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Re-learning in Reading and Writing – is it possible?
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Abstract

Increasing failing in reading and writing among student in Swedish schools results in that many students can’t reach the goal stated in the curriculum in compulsory school. Therefore they are forced to enter an individual program at the upper secondary school. The specific aim of this part of a longitudinal Grounded Theory-study was to conceptualize and generate a theory about what two teachers and their students in one class in upper secondary school actually do when working with re-reading and re-writing using a specific method. The results based on qualitative research interviews, observations, questionnaires, video recording, and analysis in the tradition of grounded theory, show that these teachers strived systematically to ensure every student’s reading and writing development through what is labeled didactic arranging. Teachers, students and the didactic procedures are shown to be in constant interaction. It was also found to be important that the teachers believed that every student could re-learn reading and writing and help them to believe in their re-learning so they could increase their low self-esteem and self-confidence.

Keywords: Grounded Theory; literacy; education; special education; reading research; reading instruction.

Introduction

In Sweden there is a dearth of knowledge about what experienced and skilled teachers do when they succeed in teaching children to read and write. Many professional practitioners of the present generation still will soon reach retiring age. Therefore it is important to investigate and record what these teachers do in their actual practice with literacy teaching (Myrberg, 2003). Historically, issues of reading and writing have been the source of much discussion. Best practices and specific methods have been discussed, but also what kinds of competencies teachers ought to possess (Hjälme, 1999). Teacher training programs in Sweden have been criticized because teacher trainees of today have less knowledge about read and write teaching than earlier generations (Andersson, 1986; Skolverket, 1996, 1998; Myrberg & Lange, 2006). This study falls within the field of Special Education, and is rooted in a preventive perspective. No pupils ought to fail in his or her literacy acquisition. Thus, if or when they need extra support, it should be made available to them, and as early as possible. Adults who manage to avoid learning to read
and write are automatically disbarred from further education (Fischbein, 1996). New research had clarified those factors that are most important for the development of reading and writing. Of most importance are teachers’ competencies, engagement and positive responses to each student (Hattie, 2009). Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in recent years has shown that Swedish student’s reading and writing skills have been declining. Figures showed that 15-year old students in Sweden had decreased in reading and reading comprehension. It was also obvious that 15-year boys with another mother tongue failed most (PISA, 2010). When student fail to reach the goal stated in the curriculum in grade 9, the chance to enter a national program at upper secondary school is less. The opportunity students have is to apply to an individual program and this program has increased at upper secondary school in Sweden (Skolverket, 2010). Some of this individual program offers re-learning as a new option to become better in reading and writing. Re-learning in this case could be defined as a new way of learning how to read and write. Media and policymakers have highlighted this issue at national and international level. Too many Swedish students leave school without having reached the minimum standards set by the compulsory school curriculum. The future problem for these students can leads to unemployment and more of unhealthy. Early success in reading and writing is a key factor determining a student’s later mental health (Barnekow & Muijen, 2009). Successful societal development depends on the existence of a literate population; literacy not only benefits individual personal development, but also enables participatory citizenship (Stanovich, 1986; Elbro, 1999; Stanovich & Stanovich, 1999; Myrberg, 2003; Reichenberg & Lundberg, 2011). Research in the classroom, conducted in different contexts, could offer one way to investigate what factors could prevent failure and increase literacy among students. There is also a need to investigate the way skilled teachers work when teaching students how to read and write (Myrberg & Lange, 2006). This begs the question as to the source or cause of the problem of an unacceptable number of students failing in their reading and writing development? Is the cause to be found in the schooling system itself? Are teacher deficient? Is it the teacher training or the individual learner who is at fault? Or is it this entire factor together that gives these results?

