them to give the change a chance (Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997).

### 3.3.3 Functional stupidity

Another concept that relates to organizational change and individual's perspective of change is functional stupidity. Scrutiny and complying with rules has become a normal way to manage an organization and this is a standard especially within the public sector (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). According to the authors, complying with rules and doing what you are being told has a link to functional stupidity.

As a concept, functional stupidity is relatively new. It was first established by Mats Alvesson and André Spicer and the concept has received a great deal of attention within the academics (Butler, 2016). According to Alvesson and Spicer (2016 p. 239) functional stupidity can be defined as:

*"[...] Functional stupidity is inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways. It involves lack of reflexivity, a disinclination to require or provide justification, and avoidance of substantive reasoning"*

Alvesson and Spicer (2016) explain functional stupidity as a lack of reflexivity and the incapacity to produce critical thinking about one's work and see what the consequences of one's work are. This is also known as substantive reasoning (Butler, 2016). According to Alvesson and Spicer (2016) functional stupidity is linked especially to politics and power. Despite of the name, functional stupidity should not be linked to stupid people, and according to Alvesson & Spicer (2016 p. 9) "You need to be relatively intelligent to be functionally stupid". Paulsen (2017, p. 205) supports this view by stating that "functional stupidity in itself is unreflective in the sense that one cannot think about it without being reflective, thus suspending the stupidity". Furthermore, Alvesson & Spicer (2016) highlight that when people are functionally stupid it enables them to use their intellectual resources on what they wish to focus on.

Functional stupidity can be examined by both constructive and destructive views. According to the constructive view functional stupidity can accelerate decision making as people do not question as easily (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). This allows people to work without interruptions. The authors state that functional stupidity can also mean that people trust the organization they are working for, and they do not feel that it is necessary to question the decision makers. In contrary, when functional stupidity is viewed destructively, it can be seen as a factor making people think with a too narrow perspective, as they stop asking questions

(Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). This can be demonstrated by overlooking problems, and result in accumulated problems, as they are not dealt with in time (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016).

Alvesson & Spicer (2016) divide functional stupidity into five different categories: Leadership-induced stupidity, Structure-induced stupidity, Imitation-Induced Stupidity, Branding-Induced Stupidity and Culture-Induced Stupidity.

In the first form, leadership-induced stupidity, employees develop a profound faith in their leader and have a very strong faith in the leader's power (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). According to the authors, the second form of stupidity, structure-induced stupidity occurs when people accept presses and systems even though they see that they are unsuccessful. The third form of functional stupidity, imitation-induced stupidity occurs when companies imitate each other. The fourth form, branding-induced stupidity occurs when people have "untrammeled enthusiasm for brands and images" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016 p. 18). The final form of functional stupidity, culture-induced stupidity occurs in an organization where the company culture can even encourage people to be functionally stupid (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Organizational culture has an effect on how people make assumptions, what kind of practices they use and it also affects employees to have certain beliefs, which all enable people to work smoother without thinking every step they take (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). This may be beneficial for a company if employees do not question decision making as it saves time.

Butler (2016) has questioned functional stupidity. The author challenges the widely held view on functional stupidity and claims that Alvesson and Spicer do not have empirical material to support their claims. Butler (2016) also criticizes the authors for using ambiguous words for instance: *most organizations*, *some organizations* and *in many instances*, instead of giving real examples. According to Butler (2016) other researchers also challenge the authors with the same critique and they suggest that functional stupidity should be researched further in order to gain a deeper understanding on the topic. Paulsen (2017) also recommends future research to gather general data in order to understand are we indeed living in a stupidity-based economy.

Based on Butler's critique on functional stupidity, the authors want to contribute further to this concept and study if traces of functional stupidity among the teachers in Lund's

Municipality can be found. Furthermore, the authors are interested in the consequences of being functionally stupid.

## 4 Multiple Interpretations of Change

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*The fourth chapter will present and analyze the empirical material concerning how teachers interpret working in a changing organization. Change interpreted from three different perspectives will be presented.*

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### 4.1 Introduction

As mentioned before, we have conducted interviews with eleven teachers at six different schools in Lund's Municipality. Overall the teachers have been very open when talking to us, and we feel that they have been able to speak freely about their experiences. According to our study, the way teacher interpret working in a changing organization can be divided into three different perspectives. Firstly, most teachers interpret organizational change as a necessity in order to develop and progress. Secondly, teachers experience a great deal of pressure in relations to the changes. Lastly, the teachers embrace change and see it as a way forward. However, the lack of being able to influence the changes has led to that most of the teachers feel powerless and detached. The following analysis will cover the teachers' interpretations about working for changing organization from multiple perspectives, and illustrate how our findings appear in practice.

### 4.2 Change Interpreted as a Necessity

In this part of the analysis we will present our main findings considering how teachers interpret change as a necessity will be presented. A short summary of the main finding in this part of the analysis will first be presented, to give the reader an overview of the material that will follow. It can be concluded that teachers interpret change as a necessity in order to progress, and a way to move forward. A well-functioning education system is a cornerstone in a well-functioning society. The world we live in continuously change, and therefore schools must adapt and change with the society. However, our findings also show that the teachers believe that not all changes that happen are necessary, it depends on the scope of the change, and the reasons behind the change. Furthermore, most of the teachers we interviewed had positive attitude towards changes. Many of them viewed changes as something excited, and a

way to bring in new ideas and approaches. Nevertheless, a downside is that many changes cause less stability in the organization, which can be frustrating, especially for younger teachers who still need to find their place in the profession.

Most of the teachers expressed that changes are needed in order to move forward and develop. An argument for this was that our society changes continuously, and therefore organizations that are a part of the society must also change continuously. Furthermore, if the society does not change it will not progress, since the world is constantly evolving. An example given by one teacher is that comprehensive school started in Sweden in 1842, and if schools would have been the same today as they were in 1842 it probably would not work. Another teacher reflected by saying “A society that doesn’t change is a dying society”. Many of the more experienced teachers also stated that the aim of their work, teaching, has not changed. However the teaching methods have changed, mostly because of changes in society.

