EXPERIENCES OF CLASSROOM RESEARCH TO INCREASE SCHOOLCHILDREN’S WELL-BEING

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INTRODUCTION

The work with developing learning environments in schools is an actual topic in the development of children’s health and learning conditions in the Swedish society. It is found to be the responsibility of the Swedish schools (Swedish Government Prop. 2001/02:14) to create good learning environments that facilitate knowledge processes and personal growth for children and youth. From such a perspective it is interesting to ask questions about the health situation for children and their families of today.

According to The National Board of Health and Welfare (2003), which has presented a report on health, economical and social condition for the people, the health situation in Sweden is still improving. But there are some areas that signal that conditions are not so good. The National Board of Health and Welfare presents two perspectives in their report: the first is on social and economical conditions, and the second is on health. In Sweden the rates of unemployment have increased slightly during 2003. It is also found that the number of people who are out of work because of sick leave have increased dramatically.

Regarding the health condition The National Board of Health and Welfare (2003) reported that the health condition of the Swedish people is improving from a physical perspective. However, the number of people expressing psychosocial problems has increased amongst working ages, thus also amongst those who are parents to schoolchildren. According to the report, this can be a temporary change, but there are some signals concerning the fact that people have more psychological worries and also that the alcoholic consumption has increased. The most troublesome aspect is that this is especially prominent amongst young people. It
seems as if life conditions amongst youths show a more negative trend than before.

Several studies (Berntsson, Köhler & Gustavsson, 2001; Borup, 1998; Marklund, 1997) show that psychosomatic complaints, such as headaches and stomach pains and emotions of depression, are increasing amongst schoolchildren even though many children experience themselves as healthy. Questions can be asked if “somatizing” is a way for schoolchildren to express something important about themselves and their problems. In another study by Danielsson and Marklund (2001), it was found that the number of young people, in the age of 11, was increasing amongst those having psychosocial ill-health. The findings by Clausson, Petersson and Berg (2003) indicate that the schoolchildren in Sweden are physically healthy and psychosocially unhealthy. It was established that the schoolchildren were mainly bodily healthy, with few physical health problems. Psychosomatic complaints were more common as well as problems with low self-esteem. Schoolchildren seemed to have great needs to talk and trust in someone. According to Clausson et al. (2003), health and ill health could also be related to the school situation, a situation dominated by increasing stress rather than well-being. This speaks in favour of research which focuses on schoolchildren’s psychosocial health and well-being, in a similar way as is adopted in the ArctiChildren 2004-2006 project.

According to the Swedish Education Act (1985:1100), all children and youths shall have equal access to education and shall enjoy this right, regardless of gender, where they live, or social or economic factors. The Education Act states that education shall provide the pupils with knowledge and, in co-operation with the homes, promote their harmonious development into responsible human beings and members of the community. Consideration shall also be given to students with special needs. The National Agency for Education (2003) is constantly working with questions regarding school development in Sweden. The Ministry of School development (2001 and 2003) has also highlighted that children’s learning goes hand in hand with health. However, the need for more knowledge about relationships between health, learning and security has also been identified.
The Ministry of Education and Science (SOU 2000:19) has stated that the starting point for children’s learning is their need for understanding, participation and influence and that the same conditions are needed to support good health. To be able to create a good learning environment, staff and children need to talk, discuss and reflect on their work and communication in school. From such a standpoint it is interesting to find out what and how members of staff at a school learn when participating in a research and development project.

The aim

The aim of this article is to illuminate the experience of participating in classroom research with an intervention focusing on increasing schoolchildren’s well-being.
METHOD

The point of departure for this study was the “Development and Research Project of Psychosocial Well-being of Children and Youth in the Artic – ArctiChildren” which was based on collaboration with researchers in Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. The Arctic Children project in Sweden embraced several studies. In this article one part of the Arctic Children project is presented by a qualitative study of a classroom intervention aiming at increasing schoolchildren’s well-being. One school in a schooldistrict from the North of Sweden participated voluntarily during one year in the research.

Ethical considerations

Written and oral information was given to the staff at the school, to the parents of the children in the class and to the children themselves. By such a strategy the involved participants could read but also ask questions and confirm their understanding of the research before taking their decision of participation. The participants in this study were reassured that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without giving any explanation. Approval for carrying out the research project was received from the local Research Ethics Committee, Luleå University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden.