Teacher in this study used a specific method, named Witting-method, that can be applied for students in all ages, but are most known as a re-learning method for older students and adults that earlier have failed in their reading and writing development. The Witting method (Witting, 1985, 1986, 1993, 2005) is since the 1960’s a method of instruction for reading and writing at different grade-levels in Sweden and was developed by Maja Witting, education researcher and teacher training lecturer at Uppsala University, now retired. Witting developed her approach to teaching after many years of close interaction with students’ learning in classroom situations. She started her work with students that had cognitive disabilities, at that time in Special schools. Today the method is used in different contexts. Special schools in Sweden were closed around 1986 and today students with different kinds of disabilities can choose special or ordinary classes in compulsory schools. In a typical class teacher meet different kinds of disabilities. Students with more severe cognitive disabilities still are placed in special classes in mainstreamed schools, unless the parents wish to have them in ordinary classes with a special program (Skolverket, 2010).

The Witting method is also used among adults with cognitive disabilities that continue to learn in adult education. Wramner (2008) states it is successful teaching literacy among adults that have cognitive disability by using the Witting method. The theoretical base of the Witting method (Witting, 1985) stresses the importance of meta-cognition and linguistic awareness and is based on the idea that the learner must first master the system of relations between letters and sounds. This is a prerequisite to comprehend what is being read. The reading and writing activities can be divided into two parts. The first part is the technique is for mastering the system of relation between the letters and the sounds and is more of a mechanical part. The second part is the content, which is the creative and dynamic part of reading and writing. The Witting-method is also based on “the content neutral language structures”, (ma, bi, is) and on a dialogue between the pupil and teacher sharing responsibility for the learning process. These content neutral structures are neutral and have no meaning until the student change his or her approach from form to content and examines it in searching for content. The students have to find a word that corresponds to the specific structure. This specific method contains attentive writing, which is the technical part and working with content, the associative routine. These two components are closely connected to each other (ibid). The Witting method is easy to identify on a theoretical level. It is well described in a handbook, in articles and in different books that explain the ideological background as well as the development of the method. While this study (Swärd, 2008) is focused on the practical use of the method, there is an overlap between theoretical issues and practical considerations. It is important, where necessary, for teaching support to be given as early as possible,
which in turn demands the carrying out of regular assessments of the student’s progress (Chall, 1967; Barr, Kamil, Mosenthal & Pearson, 1991; Adams, 1980, 2001; Juel, 1996; Lerkanen, 2003; Myrberg, 2003; Fröjd, 2005). Any teaching practice includes a multitude of factors and it is almost impossible to decide whatever method might be “the best” or most effective. Research results indicate that students at risk have more success with methods based on letter-sound connections. Successful teaching strategies should involve a balance between working with letter-sound and comprehension (Barr et al, 1991; Naeslund, 1956; Lerkanen, 2003). As mentioned above, this study is written within the framework of special education that in Sweden has a broad perspective. This means that difficulties or possibilities have arisen in the interaction between the environmental factors and the individual predispositions. Special education is defined as interdisciplinary and has a holistic perspective (Fischbein, 1996). To encourage success it is important to note that teachers’ competence and their personal ethics have crucial impact on success rates. Teachers need to know and understand how students learn in different ways, that all individuals are unique and that they have different experiences and backgrounds when faced with the hurdle of learning to read and write (ibid).

The challenge for teachers is to try to meet these individuals’ needs and be able to tailor their teaching practice to the variation they find in their students (Chall, 1967; Taube, 1988; Lindblad, 1994; Fischbein, 1996, 2001; Adams, 2001, Myrberg, 2001, 2003; Tornberg, 2006; Nilholm & Björekkj-Akesson, 2007). Research has also shown how important an individual’s self-confidence is for the continuing literacy development and that reading and writing development begins quickly once children have begun school (Taube, 2002; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 2000). In Sweden teachers, in knowing how to teach reading and writing are free to choose what method they wish. There are a lot of studies about younger students reading and writing development but less of research for older students. More specific it is less research done in relation to teachers’ way of working and assessment in the individual program at upper secondary school in Sweden where students that earlier have failed in their reading and writing (Hugo, 2007). When teacher assess students knowledge and skills they also have impact on students self-monitoring and regulation of their own learning (Earl, 2003; Hume & Coll, 2009; Lundahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2010). This article will put some light over what’s happen when teacher and student at one individual reading and writing program use the Witting-method in what in this method is called re-learning.