The internet is one example of a change in society that has had a big impact on the teachers. One teacher states that internet has made working much easier, since digital tools can be used when teaching. An example of this is showing a video on YouTube when trying to explain something that can be difficult for the student to understand without a visual perspective. However, the teacher continues, the digitalization also makes teaching harder, since the demands on administrating and registering data in systems have increased. This goes in line with what other teachers expressed. Several teachers talked about Unikum, a system that the teachers have to use for documentation. The thoughts about the system varied somewhat between the different teachers we talked to: “I don’t mind it, I think it is good for ourselves to document stuff”, “it is a good system that helps you in your daily work”, “it takes a lot of time and gives us a lot of unnecessary work”. The teachers also experienced that the training they received regarding how to use the system was insufficient and at a low level. One teacher described her experience of the training in the following way:

*“I went to the training...all the teacher in this area was at the same training and everyone has to be on the same level... I am quite computer literate, and I ended up not learning anything. There were a lot of people, who couldn't get their computer to start, and then they had to download the right program, and then we ended up sitting for about two hours and I hadn't learnt anything”*

This quote can be seen as an illustration of how the teachers perceive the changes in their work, which has been done as a consequence of the digital changes in society. These changes affect teachers differently, depending on their previous experience. This can lead to that teachers interpret these changes very differently, for example depending on their computer knowledge. A general conclusion is that the teachers interpret that several changes that have been made due to how the society have developed from a digital perspective has led to more administrative work for the them. However the opinions regarding the benefits of these changes differ. New research, rules and regulations are another reason why changes in schools occur. Many teachers stated that schools change because research discovers that there are more efficient ways to work. One teacher expresses it the following way:

*“You are never fully learned, you always have to move forward and listen to research and what’s new so you don’t stagnate in one position and just do what you did in the eighties. People are changing and so is everything”*

This quote goes in line with the previous statements that school needs to change because the environment is changing. The following quote sums up how several teachers interpret the way change is seen as progressing: “Change is to improve the quality of teaching and to improve schools [...] changes are not just for myself, but to make schools generally better”. This quote illustrates what most teachers have stated in the interviews; they see changes in school as a necessity in order to develop. Adjusting to new research, rules and regulations is also a way to move forward and adapt to the changes in society. One teacher develops further and states that the trends in society affect schools:

*“There is a lot of trends in the schools [...] in this municipality we follow a trend [...] and that has consequences that I have to follow with my students [...] I would have to say that trends affect me more than organizing changing very much. There is no common theme in the trends, they usually tend to go from one trend to another, they don’t hook into each other. It just now it’s this guru, this person’s theory that is popular here”*

This quote also illustrates the problem of following new trends, especially when there is no common theme with the trends, and they do not latch on to each other. Instead they often pop up, the way many teacher experience that they do. However, as long as there are new trends and research, the teachers believe schools will continue to change.

Although there is a consensus that changes in general are necessary, not all the changes that continuously happen are depicted as necessary. One teacher describes it the following way

“To say that changes are necessary, is maybe pushing it a bit too far. It is necessary to change, but all the changes aren’t always necessary”. Another teacher expressed the following: “If you can do things in more effective and sufficient way, you need to change”. However, as illustrated by the first quote, not all changes that are made be necessary and the teachers experience that some changes are rolled back after a couple of months or years, since they were not suitable. In general, the teachers express that external changes, which are more likely to be more thought through, tend to stick. In contrast, changes that happen quickly are generally experienced as unnecessary. The following quotes shows how one teacher reflects when asked about if all the changes are necessary: “Yes, they are necessary. What's not necessary is doing very big changes, people go crazy if the changes are too big, people need small changes”.

During our interviews a majority expressed that they are positive towards change and likes it, nevertheless they had several colleagues who were not as positive. One teacher expressed the following: ”Change in itself is not something necessary, but I believe that the will to change in a positive way is essential in a workplace”. In addition, many teachers felt that a person’s attitude towards change is dependent on one’s personality, and most of the teachers viewed themselves as a positive person. Several teachers expressed that they see changes as something exciting; they look forward to changes and welcome them. For example, one teacher stated “I like changes, otherwise I get bored. I’ve been doing this for a long thing, so I need to bring in something new”. In addition, the teacher stated a belief that it is important to be positive towards changes, try them and enforce them. Otherwise people might stop having ideas. Another teacher was also very positive towards changes, during the interview and said: “I embrace change, it makes life more fun”.

On the other hand, many teachers expressed that they have colleagues who do not share the same enthusiasm for changes. One teacher experienced that some of the colleagues’ feel that they are just there to do their work, and do not care about the changes. In addition, the teacher perceived that a lot of the colleagues do not like changes, and try to hold on to the way they always have done things. Another teacher stated “for me most of the changes have been for the better. But I’m sure not everyone would say that”. A conclusion from this is that the teachers, who volunteered to be interviewed by us, do not represent the interpretations of all teachers. Furthermore, just because the teachers told us they are positive and embrace changes; it does not necessarily have to be the case in their daily work.

When asked about the necessity of change, some teacher also reflected about if they see changes as good or bad. Their answers show that changes are usually perceived as “good” when teachers can understand why they need to change, and the changes are followed-up. For example, most of the teachers we interviewed were positive towards the new grading system, which was a part of the new Education Act (2010:800). Although the teachers seem to agree that the implementation of the new grading system could have been smoother, most of the teachers experienced that, in a large extent, it was a change was for the better, since they could see the need for change. On the other hand, many teachers stated that they sometimes do not really understand why something is changing and then it can be more difficult to have a positive attitude towards the change. The following quote illustrates how one teacher reflects about changes:

*“Changes are good, and a change only occur when there is a need. If you walk along a path, and then you stumble upon something you need to examine it and maybe change. But if something is going well, then you can be secure in that, but then you can also get comfortable and be too secure, and not notice the need for change. However, change for the sake of change might not be needed”*

Changing for the sake of change is something several teachers bring up. Most of them agree that change for the change of sake is unnecessary, yet they experience that it has happened. This is illustrated by the following quote: “I don’t like change for the sake of change. Sometimes I have felt when the organization has shifted or broken up it’s been for the sake of changing, and that’s not good.” Overall, the changes the teachers have experienced can be interpreted as both good and bad. However, it was demonstrated during the interviews that the implementation of a change has a large effect on how teachers interpret the change. For example, one teacher stated: “changes can be both good and bad, but if there is chaos in between, when implementing the changes, that is not good”.

When talking about the implementation of new grading system, all teachers thought it was poorly prepared. One teacher said: “Everyone was confused; many people are still confused, sometimes I am”. In addition, a few teachers mention that when doing changes, there is also a need to evaluate them, which they thought the schools often forgot. For example, one teacher expressed an irritation regarding this and expressed: “it is impossible to evaluate all the changes, in the same rate as the changes happen” and another teacher expressed the same frustration by stating “I don’t feel that we follow-up how it is going”. In summary, a smooth

implementation process of changes will in general make teachers have a more positive interpretation of the changes.

During our interviews, some teachers also expressed a need for more stability, when asked about their ability to concentrate on their daily work.

*“There are new things happening all the time and I can’t give my heart to everything. I feel stressed, a bit torn and confused. I am not sure what to focus on and I don’t understand why we are doing all these things”*

This is a quote from one of the teachers, displaying the downside with changes. Another teacher stated: “we need more stability, we can’t just change all the time, I want more stability, and peace and quiet” and continued by stating: “it takes a lot of time from planning my lesson and taking care of my students, what I really should be doing as a teacher” while a third teacher expressed that “it is an ongoing struggle, and of course you want to have time to plan for certain things [...] but sometimes I think people feel that there are too many things going on”. A fourth teacher added: “When you just learned it, it can be time to learn something new”. These quotes illustrate the images of teachers not quite confident in their work, expressing a need for more stability and frustration regarding the constant need for change.