Research context, participants and analysis

The research project took place in one school class, with 20 children in grade four. In accordance with what Park (2001, p.88) describes, participatory research was in this project seen as a form of praxis helping to “actualize our potentials and develop ourselves as a human community”. Furthermore, Park emphasizes that in action research it is also relevant to think of what we do as agents of change during the research process. In the present study the ‘agents’ were one principal, one teacher and one classroom researcher. The whole research process was going on for over two
terms and the intervention was implemented during one month within the second term.

According to the idea of the Swedish part of the project, the decision was taken to adopt a child’s perspective during the research process. It was also decided to use a qualitative research paradigm to gain an understanding of schoolchildren and staffs’ lived experience of the classroom intervention. This study was based on phenomenological philosophy and methodology (Bengtsson, 1991). A close relationship between researchers, the school staff, schoolchildren and parents was desirable and also a fact during the project in accordance with what Tiller (1999) suggests. The planning, developing, implementation and documentation of well-being interventions in the classroom, have been provided in a close relationship between the researchers and the school staff. According to Gallagher (1995, p. 33) the researchers’ awareness of, and openness to, the complexity of the life world are important factors when collecting and analyzing data.

In the present study the teacher and the principal shared their experiences of being involved in the research project with a classroom intervention to increase schoolchildren’s well-being. Individual narrative interviews were conducted six months after the end of the research project and transcribed verbatim. A phenomenological analysis was performed (c.f. Strandmark & Hedelin, 2002) by first obtaining a sense of the whole during the reading of the transcripts. In the next step the text was differentiated into meaning units and later, in a third step, transformed. This third step was based on a process of intuition, reflection and free imaginative variations. In the last step, the transformed meaning units were synthesised into a consistent statement of the structure of the phenomenon.
FINDINGS

When analysing the data three themes emerged that created an illustration of school staff’s experiences of participating in classroom research increasing children’s well-being. The themes were; (a) allowing children to be part of classrooms activities; (b) creating a supportive learning environment and (c) learning through deep reflection.

Allowing children to be part of classrooms activities

During the project the psychosocial well-being of the children were in focus. The work to create good experiences of well-being in the classroom’s learning environment was developed out of the schoolchildren’s state and their progression in the class. It was not a programme adopted beforehand. Even though the teacher and classroom researcher had gained knowledge from literature in the subject, it was decided that it should be the children who set the agenda. However, the theoretical knowledge was used more like a source for inspiration, as the teacher mentioned:

“It is difficult to follow an already existing manual about working with psychosocial issues when you are working with the children, because it is not sure that their [the children’s] needs are the same as the text book author’s.”

Instead, listening to the children and having a sensitive ear were issues experienced as being the most important in the work with developing good well-being experiences during the research project. It was the teacher who introduced ideas about developing their own well-being activities, but it was the children who fulfilled them.

To follow the children or letting them take responsibility was based on the teacher’s interest to do so. The teacher’s interest in following the children’s own signals was also a necessary prerequisite. During the project it was experienced that the more the teacher left to the children, the more they took responsibility in organising and providing their school work. By letting the chil-
Children take more control, they increased their longing not only for taking part in activities of well-being, but also in their schoolwork in general. It became evident, that if a teacher wants to give the children influence over their own work the children also need to take their own responsibility. This insight implies that teachers have to have the confidence to dare to let go of some of their own control. One example of how children’s own influence over their work can be increased is seen in the following:

“We have discussions about bigger project, such as one about Europe. I provide the frames but it is all the time a school for the children to take on their own responsibility. But when you are working towards a goal and you know all the time where you are going it becomes easier [for the children]. I can see a development in all children in this respect.”

By letting the children take on more responsibility their progression within the class became more visible. From the principal’s perspective, the schoolchildren’s changed attitude and actual outlook towards each other became more evident the longer the project lasted. The schoolchildren’s increased responsibility also created a strong feeling amongst the children. The teacher emphasised the importance of creating positive feelings amongst the children when thinking about school.

Creating a supportive learning environment

The teacher and classroom researcher created the frames for the activities of well-being that took place during the project. It was however together with the children the frames were filled with concrete ideas and implemented in the classroom. One activity that was developed was the cosy reading and massage, the children were assured by the teacher that it was alright to relax and achieve stress reduction. By using massage as one form of activity but also classical music relaxing was achieved in the classroom when the children’s needs and present state indicated a need for it. Through this, a calmer environment was created that facilitated the schoolchildren’s regular school work. The principal ex-
experienced changes in the classroom environment when visiting the class that was difficult to explain. They were changes expressed in the form calmness, for example, that influenced the schoolchildren’s learning and their increased responsibility and awareness of the importance of being a student.