**Aim**

The specific aim of the present longitudinal grounded theory study as well as this part of the study was to conceptualize and generate a theory about what two teachers and their eight students, over a number of years, actually do when working with re-learning in reading and writing using a specific method. A wider goal for the full study is to apply the implications of the derived grounded theory to general and special education theory in helping to alleviate reading and writing difficulties and prevent students from failing.

**Grounded Theory methodology**

Grounded Theory, the research method in this study, has been applied from the outset of data collection and throughout the whole data-gathering procedure. Grounded Theory, an inductive method with a number of deductive steps is used to examine what skilled teachers do when working on literacy. A theory helps practitioners, in this case teacher, to understand what kinds of choices they can make in a given substantive field (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is a general method that can be used with any kind of data. Because the first selected teacher used a reading and writing method that had never been investigated, the methodology also came to include this special approach to reading and writing. Grounded Theory is a qualitative method and the term “grounded” signals that the theory is grounded in empirical data and research will be more relevant when theory is grounded in empirical data (ibid). The goal of Grounded Theory is to generate and formulate hypotheses based on conceptual ideas emanating from the data that may later be subjected to normal verification procedures. Potential hypotheses are generated by constant comparison of data at different levels of abstraction. Through procedure of constant comparison and analysis of descriptive data, creation of categories, and theoretical memoing to abstract their relationships will ground understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. The goal is to ‘discover’ or uncover an emergent theory. Grounded Theory presupposes that this emergent theory will reflect how teachers in the substantive field deal with the main concerns of their teaching practice. (Glaser, 1979, 1998, 2005). The constant comparative analytic
procedure is a key constituent of the method. Even if the general idea is that transcribed text are broken into units, possible to analyze, this can be done in a variety of ways. The data at this stage are constantly compared and as the number of categories increase, they are compared, and results in more abstract categories. This abstracting continues until a central or “core category” is conceptualized and this "core category” organizes the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1998).

Participants

The parameters of the full study are (i) four teachers/special teachers, (ii) their 44 pupils, 16 girls and 28 boys (iii) in four different contexts, (iv) all using the Witting method. The four teachers were women varying in age and experience as follows: age 50, 5 years experience, age 48, 26 years of experience, age 59, 38 years experience, and age 61, 40 years experience. All subjects have been chosen through purposeful sampling, beginning with the first teacher, a strategic choice, which put the researcher in contact with the Witting method. The first teacher was also the link to the second teacher. The author met the last two teachers at a conference, randomly selecting. The age of the pupils ranged from 7 to 20 years and all were chosen because of their connections with the various teachers. The first context was grade 1-3 (and also 4-6, 7-12 years old students) and one primary teacher. The second context was grade 4-6 (9-12 years old students), third context grade 7-9 (13-16 years old students) and these contexts had the same teacher: she was a teacher in special education with. This article describes the fourth and last context, a special reading and writing program at high school, grade 1-3 (16-19 years old students). In this context the participants were two teachers (one teacher in the class and one teacher in special education) and seven students, two girls and five boys. These four teachers in different context were needed to compare “what is happening” when these teachers used the Witting-method and what their students reflection was upon their own reading and writing development in connection to the teachers application of the method.

Data Collection

The first context gave rich sets of data that needed to be compared with how teachers in different contexts used the same reading and writing-method. Data gathering was eclectic. Some lessons were video recorded. “Open questionnaires” were distributed among students in order to investigate how they expired their reading and writing process in relation to The Witting method. “Small chats” and regular interviews, digitally recorded, with the teachers and students also contributed to the data. Also, information about what teachers and their students actually do when they are working with reading and writing was gathered through observation and note taking in the field. Data gathering and analysis followed the precepts of Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978,1996,1998, 2005). Once concepts had been generated they were reflected upon. All categories and subcategories were then part of a framework from which the core-category emerged. By constantly comparing, memo-writing and analyzing, all sub-categories were fitted into to the core-category. Memo-writing is of central importance in the theoretical analysis and eventually contains hypotheses of the emergent theory. Memos, in which ideas were noting, reflections on concepts and how they related to each other, were crucial to this study, which ended in the final sorting and comparing between the four contexts that preceded the generation of the ultimate Grounded Theory (ibid). Teacher interviews, student interviews and participant observation were used in collecting the research data. The interviews with the teacher and their students were to identify the impact of the application of the Witting-method. Interviews were semi-structured to explore issues, follow up and to allow for interaction and they were transcribed verbatim (Kvale, 1997). Observational data from participant observations, note-taking were validated through methodological triangulation, where observations, video recording, note taking, and interviews gathered the same information (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Interviews with the teacher were between 40-60 minutes and with the students around 20-30 minutes, totally 13 hours. Time for observations and video recording was 61 hours 20 minutes. The total amount of time in the fourth context was 74 hours and 20 minutes over a period of three years.