Our interviews show, that the longer the interviewees had been a teacher, the more secure and confident they felt and acted. The teachers we interviewed who were more experienced, in contrast to the less experienced teacher, said that the changes do not affect their ability to do their daily work in a large extent. A teacher with quite many years of experience answered our question in the following way:

*“It takes a bit longer when you have to do something differently, but it is not a problem. When I try new things, I have to see how it is going, but often it is easy enough, I’m so experienced”*

In addition to saying this, the teacher did not show any signs of feeling stressed, or confused about work. We also interpret the same experience among other teachers we interviewed who had been teaching for several years. A reason for this might be because they are more experienced, and have learned how to deal with the changes the teachers are exposed to.

In summary, we have in the section demonstrated how teachers interpret changes in school as unavoidable. School is a part of society, and since the society changes continuously, schools must also change continuously. Therefore, the teachers interpret changes as a necessity. Research and trends in society are perceived by the teachers as reasons for change. However, not all changes the schools introduce are seen as necessary and the teachers sometimes are frustrated and experience changing is only for the sake of change. Most of the teachers also expressed a positive attitude towards change. This is the case especially when they experience that they understand the need for the change, and the change has a smooth implementation process. We also discovered that less experienced teachers feel it more difficult to handle the changes compared to more experienced teachers. Younger teachers showed more signs of feeling confused, and unsure in their profession. In the next section we will look at how teachers interpret change as pressure.

### 4.3 Change Interpreted as Pressure

According to our study, much of the instability in Lund's Municipality stems from pressure to change and in this part of the analysis we will present where the pressure for initiating changes strives from. The results of our study indicate that the pressure for change is mainly external, which was explained by the character of the organization. As a governmental organization the employees cannot create a pressure to change as much as external forces and political forces can. This is due to the character of the educational system and how it is governed and linked to politics. Therefore, the findings indicate that the main pressure for change is external and it strives from politics. Every fourth year the political power in Lund changes, which results in continuous changes as the dominant political party changes. Hence, most often than not the political reforms lead into reforming Lund's Municipality, including the schools.

*“I think it is the same reason for every Municipality [...]. We joke about every fourth year it's time for new change.[...] It is very popular to change school and make something new out of it”*

*“Change is quite often external. Sometimes some teachers have to go to a course and learn a new way of working with particular area and they might come back to the school*

*and try to bring it in. So that happens as well. So that is sort of internal change expect it is external in a sense that they learnt it on a course. So yes, external mostly”*

As the quotes state, teachers perceive changing school system as a very trendy among politicians. One teacher exemplified by stating that everyone has been to comprehensive school and therefore almost everyone has their own opinion to which way educational system should be developed. Furthermore, the pressure to change striving from the government is not unanimous, which is illustrated by the following quotes:

*“The Lund’s Municipality only changes because of the government [...] I think Lund’s Municipality does not really come up with anything on its own. Not much anyway. [...] But the government changes because they have different ideas about what is good at school and we have to follow the directors [...] and ministers”*

*“Government has different ideas what is good in schools “*

Opinions within the government differentiate from each other and decision making takes time. The direction of the changes depends on the political majority. However, the politicians usually want to change something, regardless of the party and the ideology of the new representatives. The changes and reforms made by politicians were seen sometimes more as political power struggle rather than an attempt to improve schools.

*“You get a feeling that every time we have an election in Sweden the new politicians want to show that now we are governing, that it is us and we are going to change everything to the better [...] and those sudden changes are not very well reflected on [...]. Very little is us providing ideas. It is more likely to be something that is decided above your head. It is not always the politicians that decide, it can be bosses as well”*

As the quote states, political reforms are interpreted as a way to show off who possess power within the decision makers. Our study shows that teachers’ criticize politics and power as teachers quite often do not hear about the reforms, which are made by politicians. This has been described as a frustrating factor as one can read about decision making from paper or by visiting plenary session. However, it can take time to hear about reforms from one’s employer, or one might not ever hear about them from a formal way. Our findings imply that communication was seen as imperfect and this was partly due to high hierarchy at the Lund’s Municipality.

*“Quite often you hear that they bring proposition for a law and then you don’t find out for a while whether it comes law or not. And then you can start to implement it anyway beforehand if you like it and if you don’t then wait and see if you have to”*

The aforementioned quote illustrates that teachers felt they had the power to implement new working methods even though they were not yet legally binding. However, our study indicates that teachers felt that they did not have the power to act as a change agents themselves. The main way to affect was by voting in elections. Furthermore, some teachers also felt that their primary job is to teach, plan lessons and find themselves as a teacher instead of affecting changes all the time. Therefore someone else leading the change was seen in a good way.

Teachers criticized the way politics and power created pressure to change. The evidence of this study suggests that the governing power does not always know what is actually happening in schools.

*“Teachers don’t usually put down on words what they know because teachers have a profession and we are quite good. You know if other people have a party for children and then they get 25 children to the house, it is chaos. But teachers can keep 25 children busy and working for a whole day. So we do have a profession and know how to deal with children and get them working but it is very hard to put it into words what that is. What it is that we actually know and how we do it?[...] So there is a profession that we haven’t really put into words what we can do”.*

*“The government does not have knowledge on what I do”*

*“Lack of perspective when doing changes”*

These quotes illustrate that teachers perceive their profession in a very unique way. The knowledge which the teachers possess is as a very unique competent and one cannot simply write down how to held a class or how to get children to be quiet. During these interviews it became clear that teachers question if the politicians and government are the right people to act as a change agents. The knowledge is something that one needs to learn by oneself. Due to the exclusive character of the knowledge which the teachers possess, it appeared meaningless to have pressure to change coming from politics and power, as people working in those positions do not have the knowledge to work as a teacher themselves. Therefore, it can be questioned, if the pressure to change is coming from the right direction.

Governmental and political pressures were not the only ones seen as a reason for changes. Reputation of the Swedish school system has been under constant evaluation and criticism as Sweden's PISA test results are not satisfying enough. Pressure for change was also seen as following after crises. During our interviews the teachers compared the Swedish and Finnish educational system several times and changes were made in order to raise Sweden's PISA results. Some of the teachers felt the pressure to change Lund's Municipality strived from the idea of solving existing problems and moving forward.

*"[...] I read an article that that was how they did it in Finland and they have much better results in Finland than in Sweden [...]"*

*"Crises create a need for change"*

The quotes above indicate what other teachers said as well, comparing Lund's Municipality to other organizations also outside Sweden, does lead to pressure and willingness to change. Furthermore, as an educational institution research was also seen as a factor leading to change initiatives. When new tools and new ways of working were discovered, it led to changes in working methods either by teachers experimenting new working methods by themselves or by adopting new legislations. The changes initiated by the teachers were mainly small, for example, having large pillows in the classroom enabled students to lie on the floor while listening. According to a study, a child learns better when they are not sitting on chair. On contrary, the big changes were usually initiated by government and politicians. A grading reform is a good illustration of a bigger change. Our study indicates that some of the changes were due to trends, and not only due to research. For politicians it was perceived to be trendy to change educational system, and for teachers it was trendy to try out new teaching methods.

