

The start-up phase in a research and development work project: A foundation for development

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Abstract

The article is based on a research and development work project (R&D project) conducted in a Norwegian lower secondary school. The purpose of the text is to describe the researchers' and teachers' roles during the initial phase of such a project, and what this phase and the close cooperation between the researcher and teachers mean for the progress of the project. The reader will see how the participating teachers modify their attitudes to the project throughout the start-up phase. This phase is outlined by means of empirical data. The study shows how such a project challenges the researchers' communicative, social and knowledge competence. Furthermore, teachers have to see the need for development and willingly participate in developmental processes, listening to and using researchers as resource persons, if a start-up phase is to be successful for subsequent development in the project.

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1. Introduction

In educational research, the terms employed are frequently “research with” rather than “research on” (Postholm, 2007). “Research with” implies that researchers and teachers are working together trying to develop practice, while at the same time researchers are engaged in studying the ongoing activity with a researcher's eye. For years, Carr and Kemmis (1986) have maintained that it is not enough to describe actions and reflections connected to practice. They claim that, if there are problems in a teaching situation, researchers should not just describe the processes that take place but

also try to improve this practice as part of the research process. The start-up phase of the research process presented in this article does not take place in a teaching context that presents special problems, but where the participating teachers are interested in improving their practice. All the same, we will learn that there is some hidden resistance that will come to the surface, and, furthermore, that development can create some competition concerning the time the teachers have at their disposal. The research and development work project (R&D project) will be conducted at the selected school over a 2-year period. The project commenced at the school in September 2006 and the start-up phase was planned to last until Christmas the same year.

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The research presented is funded by the Norwegian National Research Council and has several tags attached to it. It should be a R&D project focusing on the main topics in the Current National curriculum. This means that the content and method of the project have been decided over the heads of both teachers and researchers. However, national regulations for research and development in schools state that development in schools should be motivated and initiated by the teachers themselves (White Paper no. 30, 2003–2004). In this article, the focus is on the meeting between teachers and researchers in the initial phase of a project, trying to enhance development within the restricted framework set by the funding for the work.

The purpose of this article is to describe the researchers' and teachers' roles during the start-up phase of the R&D project. The text also describes how the participating teachers modified their attitudes to the project throughout this phase. I start by presenting the R&D project and the participating teachers in their professional roles and context, and then go on to the theoretical and methodological approaches used. Next, I outline the start-up phase and how it developed, illustrating this with empirical data. I conclude the text by discussing how researchers together with teachers should organize the start-up phase in R&D projects to create constructive cooperation that can lay the foundation for commitment and actions leading to improvement.

2. The R&D project and the teachers in their school

The initiative for an R&D project can come from the practice field as much as from researchers. A headmaster at a school that was participating in such a project told the researcher that she was invited because she was familiar with their way of working. She added that at the same time she was an outsider who probably saw things from another perspective than they did (Postholm & Madsen, 2006). We see that the thesis question can come from the school, from researchers, or the thesis question can also be formed by the researchers or both parties together. Both researchers and teachers can agree on a common thesis question that becomes the starting point for the R&D work. This was the case for the project that is presented in this article. The teachers involved worked at a school that emphasized school development with the pupils' learning as the main focus. The headmaster

eagerly invited researchers into her school to help her develop practice and the premises necessary for improving it. She motivated the teachers to take part in the project, and also reminded them that research and development competence is an important part of their total competence, as stated by Norwegian National Authorities (White Paper no. 30, 2003–2004).

Altogether six researchers applied to the Norwegian Research Council for funding. The research programme favoured, as mentioned, projects that were organized with close cooperation between researchers and teachers so that they could develop practice together. This guiding framework resulted in collaboration between researchers and teachers already in the writing of the application. The researchers were connected to two teacher education colleges, and therefore an institution that was connected to both these teacher education colleges in its role as a student teacher training school was selected.

The selected school is situated in a suburban area and has pupils from the first to tenth grades. Forty teachers are working at the school, which has 500 pupils. The pupils are for the most part from middle-class families, and there are few immigrants at the school. The teachers are divided into three teams. Teachers in Team 1 teach pupils in grades one–four, teachers in Team 2 teach pupils in grades five–seven and teachers in Team 3 have the responsibility for the pupils in eighth–tenth grades. Each of the three teams has a team leader, who is one of the teachers. I am connected with Team 3 and therefore this micro society (Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000) is the focus in this text.

During the writing of the application for funding, which was later granted, I had several meetings with these teachers in which we developed the research question together. We arrived at: *How can various work methods with the focus on learning strategies contribute to each pupil's subject and social development?* I suggested that project work could be the focus, but the teachers felt that various ways of working should be emphasized, and so that is what we ended up with. Both learning strategies and adapted education are key parts of the national curriculum, so the teachers had every opportunity to satisfy national demands on learning and support for learning when choosing this research question as a framework for their teaching.

There are altogether 12 teachers in this team, and they also belong to their own class teams. The social

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