Analysis

Grounded theory was to generate theory in a process of open, selective and theoretical coding. Open coding included line-by-line, whole-paragraph and whole-document analyses, which resulted in: naming concepts and developing categories and properties (Glaser, 1998). Concept development involved ‘in-vivo’, ‘abstracting’ and ‘borrowing from the literature’. In-vivo concepts, like ‘students earlier experiences’ or ‘discuss concepts’ were taken
from the respondents’ own words. Through abstracting and understanding from the data, situations were named like ‘continued’, or ‘planned’. Similarities and differences within the data were identified and grouped into categories as soon as some were suitable to the same phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Selective coding followed after the process of open coding and each category was defined as terms of continuity, discontinuity, constrained spaces, liberated spaces, collaboration, isolation, scheduling, teamwork and competence. Through memos under the process of coding the researcher can discover theories that are relevant to the subject and therefore can be linked to the theoretical phase. In this phase it is important to find relations between categories from a theoretical perspective (Glaser, 1978). From open coding to selective coding three core categories emerged and in the last, theoretical coding they become more obvious. These core-categories were; assignment adaptation, situational adaptation and competence controlling.

Ethical considerations

Good (2001) shows the way to sustainable ethical thinking when doing research among people that might have some sort of learning difficulties. Shortly this means that participants in the study are involved in every step in the research. Factors as collaboration, consulting, respect and empowerment must be involved in what the author called emancipatory research. Due to Brodin and Renblad (2000) it is important to consider that this kind of research needs more of ethical approach since questions can awake feelings and memories from education. In the last context there were students that due to different reasons have failed in the compulsory school and perhaps felt excluded from the school. At some moment pupils showed feelings against video recording and no recording was done in these situations. Pupils, teachers and principals as well as the parents have giving their written approval for the participation in this study. Data material has been handled due to current recommendation. The persons in the study are anonymous, have been informed and knew that they could quit the participation at any time without any explanation (HSFR, 1996).

Results

The empirical data indicated that teachers experience themselves as having to deal with complexity where they must serve both societal and individual needs. Society is in need of well-educated citizens and this goal can only be reached when all pupils have mastered the ability to read and write. The studied teachers have struggled to ensure each pupil’s reading and writing development and they had to do this through what is labelled ‘didactic arranging’. There are many factors that teachers have to account for, including each pupil’s personal wellbeing, their learning development and societal demands for effective teaching and successful outcomes. Teachers must meet the variation of needs and experience among pupils, where some have had bad experiences from elementary school. They apply their way of working with re-learning to meet the assignment stated in the curriculum. Most of the students have a lack of knowledge within many subjects because some have “been forced” to take away different subjects. The first week is about creating satisfaction, security, and confidence and learns to know each other. It takes time to learn to listen to audio books students don’t recognize. The students mostly choose books they already are familiar with and the teacher have to challenge them. The first lesson starts with discussion with each student about their reflection about earlier reading and writing support as well as their experiences from elementary school. The student are well aware about how they had before and what support they got:

It was not funny in the small group we were placed in, no more development happened.
We most of the time had to manage on our own which resulted in dropouts or giving up.
(Leif, Lasse, Leo and Linus, vt-05).