Pressure for change was seen mainly as an external factor, striving from someone outside the school. However, we also discovered internal pressure for change, which often strived from the idea of solving a problem or developing used working methods and increasing efficiency. Moving from classroom to another or changing the school building is also a good illustration of internal change. The pressure was striving from growing student volume. However, it is important to keep in mind that our study showed differences regarding how changes were perceived. Some teachers said moving from building to another is a big change whereas some teachers did not see it as a major change at all. Furthermore, most teachers said they experience that their personality plays a vital part in how they interpret change and different pressures for change initiatives. This can be illustrated by the following quote.

*“The answers you will get from me are quite positive in regards in changes with organization. The communication sure is something they can improve since it's so bad. You can interview two persons, but their attitude can bring you completely different answers”*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, our study indicates that teachers see change as a necessity. Furthermore, by understanding the necessity for change, the teachers felt to understand why there were pressures for change. Even though the teachers saw the necessity and pressure for change, they did question occasionally whether the decisions were made under a lot of pressure without any clear purpose. The level of communication between the different origins of pressure was also criticized by teachers. It was not always clear what was happening and what is the reason for the change.

*“We moved. No reason for this [...] Now we are here and in a few months we might be in some other places. Costing a lot of money”*

The quote above display the frustration one teacher expressed. It became clear that cost efficiency and logic was not always present when changes were implemented. The frustration was caused by the lack of communication, hurry and the fact of being unaware of the different stages of the change processes. Furthermore, another teacher pointed out that Lund's Municipality is a very different from business environment where changes would be done with different kind of mindset.

In summary, we have here that the main pressure to change strives from politics, government and legislation, which are under several changes every fourth after elections. The pressure to change Lund's Municipality originates from desire to raise reputation and to solve problems as well as keeping up with the trends within research. Furthermore, pressure to change also strives from desire to show off that one has the power to change education system. Therefore, the pressure is interpreted as coming from outside the schools instead of striving from the teachers. However, not all pressure to change Lund's Municipality is seen as a legitimate pressure for change. According to the teacher's decision makers do not always understand the entirety and the know-how which school possesses'. Frustration strives within the teachers as some of the changes are implemented even though there is no actual pressure or need to do things in different way. In some cases, change was even seen as a hindering factor. This can be exemplified by Lund Municipality's instruction to write more documentation even though it is not legally required and the government believes that teachers have too much

documentation to do and there should be less. In the section we will look at how teachers interpret their role.

## 4.4 How do Teachers Interpret Their Role?

The third part of our overall analysis will focus on how teachers make sense of their role and how do they contribute to change. The previous chapters have explained the necessity and pressure for change, however, teachers' role within the change process is still in the dark. Our study has shown that most of the pressure is external and comes outside schools. Therefore, the teachers had consistent opinions concerning their ability to affect all the big reforms. It was perceived as was very low. The best way to affect was seen through voting in elections when choosing new political representatives or by becoming politically active. Teachers felt that decision makers, politicians and government were far away from them, which decreased their possibility to affect decision making. However, teacher felt they could affect matters such as how to implement a lecture or how things are run in the school. Nevertheless, fundamental decisions were seen as coming from above and outside school.

*Mostly political changes [...] the initiatives are really not from schools [...] mostly external changes [...] the initiatives are really not from the schools [...] it is usually external. We don't really get to pick and choose because the deals are made centrally in the municipality”*

*“In big organizations you are too far away from the people with the power (therefore it is hard to effect)”*

*“But then we make smaller changes every year: who is teaching, which subject and in which grade, and these small changes, they are bigger than the big changes for my everyday”*

Implementing the big changes was perceived as very hard. It was also not clear how teachers could influence as the communication is not downright and the organization hierarchy disables contacting people higher than one's supervisor.

*“I only point out things to my boss because there is quite a strong hierarchy that you are not allowed to go beyond your boss with questions [...] so most people just turn to their bosses”*

These findings indicate that due to the hierarchy and the complexity regarding how Lund's Municipality and educational system is governed, it takes a lot of time to make changes. Teachers explained that they do not have to get excited about a change initiative in the early stage as it may take years before it reaches the teachers through formal communication tools such as email or meetings with the principal. Some of the teachers also said that they hear about the change initiatives from the media and by following politics, and not only from school.

*“Decision are made by the politicians [...] they decide, and I never hear about any of the decisions”*

*“Frustration due to lack of communication about the changes”*

The quote above is a good illustration of how powerless and badly informed the teachers felt. One teacher pointed out that working for the public sector is very different compared to working for the private sector, where employees can be more innovative and where manager's presence can be sensed stronger. The communication is also easier in the private sector due to a smaller amount of processes, procedures and hierarchy.

*“Changing organizations takes a very long time and is difficult, especially compared to a private company that has to make a profit”*

*“I contributed to non-changes. I say that we need stability and can't just change around here [...] I contribute to stability and flexibility”*

During the interviews we discovered that every single teacher was extremely passionate about working as a teacher. For example, when asked about how it is to be a teacher, one teacher answered: “it is so wonderful, it is the best job you can have in my opinion”. We were able to feel the excitement when they were talking about their work. As mentioned before, most of the teachers felt changes are necessary. However, due to their passion for their work and busy schedule they wished to be more focused on their actual job rather than initiating changes. Most of the teachers said that in the beginning of their career planning lectures takes more time compared to teachers who have been working for several years. Therefore, less experienced teachers need more time and need to focus on teaching and planning the lectures. Due to the strong passion towards their profession, teachers felt like changing was not as important as concentrating in teaching. There were students with special needs and other important matters that needed teacher's' attention. Hence, concentrating on changing Lund's

Municipality, when it is hierarchically challenging, does not feel like a smart choice for the teachers. Most of the teachers said that they will do as they are told instead trying to get their voice heard by the politics.

*“I just follow the changes, I’m not very driven in them, I don’t initiate them or (yells) change is good! [...] I think you should make your voice heard more, but I don’t generally. This is due to my personality; I’m not a leader when there are others. I can be leader in my classroom, but not among others [...] I just follow the group and do what I am told [...].”*

The aforementioned quote illustrates how a teacher stated that they used to try to influence changes and tried to be as involved as possible. However, due to the problems within communication and constant change processes, the excitement and eagerness to be involved decreased. It was also pointed out that not all change processes are finished and even though the teachers would discuss about reforms in their meetings, they would not be able to influence the decision makers. Despite the situation, most of the teachers were satisfied with the situation. If a teacher wanted to have more power they would apply for the principal’s position or they would be politically active. In our study, 18 % of the teachers we interviewed were politically active as they felt it was a good way to contribute to changes.

