

## **A life of its own – a study about Action Research to support School development**

In schools in Sweden today researchers are encouraged through national policies that highlight the importance of research in the teaching profession in relation to school improvement to work with school teachers in local development projects. In autumn 2007 I was contacted by one of the teachers at a local school, about my willingness to participate in one such project that was attempting to use computers with young school children 6-9 years as tools for learning to read and write. It was carried out in the academic years of 2008/2009 and 2009/2010. We developed the project in the form of an action research project.

Action research gave me the opportunity to combine practical relevance with the scientific requirements that exist in academia. Teachers at Tower School were given the opportunity to reflect on their own practice and their professional roles, and they were encouraged to think about and eventually change any ingrained approaches in relation to how they work with pupils when helping them to learn to read and write and develop reading and writing proficiencies. The project was organised on the basis of an action research question that could be phrased in the following way: *How can we use the computer together with pupils as a tool that can help the development of better reading and writing competencies amongst young school pupils?*

The action research project began well and ran well over the course of just over one year. Teachers developed their teaching, reflect on their professional roles and discussed the qualitative aspects of pupils computer written texts. However, after a year education restructuring in the region resulted in significant changes within the organization of comprehensive schooling. These changes were significant at Tower School in that they significantly affected the working conditions for teachers (through redundancies and transfers), their pupils (through teacher changes) and the researcher (through the changed conditions for conducting action research). Often it is taken for granted that everything runs smoothly in empirical research. But what happens to research and school development in a school under change when components in the organization and running of schools begin perhaps to break down? The focus moved in other words from school classrooms, teaching practices and learning outcomes to how an organization functions in a web of political and economic relations that stretch all the way up to macro- European levels, the nation-state and the municipality and affect the micro-political level of the school, its participating teachers, their pupils and me as a researcher.

I am using Practice Architectures and the concepts saying, doing and relating. Saying – what teachers are talking about. Doing – what teachers do, both in the classroom, but also what they do differently after we have discussed in the group. What do they do differently and why? Relating – in relation to the rest of the group but also in relation to policy documents, history, environment, politics and economics. Cultural/discursive, socio/political and material/economic arrangements which can be interesting, relevant and useful in relation to a changed organization.

### **Method**

In this study we used various tools to make everyday life visible and take action, to observe what was happening in the classroom and for reflection on what happened. By using various tools such as focus groups, observations, conversations with teachers and pupils, evening meetings/sessions and journal writing we tried to create an opportunity for reflection, documentation and teacher and researcher development. The use of tools like these is common in action research. The tools are meant to complement each other and are a condition for the development and operation of a learning effect. By reflecting and discussing individually and in groups an intention is to create a new understanding of the operation. The use of tools is an opportunity to gain insight into practice

### **Expected Outcomes**

Despite changes in the organization and the changing conditions of action research the teachers choose to continue to work on teaching writing and reading learning through the computer. They said they felt sufficiently secure after the first year of the project in their professional capacity and felt able to realize the benefits of working in this way. The teachers lifted up colleagues and a team role as important in an unstable organization. Two aspects are central to school activities affected school development and our action research project at Tower School. These are time and organization. These two concepts are central to action research. Time is a key to

being able to reflect over and drive school improvement and therefore also to conduct an action research project. But you also need a confident, clear and present leadership in a stable organization that is more committed toward school improvement with the support of action research than economic savings or economic efficiency. Increased economic management may be a danger in the long term for effective school development. It certainly created adverse conditions for my work that made the normal running of my action research project particularly difficult.

## References

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