One other activity developed through the teacher’s confirmation of the children was the good communication. It was experienced as very good use of the time in the classroom to support the children to meet and genuinely listen to each other. When the teacher listened five to seven minutes to a child’s spontaneous conversation, the creation of a genuine meeting could begin. By creating such an environment of active listening and talking every child also knew that there always was someone present in the classroom who wanted to listen. By learning to listen to each other the children could share each other’s experiences and were coming closer to each other. Such a good talking climate created a feeling of security where the children dared to reveal uncertainty but also talk about their success. One example of the significance of developing a good talking climate is presented in the following quotation:

“The talking does not only generate the exchange of feelings but also an exchange of knowledge because when the children learn to listen to each other they also learn to respect each other, and I can see it in this group that they are allowed to share things they have learnt but also express themselves when they feel insecure...”.

**Learning through deep reflection**

Within the project it was decided that documentation of activities, actions and outcomes would be used as one way to follow the progress during the development and research process. This documentation was done on a regular basis every week by the children and by the teacher in their logbooks. The documentation was meant to serve as a base for the classroom research but turned out to be a valuable tool for reflection. Regular documentation was experienced as a valuable tool for meeting every individual
child. The deep thinking during the teacher’s writing process related to the individual child, was time-consuming and demanded a great deal of effort parallel to experiences of being involved in an energy demanding process. However, it was experienced as being worthwhile since the process of writing created a foundation for deep reflection. Reflections were made by the individual teacher but also together with the researcher and together with the principal.

By being able to share one’s documented experiences with others or with oneself, a deeper understanding of one’s own role as a teacher was created. The awareness of developing a personal reflection during the project is described as follows:

“I have developed my ability to reflect upon my role during the project; I do not write in the same way as last autumn, but I believe that the start [of the project] has lead to that I have it inside me now. But I am also contemplating because of the children’s reflections since I am mirroring my teachership by the children’s reflections in their logbooks”.

The writing and documentation that have been done are experienced as being a catalyst for reflection. Both the teacher and principal could more easily follow the whole process of the project to increase the children’s influence in their schoolwork. The documentation made the experience accessible and by reading, thinking and analysing it, a base for better understanding the process of increasing the schoolchildren’s well-being was created. The children’s progress in the class became thus more visible. Besides documentation, discussions with the classroom researcher facilitated reflection. By being able to discuss with another person, thoughts on quality and content during the classrooms experiences were brought up. Such discussions created new understanding and learning about teaching and learning processes in the class. As expressed by a teacher: “The most important thing has been the deep reflection I have gone through which has taught me much.” This suggests that participation in a classroom research project creates learning through reflection.

The experiences made during the implementation of activities of well-being were perceived as something internal and present
after the project period. These activities that were developed during the action research project are still used six months after the research has ended, at least once a day. To participate in a research developing project was also seen as one form of further education. The model developed in the classroom together with the children and a researcher created valuable knowledge that felt important to share with other.

**Comprehensive understanding**

When trying to understand what constitutes the thematic findings in this study one type of understanding seems more likely. The meaning of being part of a research project, as in the present study, seems to be to achieving a sensitive ear. This can be understood out of both the process of achieving ‘a sensitive ear’ but also out of the meaning of having ‘a sensitive ear.’ Such a type of understanding is found as an imbued message within all the three themes.

The achieving of ‘a sensitive ear’ is something that schoolchildren can acquire by a teacher allowing and supporting them to take more responsibility and to teach them to listen to each other. This in turn seems to be one ingredient in increasing schoolchildren’s well-being. By focusing on and paying attention to individual schoolchildren’s needs, interest and present state of well-being as well as their expressions, the school staff developed their listening parallel to the schoolchildren developing their listening. But ‘a sensitive ear’ seems also to be able to develop during a writing process. When a teacher is providing documentation it is found to embrace also an inner dialogue. This kind of inner dialogue is held with the individual child in focus during the writing, thus is an inner listening occurring. Another way of achieving ‘a sensitive ear’ is by focused listening during regular discussions, as was initiated in collaboration with the researcher during the project. Such listening can maybe also be learnt by discussions with other interested colleagues.