Our study shows that teachers also felt that a good way to contribute to Lund’s Municipality and the quality of their work was not by changing the organization. Instead it was by giving their best to their students. Thus, the teachers did not actively participate in the change process, rather they focused on how they can improve learning conditions for their students. We were told that getting better results from PISA tests drives from how well the students are prepared and how well they have learned. Teachers said by helping the students as best as they can, the results will improve and also Sweden’s ranking will get higher. Teachers felt they could change the PISA results and the future of their students by giving their best to their students. For example, teachers told they were changing their teaching methods according to research to help their students learning. They could also see results in new working methods which they had obtained. This is an illustration of a change that is not coming from politics and that no one is pressuring to implement.

## 5 Discussion

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*The fifth chapter will present a discussion based on empirical material, analysis and theoretical framework. The authors will discuss how employees interpret working in an organization undergoing changes.*

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Based on our case study, the multiple perspectives of how teachers interpret working in a changing organization have been explored. This thesis aims to give an understanding of employees' interpretations of working in an organization undergoing change. As previous research has shown it is natural to be almost too optimistic when talking about the need for change, and it is not always as justified to change as it may seem when reading the literature relating to the field (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2015). Furthermore, organizational change evolves around the employees (Porras & Robertson, 1992; Tetenbaum, 1998) and therefore it is important to take their perspective into account and see how they are impacted.

During the interviews, examples have been displayed of both episodic and continuous change, which Weick & Quinn (1999) described. Two major events that have led to episodic changes are the new Education Act (2010:800) and the PISA debate. The new Education Act (2010:800) was a change caused by an external factor, which most teachers thought was for the better. Nevertheless, they experienced that it was also hard for them to know what to do in practice, since they believed the change was unprepared. In addition, the PISA debate caused a problematic situation for the teachers, and several of them were forced to rethink their teaching methods. These two events were experienced as problematic and caused concern and turbulence for the teachers, which is in accordance with what Czarniawska (2011) argues regarding episodic changes. Especially the PISA debate forced the teachers to come up with their own ideas with how they should cope with the problematic situation, and they were also given a lot of blame. Many of the teachers we spoke to had good insights why the results were low in the PISA tests, however their voices were rarely heard in the bigger picture.

As Orlikowski (1996) states, continuous change processes are hard to detect which makes it hard to conclude when a change has happened. This was shown during our interviews, since many of the teachers had trouble narrowing down the smaller changes that had happened. It was easier for them to pinpoint the larger changes, such as the grading reform. Since continuous change is hard to detect, it can also be hard to measure and analyze (Orlikowski,

1996). However, we argue that we have been able to see clear evidence of continuous change when the teachers have reflected about their work. Furthermore, in line with Tsoukas & Chia (2002) statement, we believe that there is no need to separate episodic change from continuous change, since a sharper view of change can be achieved by using both approaches. Therefore, the discussion will focus on both aspects of change.

## 5.1 Change Interpreted as a Necessity

As shown in the analysis, the teachers interpreted change, in general, as necessity. This view goes in line with the claim from researcher that organizations must change in order to survive (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Kotter, 2012). All teachers we interviewed agreed on that change is inevitable for an organization, and in particular, it is important for an organization that deals with education to develop. However, having established that change in general is important, the teachers also highlighted the fact that often they experienced changes, which they felt were unnecessary. In addition, the teachers stressed that stability, at least to some extent, is important for an organization.

Tsoukas and Chia (2002) argue “change is the normal condition of organizational life” (p. 567), yet it seems that the teachers do not agree with this statement completely. A reason for this can be that when constant changes are happening, the teachers become confused, and unsure what to focus on. However, this mainly seems to be the case when there are changes that disrupt their everyday activities, and takes away time from their actual work; teaching. In addition, some changes can be harder to detect than others, and therefore it can be hard for the teachers to see the everyday changes.

One reason why the teachers saw organizational changes as necessary was that they believed that changing was a way of developing, and that the school always could become better, and evolve. For example, the school's ranking could be increased, the teaching methods could be developed due to research, and the students could always perform better at tests. As long as there was a belief that something could be done in a better, more efficient way, which would make the school aim higher, the teachers thought a change was necessary. These arguments are in accordance with the teleological theory for change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Nevertheless, we argue that the pressure to always be better, and aim higher, could also cause confusion, and a feeling that what they are doing is never good enough. The reason for this is

because that it is also important that the teachers have time to focus on their actual work, and can find their own role in the profession, instead of constantly facing pressure to change.

Research and trends in society are also interpreted by the teachers as a motive for many changes. However, we believe that research and trends play a key role in why people can become over optimistic when talking about change, and why many changes fail. In the case presented, is probably natural for Lund's Municipality to look at other municipalities and see how they are doing, especially since test results are relatively easy to compare between schools in different municipalities. If another municipality has higher test results, logically Lund's Municipality wants to adapt the same teaching methods and to not fall behind. However, when talking to the teachers, this situation almost become comical, since the teachers are constantly given new directives of which method and trend they should follow and work with. In addition, there also seems to be a non-exciting evaluation of the different approaches, due to the high number of changes and lack of time for evaluation.

Another reason why the teachers interpret change as a necessity is that school is a part of society, and since the society changes, schools also has to change. An example of this is adapting to the new digital tools that have been developed over the years, which goes in the with the life cycle theory (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). One teacher explains it very well when stating that the comprehensive school was founded in 1845, and it would not work if schools were the same today as they were then. The environment, as a well as working life is changing (Lundahl et al., 2010) and since school should prepare students for the working life, it is crucial that the school system keeps up with the changes in working life. One change in society that has had a major impact on teaching is digitalization. When discussing digitalization with the teachers, and changes in their work related to the digital changes in society, it becomes clear that this is an area where opinions differ. A few teachers find it frustrating that the training they receive always seems to focus on teachers who are struggling with even turning on their computer. Of course, this might not always be the case, although if some teachers continuously experience that the training they receive is useless for them, it can in the long term led to a less enthusiastic approach towards new digital tools.

Overall, we are surprised by how positive approach to change showed by the teachers, since the change efforts described to us often requires plenty of time and energy from the teachers, which goes in lines with what Sveningsson & Alvesson (2016) states. In addition, Zimmerman (2006) states that change efforts in schools are generally met with resistance,

which was not supported by the answers in our case study. One explanation for this might be that the teachers are aware of the pressure for organizations to continuously change, and they do not want to be experienced as reactionary. Many of the teachers we interviewed stated that they were positive to changes and embraced them, however they know of colleagues who were not as fond of changes. It might be that they answered questions the way they thought they “should” be answered, yet the teachers also made sure to mention their colleagues to show that not everyone likes changes. In addition, we also interviewed a few people who were less optimistic about the changes, and it could be that they were more honest in their answers. On the other hand, perhaps the people who volunteer to an interview about organizational changes might be more enthusiastic about them, then the people who did not volunteer.

As mentioned above, the teachers emphasize that they have experienced changes that they were only for the sake of change, which they thought were unnecessary. If this happens continuously, it can lead to organizational change cynicism among the employees. Cynicism can occur “if management has a track record of making promises it cannot keep or if the hype is simply unbelievable” (Fleming, 2005, p. 290). Thus, if the management keeps making many changes that the employees interpret as unnecessary, and know they cannot keep, the employees can become cynical. Cynicism can then lead to that the employees become less willing to be a part of the change, which consequently ensures the failure of the change (Abraham, 2000).

