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Bridging the Hell's Gap – a Swedish school development project focusing the School Library as an educational resource

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In a school- development project called Bridging the Hell's Gap, eight schools in the Gothenburg area have been focusing the school library as a learning resource in the educational process. The project is carried out in elementary and secondary schools where children and students are from 6 to 18 years old. From each school a staff team about ten persons (teachers and librarians) have been participating.

Bridging the Hell's Gap started in august 2000 and is at the moment (may 2002) in it's finishing phase. The owner of the project is the Swedish Board of Education that also fully finances the project. Bridging the Hell's Gap is a part of a national school project, called the Language room. This project has as it's overall object to develop children's literacy skills.

Three institutions share the responsibility of directing and leading the project, namely, GR - The Gothenburg Region Association of Local Authorities, the Regional Library of Västra Götaland and the Department of education at the University of Gothenburg.

Hell's Gap – a metaphor

What kind of a gap is this Hell's Gap? In the book *The Robber's daughter* by Astrid Lindgren, the Hell's Gap separates two families and their castles. Kirsty is brought up with the notion that she has to mind the gap very carefully not to fall into it.

Are there any Hell's gaps in schools' work and in educational contexts? Used as a metaphor, the Gap in question may be seen as representing the distance between theory and practice or representing the contrast between, on one hand, teachers' ambition in teaching knowledge in terms of understanding, integration, wholeness and so on, and on the other hand, pupils' learning knowledge in terms of pieces, details and facts without relation to a greater whole. Perhaps there are more gaps, which have to be bridged? In any case, the Gap is the challenge!

The design of the project

The important standpoint and the leading question in this project are:
Can the school library make a bridge over the Hell's gap?

The aim of the project is to create school libraries as arenas for children's and student's curiosity, eagerness, hard work, pleasure, joy, thinking, creativeness and learning.

“Tracks” in the project

Three main parts or “tracks” constitute the project. Each track holds the ideas of some necessary conditions, taking into account the possibilities to carry out an educational development process successfully. The track *“Not without my principle”* holds the assumption that the principal must actively and in many different ways support the staff in the development process, not only with economic, administrative and organisational matters but also with special regards to pedagogical issues.

“Coming to a crossroad” is a course track that focuses teachers and librarians as learners. The purpose of the course is to develop the professional competencies in order to improve the pedagogical reasoning and decision-making.

The third track is called *“Without any answers”* and is a research track. The researchers come from the Department of Education, University of Gothenburg and Swedish School of Library and Information Studies, University College of Borås. The overall research question of the study focuses on how students create meaning through the school library. Results from this study will be presented next year in 2003.

The first track is managed by the principals, the second by the project managers and the third track is conducted by researchers.

The design of the track “Coming to a crossroad”

As mentioned before this course track has been focusing the teachers and librarians as learners. The assumption is that no change and development can be realised without the staff's professional development. Therefore this course is very important relating to the outcomes of the project.

The course has got three main parts, which the teams have been carrying through:

1. A description of the present situation of the school library's involvement and status in the school. This part has been discussed and written down by each team.
2. A developing task on a theme of special interest of each team and school.
3. Making a development plan for the nearest and coming future on how to make the school library a learning environment

Scaffolds in the process

1. Time for conversations and discussions about educational and pedagogical matters and issues.
2. The importance of the headmaster's and the headmistress's involvement, engagement and support
3. The shared responsibility between staff and principal of educational development

Input in the process

The following features have been important parts of the work in the course track:

Literature studies: The participants have read texts according to their discussions and developing task. At some times the project leaders have taken part in discussing the literature.

Group discussions: These have been one of the most important elements in this project. All teams have had time- one day per month during two years to sit down and discuss pedagogical matters, questions, texts and their own work.

Documentation: This has also been an important part, but it seems as if teachers and librarians are not too fond of writing as documentation.

Coming together and meet other teachers and librarians: The teams have derived much benefit from these meetings, both within own school and across schools

Lectures on issues relevant for school library development as well as teaching and learning

The participating teams have had great possibilities to suggest and arrange special "in service training" and invite inspiring lecturers according to their project tasks and processes. Some teams have used this possibility to influence the issues, some have joined the others suggestions. Every team have been invited to all arrangements.

Challenging questions about pedagogical reasoning: It has been the project leaders' ambition, when meeting the participating teams, to be creative discourse partners. The teachers and librarians have asked for challenging questions, in order to discover underlying assumptions and ideas that might prevent pedagogical reasoning from developing and change.

Reflection

Time to reflect have been extremely important. "The reflective practitioner" is a necessity in a school development process.

Dilemmas

The outcomes of the project are of course interesting and important related to the aims and ambitions of the project. However, in this paper we would, as project conductors, rather emphasize some dilemmas which showed up in the process. We chose the word dilemmas and not problems because we mean that problems can usually be solved and then they disappear, but dilemmas are still there. You can't get rid of them, therefore you have to find ways to deal with them. We look at these dilemmas as a kind of features in most school development project. We haven't got the answers to how to handle them but as project conductors we want to present these dilemmas to you, hoping to start an urgent and important discussion on similar and mutual experiences.

The dilemmas held in the project were about

The relation between what professionals *say* they do and what they *really* do - the relation between words and actions.

Different meanings of used concepts, words and expressions

The lack of time

How to discover assumptions, ideas and taken for granted underlying actions in classrooms and libraries

Who should do what? The roles of the teacher and librarian according to students literacy skills?

In conclusion

The project has also been seen as a project of Knowledge and Awareness with the following questions in focus:

1. What are the educational functions of the school library?
2. What is the school librarians educational role?
3. In what ways can “the good” school library empower the school development as a whole?

As project conductors we have found that the dilemmas need to be sorted out for each school. This is a necessity in the work of finding the educational functions of the school library and the librarians educational role. The dilemmas can differ from school to school depending on the learning and teaching environment.

The school librarian has still and most often got a serving role, both in relation to teachers and student. In making the staff aware of the dilemmas the role can be changed towards a more scaffolding one for the teachers as well as the students.

We have also found, and this is a most clear conclusion, that focusing the school library in a school developing project, starts interesting and important processes concerning learning and teaching in the school in question as a whole. Issues and questions are raised on educational matters. The developing process leads via the school library. Teachers and librarians become engaged in the in the same concerns. It is possible!