Theories about inter-subjectivity offer valuable insights when trying to understand the meaning of having ‘a sensitive ear.’ According to Mead (1976) the process of language is essential for
the development of the self. But, the self is not present when a child is born; rather the self is developed in social experiences. By conversing with others an awareness of one’s own speech is present as well as awareness about decisions that must be taken about what to say next. Mead means that significant speech is action that influences the individual herself and that this effect for the individual also influences her own communication. From this perspective, the meaning of ‘having a sensitive ear,’ can also be found to be supporting the development of the self. By being supported to talk in an active listening climate, children can also receive their own feedback by listening to themselves while talking, in addition to the feedback that comes from others’ responses.

During the research process attention was paid to support schoolchildren to listen to each other talk. Consequently, their listening became a turning of attention towards what von Wright (2000, p. 90) calls as “taking the perspective of another,” which in speech is visible to all listeners. If such attention of the other’s perspective increases then it is also possible that their willingness to take responsibility for each other increases. Von Wright (2000) interprets Mead’s writings and suggests that the teacher must catch the students’ attention but also their selves to be able to provide an ethical form of teaching and learning situation with an emotional connection.
DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that participation in a classroom research intervention focusing on increasing schoolchildren’s well-being allowed the children to be partners, created a supportive learning environment and increased learning through deep reflection. This can also be understood as learning involving the depths of the individual person in a similar way as Tiller (1999) writes is desirable for learning.

The findings reveal the process to let the schoolchildren take their own responsibility. It was discovered that when increasing the school children's individual responsibility it led to the children more actively participating in their own school work. It is however the teacher who has been setting the goal and frames for their school work. These frames can be regarded as open in a sense similar with a description of Marshall (2001, p.433), who writes that “each person must identify and craft his or her own qualities and practices.” The process to let the schoolchildren take increased responsibility was supported by the participation in a research project. As Marshall (2001) writes, the actors, in classical action research format, take a step backwards and reflect on their experiences and on their actions before they go further in their practice. Such rhythm of moving back and forth between action and reflection within the action research was also present in this study. It seems that the teacher describes how the reflection that initially were based on the provided documentation of activities, during the research process of one school year, rather became an way of acting without the need of written documentation.

In addition to documentation, discussions with the classroom researcher are findings that were concluded to facilitate reflection and create new understanding about the teaching and learning processes present in the class. Why reflection can contribute to new understanding can be explained by Dewey’s (1997/1916) writing of thinking/reflection as a conscious striving to discover specific connection between what we are doing and the outcomes of the actions. Reflection seems to create a space for professional development similar with Dewey’s thinking and also an avoidance of using routine and capricious actions. If such reflection is
facilitated by the conversation with the classroom researcher is not answered in this study. Rather one understanding of the findings is similar with Watson and Wilcox’s (2000) presentations which suggest that colleague collaboration can provide a fresh perspective on that which is familiar to us.

But another reason to why reflection was initiated and found to be useful when participating in the classroom research project can be due to the new ideas the project inspired. Via the project discussions, new horizons on well-being can be opened up and thus new thoughts created. The need for a new understanding of the concept of well-being is pointed out by Sarvimäki (2006). Reflection can accordingly be one way to create a new understanding of well-being in a learning environment. From past and present experiences the focus can be shifted towards the future when discussing how schoolchildren’s well-being can be developed in the best way.

Methodological considerations

This study contributes to an understanding of the experience of participating in classroom research with an intervention focusing on increasing schoolchildren’s well-being. However, it is not possible from this study to say anything about the long-lasting effects of such experiences and learning. If such insights had been desirable, a study with some other design would have been more appropriate. Rather, this study presents qualitative findings relevant for the persons involved. The present study may certainly be valuable for other settings and can hopefully provide other readers familiar with classroom activities with new insights.

This study assumes that the meaning of having ‘a sensitive ear’ contributes to individuals’ development of the self. From experiences of being supported to talk, in an active listening climate, people can receive their own feedback by listening when talking and by listening to others’ responses. Such an interpretation is not based on any implicit demand of objectivity. Rather, the interpretation in this study is based on arguments similar to those of Kvale (2005) about the need of readers using the same viewpoint when reading the text as the researcher, and then ought to see the same things as the researcher does.
REFERENCES


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