In the presented case, many of the teachers talked about changes that they did not see as necessary. However, we only interpreted a few signs of cynicism among the teachers, which we interviewed. Especially the less experienced teachers were stressed and confused because of the constant changes. They expressed that they wanted to be left alone and we also interpreted that they were less optimistic when talking about changes, and saw a lesser need for them. This could be a result of the continuous changes that they have experienced. However, the fact that we only saw signs of cynicism among the less experienced teachers could also indicate that being a teacher is more stressful and confusing when you are new in your profession. As teachers gain experience they become more secure, less stressed and therefore have the time to be more amenable. Hence, we believe that the aforementioned is more connected with the amount of knowledge relating to the teaching profession, than being cynical.

When talking about specific changes, the teachers seemed especially optimistic about the changes they experienced a need for, had a smooth implementation process and which were well communicated. This goes in line with what Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) argue. One implication of this is the importance for the management to ensure that the employees understand why there is a change and have a two-way communication about it. Thus, urgency for the change will be created. It is hard for the management to change the minds of the employees once it has been made up. Therefore it is crucial that the information flow is continuous, since many of the changes are continuous as well.

## 5.2 Change interpreted as pressure

As we have shown in our analysis, teachers felt that change initiatives came mainly from above and outside their schools. Politics and government was seen as one of the main reasons for implementing changes. Teachers possibility to contribute to pressure to change, was seen as very little or even non-existing.

Our study supports what researchers have claimed; changes in top management often create pressure to change (Haveman, Russo & Meyer, 2001). The political power in Lund keeps changing every fourth year after elections and almost all teachers mentioned politics as the main reason for change. The educational system was seen as something which can be easily changed and it was pointed out that everyone has their own opinion about schools since anyone has gone to school. Teachers felt that change was continuous and slow, however, the pace of changed increased after every elections as new politicians were in power.

Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) divide pressure to change to internal and environmental pressure. The authors experienced political pressure as environmental pressure and so did the teachers. However, it is interesting as the politicians and government are part of Lund's Municipality, yet they are still experienced as an environmental power by teachers. This illustrates well how powerless the teachers feel in a complicated public organization where hierarchy plays a crucial role.

Politics were interpreted as the biggest change initiator. However, not all the pressure strived from the politicians as they were under environmental pressure themselves. Competition and poor results from PISA tests were pressuring politicians to do changes. It was explained by

the teachers that Lund's Municipality is often compared to other Municipalities as well as to neighboring countries. The reputation of Lund's Municipality was therefore seen as reason to make changes in order to amend reputation. The politicians saw changing legislation of educational system as their social responsibility, which Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) would describe as an environmental pressure. The environmental pressure experienced by political powers is also described by Alvesson & Sveningsson (2016 p. 15) "Societal and cultural norms about what is politically and morally appropriate, pressure organizations in certain direction". This came true in our study as each of the political majorities had their own view and own audience and wanted to fulfill their expectation what is expected from them.

An internal pressure to change was seen as a smaller indicator compared to environmental pressure. The pressure to change coming from inside was seen as unable to influence big changes coming from the politics. Internal pressure was seen as striving from the increasing amount of students, appointing new principals and from monthly meetings among teachers. Teacher's pointed out that pressure to change also strives from the students. Someone might not hear well, other needs more time during classes and a third one needs special seating arrangements in order to learn. All of these pressures were internal and teachers felt that the pressure is very unique and may not be understood by the politicians. Therefore teacher's role reacting to internal pressure coming from the students is very important. Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) identify all of these as internal pressures to change.

One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether internal and environmental pressures share the same value? Our study indicates that they do not. The character of public organizations is different compared to private organizations and therefore, environmental pressure had more value compared to internal pressure. Even though the pressure coming from the decision makers in Lund's Municipality was seen as an environmental pressure to change, politicians are still technically a part of Lund's Municipality. Therefore, the changes initiated by politicians are due to both internal and environmental pressures. Internal pressure can be due to urge to show how much power one has or pressure to please to people who have voted, and one has to hold up one's end. In contrast, environmental pressure was seen as due to technology, trends and competition. Alvesson & Sveningsson (2016) explain development within technology as a pressure to change and Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) share the same idea. Our study also indicates that teachers often felt that new information technology systems pressured Lund's Municipality to initiate changes.

Lawrence (1989) explained change as a way to add value to the company. Furthermore, the author explained that changes arise from power struggles, employees' skills which change along with new top management as well as due to new strategy and structure, which are both forever evolving. Our study supports Lawrence's view as teachers stated that every new political majority and principal has their own ways of working.

Previous research has shown that organizational change in the public sector can be compared with organizational change in the private sector (Coram & Burnes, 2001). However, there are differences between the private and public sectors that may influence an organizational change (Leslie & Tilley, 2004). Our study supports this claim as teachers felt that public organization has different needs and ways of working compared to private organizations. Our conclusion concerning this is that the pressure to change is more external than it is internal. Although the pressure to change is coming from several different directions, teachers feel that they are important and worth consideration. In addition, the teachers believe that decision makers should listen to their voices as teachers have a good understanding of which changes are relevant.

According to Sveningsson & Sörgärde (2015) change is a result of people's daily communication, talk, decisions and actions. The authors explain that this can occur as a result of ambition from the management to adapt the organization to changes in the environment, however it can also be about political power struggles between different departments as to which interests should be prioritized, or an individual's attempt to launch an alternative view (2013). Our study supports this view as the management was trying to adapt to environmental changes, citizens' expectations and to new research. Furthermore, changes were due to power struggles within politics and the urge to get one's own view into the spotlight. However, our study indicates that communication, talking, decision making and actions are being done. Although not as much in schools where changes happen, but among politicians.

### 5.3 How Teachers Interpret Their Role

We have shown in our analysis, that teachers have interpreted change mostly as a necessity. However, their ability to influence time-consuming and ongoing change processes was seen as very low. This is mainly explained by the character of public organization and hierarchy within the organization. Terhart (2013) argues that due to the fact that teachers are far away

from the decision makers, they feel forced to engage in reforms and development. Our findings support the aforementioned and it is true that decision makers are far away from the teacher. Due to this, and the hierarchy within the organization, teachers feel that they cannot impact the changes. However, our study indicates that this is interpreted in a positive way, as teachers could concentrate on their work and not on being change agents.

Teachers' ability to contribute to changes can be examined by sense-making. It is defined as the process where individuals give meaning to their experiences (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013). The organizational sense-making perspective is described by Weick (1995) as a developing set of ideas with descriptive capabilities. The process perspective has according to Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld (2005) a main element of sense-making, because it focuses on the significance of individuals. Furthermore, Balogun (2006) argues that the people who receive the change play a major role when determining and producing the results of the change. Teachers perceive that they do not have the possibility to develop new set of ideas. Their role was to accept and follow and voting in elections, was seen as the best way to make one's voice heard.

According to Weick (1995) it is crucial to comprehend how people within the organization interpret changes. Furthermore, sense-making is a vital part to discuss and analyze when attempting to comprehend how members of the organization understands changes. Our study shows that sometimes teachers felt that Lund's Municipality was asking them to do more than was actually required by the law. Some of the requirements were understood by the teachers, yet some of the changes did not make sense and it felt that decision makers did not understand the big picture and how changes influence teachers' daily work. This can be illustrated by new guideline to do more documenting with computer. One teacher said that it takes a lot of time and feels unnecessary even though there was some sense in it as well. Another teacher said that it was ridiculous and another teacher had counted that over 5 000 "clicks" are being done during one work day. These teachers did work in different sized schools which could have influenced the way the answered. Nevertheless, they felt it was time consuming and sometimes took their attention from their actual job.

Sense-making can be applied as an instrument to achieve an understanding of the individuals belonging to the organization (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013). It has been argued that the people who are impacted by a change play a major role when determining and producing the results of the change (Balogun, 2006). However, our

study does not support this statement. Our findings indicate that even though a shared understanding of the changes were not present all the time, teachers felt very strongly about their belonging to the organization and they were adapting to the changes within the Lund's Municipality. A reason for this could be the teachers' strong passion towards their profession.

As mentioned before, voting was the best way to affect changes. Teachers could affect the changes which were initiated at their school. These changes were small, yet sometimes they were experienced as more important than the changes initiated by the politicians. Teachers felt that they could get their voice heard during meetings with their colleagues. However, quite often the meetings did not lead to anything as there was no change agent and communication was hard due to busy schedules. Teachers also felt that they were not leaders; they were teachers and they wished to concentrate on teaching.

Our study indicates that teachers' behavior can be linked to functional stupidity caused by the organizational culture at Lund's Municipality and the characteristic of teachers work. Alvesson & Spicer (2016) divide functional stupidity into five different categories and we could find traces from two of those categories. The first trace of functional stupidity appeared in the form of Structure-induced stupidity. It occurs when people accept presses and systems even though they see that they are unsuccessful. Teachers often accepted new systems and ways of working partly due to the impossibility to speak against those decisions. Alvesson and Spicer (2016) explain that today, partly due to digitalization, companies have more bureaucratic processes than ever before. These processes are practical as they can provide order. On contrary, bureaucratic processes foster to thoughtlessness as people stop asking questions and are not thinking themselves (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Furthermore, Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) state that normally technology development can be seen problematic from the management perspective as it may be difficult to convince people to accept new information technology systems, which can make employees knowledge obsolete (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). However, in public sector, one does not have to convince employees as they have no power to affect the decision making. Even though they were not satisfied with new changes, they had no other option than to follow what they were being told. Furthermore, Alvesson and Spicer (2016) state that complying rules has become a normal way to manage an organization and is especially standard within the sector like education. Our study shows that teachers are under strict scrutiny and saying no is not always an option.

According to Larsson (2008) communication especially in hierarchical organization, which are common in the public sector, requires significant times-specific meetings where the roles in the organization are to be applied. In addition, communication plays a vital role in organizational change, and it may be more difficult to change hierarchical organizations. Our study has demonstrated that teachers feel that the communication between different divisions takes time or is even impossible, due to the hierarchy in Lund's Municipality. This impacts the change attempts negatively as the teachers experienced that information flow often is incomplete.

The second trace of functional stupidity appeared in accordance with the form of culture-induced stupidity. It occurs in an organization where the company culture can even encourage people to be functionally stupid. According to our study, the organizational culture at Lund's Municipality does not encourage teachers' to share their opinion, nor does the culture invite to new ideas. This can be exemplified by a teacher who was in the relatively new in the profession and was in the beginning very excited about changes and wanted to give her contribution to new ideas. However, after working for several years, the teacher has understood that giving one's heart to every single change is not possible as there are way too many changes going on. Furthermore, the teacher could not impact anyone outside the school. In other words, it was only possible to affect the small changes decided at the school. The teacher came to the conclusion to just do what is being told and not to put heart to everything. The teacher also described the main job as teaching and said that one does not have the time to do everything else and therefore, one rather concentrates on teaching and planning lessons. The teacher's aforementioned view is also supported by Fullan and Hargreaves (1996), who warned that a lot of change efforts in schools essentially prevent teachers from developing and growing in their work. Therefore, we can conclude that the teacher's desire to not be involved in the change process can actually help in self-development and growing at work.

Organizational culture encourages people to use certain practices, make assumptions and have certain beliefs as they enable people to work smoother without thinking every step they take (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Therefore, by being functionally stupid we argue that the teachers avoid being punished and upset. As teachers become functionally stupid they make their work easier.

As mentioned above, traces of Structure-Induced stupidity and Culture-Induced stupidity were seen out of the five different categories of functional stupidity. We did not see traces of

Leadership-Induced stupidity, Imitation-Induced stupidity and Branding-Induced stupidity. Firstly, this could be explained by the fact that the employees did not have a profound faith in their leaders. They felt that they were far away from the decision makers and had no other choice than to follow due to the organizational culture. Secondly, we did feel that the changes within Lund's Municipality were due to research rather than imitating other organizations. However, we did study the interpretation of the changes and not the changes itself and therefore we cannot say where the politicians imitating others while making decisions. Lastly, the interviewees did not see changes in Lund's Municipality as a way to of rebranding and we could not notice unrestricted enthusiasm for brands.

Our study has suggested that functional stupidity can actually help employees to cope with change and prevents them from becoming cynical. By being functionally stupid, teachers help the organization to function more efficiently and help students to receive better teaching. It can be argued that the teachers make sense of the changes by being functionally stupid, and focus their resources on the teaching as they decide to be non-reflexive towards changes. However, we could argue that Sweden's poor PISA results could be due to the fact that teachers cannot affect decision making as the organization encourages them to be functionally stupid. Alvesson and Spicer (2016) argue that functional stupidity and overlooking problems may result in accumulated problems, as they are not dealt with in time. We can wonder if the PISA results would be better if teachers would be able to point out flaws in the decision making process and could influence organizational change.

## 6 Conclusion

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*The sixth, final chapter of the thesis will summarize the main findings from the research. These findings are results from the empirical, theoretical and analytical material. Furthermore, our practical and theoretical contributions will be presented and suggestions for further research will be given.*

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The aim with this study was to give an understanding of employees' interpretations of working in an organization undergoing changes. We believed that the perspective focusing on how employees' interpret changes needed more consideration and examination. Furthermore, we wanted to contribute to the theory with additional knowledge and developed insights. In the following sections a summarize of the main findings and contributions will be presented.

### ***Changes are necessary, yet all changes are not are necessary***

During our study, all the teachers we talked to were positive to changes in general and believed they were necessary, which goes in line with Beer & Nohria's (2000) view. However, the teachers were very mindful to highlight the fact that they have experienced many unnecessary changes, and they do not see the value of changing just for the sake of change. Therefore, we believe it is important for the management to think through changes before they are carried out. If the employees experience that change happens just because there needs to be a change, it can lead to a decreasing willingness to be a part of the change, and in worst case it can lead to organizational change cynicism. As changes are important in a constantly changing society, argued by Kotter (2012) and Tsoukas & Chia (2002), we believe that management's decision making process should be constant as well. In addition, it is important to find the balance between abandoning ideas if needed, and developing new working methods constantly. If this is achieved, the changes do not disrupt the everyday activities of the employees, and the feeling of changing for the sake of change will be minimized.

### ***The significance of a change agent and communication***

This study has illustrated that despite teachers lack the ability to affect the change initiatives, they are still extremely passionate about their work and we perceive their working morale as high. We came to the conclusion that teachers did not see themselves as change agents. Even though the change agent was occasionally missing when changes within the school were

initiated, the teachers showed no interest in being the change agent by themselves, even though they could have taken the role. The teachers made it very clear that they wanted to focus on their primary work which is teaching and planning lessons, instead of being change agents. However, we argue that the organizational structure of schools is constructed in a way that the middle managers are missing. Often, it is the middle managers who assume the role as a change agent and lead the change initiative. If a clear middle manager were present in the school, it would take away pressure from the teachers to drive the changes and also make sure that the information would be shared efficiently within the school. Without a change agent it has been unclear for teachers if certain processes are still ongoing or either they have been abandoned.

Furthermore, the organization we studied has a very strong hierarchy, and the decisions affecting the teachers work were often made very far away from the teachers. This is in agreement with Terhart's (2013) research. Often the teachers felt like communication was poor within the organization and they had to look for information in alternative ways. Therefore it is very important for the management to make sure that the communication runs smoothly between different divisions even though the organizational culture is based on strong hierarchy.

### ***Functional stupidity as a way of coping with changes***

Our study indicates that in an organization that undergoes a lot of changes, the employees are expected to follow a certain rules and work under scrutiny. Furthermore, we believe the organizational culture of Lund's Municipality, and the public sector in general, encourages people towards this kind of employee behavior. As a result, there may be a need for the employees to be functionally stupid, as it can be beneficial for the organization if the employees do not ask question and follow along. Alvesson & Spicer (2016) has written that lacking reflexivity can result organization to work more efficiently. Our study supports that aforementioned theory by suggesting that, by being functionally stupid, employees can concentrate on their real work instead of talking about the change. If the employees would be innovative and search for new solutions, instead of being functionally stupid, we feel that they would get frustrated. Their opinion would not get attention and their initiatives would not be considered in the decision making process.

According to research, a two-way communication decreases cynicism and is a critical factor to success in order the managers to be aware of how employees perceive and interpret the

change (Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997). The authors state that by addressing people's fears it can help them to get rid of their concerns, and encourage them to give the change a chance. To develop this theory, our research suggested that even though employees are not part of the decision making, it is still important that information about decision making is available.

### ***The talk about change***

In conclusion, our research shows that all the talk about change adds stress and confusion to the employees. We believe that it is not the changes themselves that leads to confusion; rather it is rather all the talk surrounding the changes. We argue that the reason for this is that employees are very aware of the importance of change, and they want the organization to be able to keep up with the changes in the environment as in changes in general is interpreted positively. However, it becomes frustrating for employees to constantly having to adapt to changes, which they have no way of influencing. We feel that employees interpret that the talk surrounding change does not always correlate with changes that are truly happening. The employees are unsure how much is only talk, and what will be achieved. Two-thirds of all change projects fail (Beer & Nohria 2000, Burk & Biggard, 1997) and the talk and confusing stemming from employees interpretation of changes can be a reason why. In addition, we believe that the talk about change sometimes is exaggerated and ambiguous, which can make change hard to implement. Therefore, it is crucial for the management to consider how change, and the talk about change, is interpreted by the employees. We are aware that change is important, yet stability is also important for an organization to thrive. If an organization would react to all the pressure for change, we believe the employees would be strained.

### ***Theoretical and practical contributions and suggestion for further research***

The objective of this study was to contribute to the theory with additional knowledge and developed insights regarding the significance of understanding employees' interpretations of working in an organization undergoing changes.

Our study has focused on employees in the public sector, and their interpretations of change, which can differ from changes in the private sector. Therefore, it would be interesting to dig deeper into how organizational change differs between the public and private sectors. In addition, pressures to change and how the pressures are valued in the private and the public sector could be studied further. Our study showed that certain pressures had a higher value than others and it would be interesting to compare this with the private sector.

Our research has touched upon two relatively new concepts within the organizational change literature; organizational change cynicism and functional stupidity. Our case study indicates that changes, which are interpreted by employees as confusing and stressing, does not necessarily lead to organizational change cynicism, despite that fact the study took place in an environment where organizational change cynicism is likely to occur. A reason for this could be that our study was conducted within the public sector, and employees might have lower expectations on the management, since the goal is not to make a profit or even make end meet. Furthermore, our study suggests that functional stupidity can help employees to cope with change. In our opinion this could be researched further by conducting a larger empirical study. In addition, it would be interesting to compare results found in the public and the private sector as the literature states that the public sector tends to be more prone to functional stupidity.

The central practical contribution in our research has been to develop an understanding of how the employees interpret all the talk of change. Change is generally seen from a positive perspective, and even though changes require a lot of energy and time, they do not necessarily lead to organizational change cynicism. We believe that our research adds more knowledge and insight of how employees interpret change, and the employee perspective is important for organizations to consider, before lunging into a new change. In a hierarchical organization where employees are unable to effect the changes, it is important for the employees to make sense of why the changes are implemented. Therefore it is important to welcome events that encourage reflection.

To conclude our thesis we do not aim to generalize our findings in total. Regardless of how a change is introduced, developed and composed, people will interpret change initiatives differently because we are different as individuals. Thus, we hope our thesis creates valuable insights for researchers as well as practitioners.

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# Appendix

## Interview questions

1. Tell us about your background
  - How long have you worked as a teacher?
  - How long have you worked in Lund's Municipality?
  - What classes do you teach?
  - How old are your students?
  - Describe, how it is to work as a teacher?
2. What kind of organizational changes your organization has gone through during your employment? Both major and minor (with organizational change we mean a process in which an organization changes its working methods or aims, for example in order to develop and deal with new situations)
3. Why do you think that Lund's Municipality and schools change?
4. How has your work changed during your employment?
  - What was the reason these changes? (where did it come from, what was the reason)
  - Who initiated the change?
  - Are the changes initiated externally or internally?
5. How did the grading reform affect your work?
6. How has the PISA debate affected your work?
7. How are you informed about the changes?
  - Have you had a chance to affect the changes? Has your voice been heard?
8. How do you feel about this? (the changes)
  - Do you think the changes are necessary?
  - How do they affect your ability to do your daily work?
9. How do you contribute to the changes?
10. Have you worked for another municipality? How did it differ from working for Lund's Municipality?
11. Is there something you would like to add to this interview, that we have not discussed?