When using the Witting-method students are recommended to stop reading and instead listen to audiotaped books. The reason for this is that because the students’ difficulties with reading they often use less effortful strategies. In the re-learning they must learn new strategies to read and also to be aware about the problem they might have. The attentive writing to be aware about what sounds can be troublesome for the students. One of the students said it was weird that he actually could “see” what sounds was problematic for him. For the first time he becomes metacognitive aware about what the obstacles in his reading was. Some of the students have secured most of the sounds while other only have secured the vowels a, o, e and consonants, s, m, p, f, b, n and d. It was then difficult to read, hard to feel motivation and interest for literacy.
To vary teaching loads and strategies and support individual needs is important at all age-levels in school and here at the individual program at upper secondary school teachers and students are well aware about that re-learning must be done. Because the feeling student have about their ability to read and write from earlier year in school the teachers explain why it is important to come to school every day and why the schedule and their way of working with re-learning has to be in a systematic and structured way. In the observation and video-clip it looked like the students were happy with this way of working and in the interviews they confirmed this. They felt more secured and they also felt that teachers believed in their possibility to learn. The teachers create different situations of learning and material due to the individuals need. In Witting-method no commercial material is used except from books. Students create their own writing material and teachers design other materials if needed, like materials for maths and time management. The use of the Witting method enables a diagnostic mode of teaching as it contains tools that allow a teacher to follow each pupil’s reading and writing development and signals where early extra support may be necessary. The neutral content structures (ma, bi, rö) in the Witting method are of special prerequisite as they are triggers for the pupils’ creativity vocabulary development. This in turn is important for the pupils’ creation of texts and ability to achieve reading comprehension. The student’s metacognitive reflection is another important factor for being successful in their reading and writing development.

When we discuss and try to find out words from these content neutral structures we also become aware about how different our vocabulary can be. We come from different villages or from the central city and dialect can be different which have impact on how we use different words. We discuss and learn from each other. (Lena and Lisa, teachers)

These two teachers tried to give a lot of opportunities for students to collaborate in couples or in smaller groups. They believed their way of working was important for each student’s literacy development. Some of the boys had been silence in earlier grades and were unusual with discussion in smaller group or in couples in that way the teachers did. The Witting-method has strong emphasis in collaboration and to encourage every student. This is one important factor in the method. These students liked this way of working and thought it also was funny because they felt it was creative. After the attentive writing, which is a short start of the lessons they continue to create words, sentence and different types of texts together with each other and also by themselves sometimes. Computers were used for writing and also pencil when they preferred. The important was not what sort of equipment they used; it was that they started to create their own texts. Teachers used a variation of texts both reading aloud and in audiobooks. Reading aloud was a daily activity and students were active involved about the choice of the text. Discussion out from the text was also included and there were a lot of interesting discussion due to different words and to the content in the text. This discussion could be on different level but was mostly to check if the students understand what the author had written behind the lines. Teachers question was if the students could they understand and individual levels.

Ensuring literacy through didactic arranging is the proposed Grounded Theory. It derives from how teachers, in different contexts, teach pupils to read and write by using the Witting method. Experienced teachers, while showing competency in teaching reading and writing, also possess an ability to deal with all the factors involved in ‘day- to- day’ schoolwork. They invoke a holistic perspective that fits well into special education practice but also in general teaching practice. Collaboration involving those pupils deemed to be in need of extra support was also shown to give results. Their use of didactic arranging enables the prerequisites needed for them to handle the complexity of their assignment on both societal and individual levels.

Discussion

‘Teachers’ didactical considerations as well as their ethical values are important for how theoretical knowledge unites with teaching practice, in this case, the teaching of reading and writing. Pragmatic, action-oriented, humanistic theories fit well with how these teachers in their didactical strategies solve their assignment of ensuring
literacy. The individual and societal assignments must meld together and these teachers achieve this through their didactic arranging. The grounded theory of ensuring literacy through didactic arranging may be regarded as a model in three stages where the threads are woven together in a never-ending stream of multifactorial activities. The stages in the theory where teachers’ and pupils’ work is woven together are: assignment adaptation, situational adaptation and competence controlling. The teachers’ use of the different dimensions of the Witting method reveals a common thread throughout the varying contexts.

The Witting method is a structured and systematic approach that fits well with what research has shown any effective method ought to contain. A dilemma may arise if teachers may be inclined to adopt a mechanical or static strategy, without displaying any didactic creativity of their own. This use of the Witting method may be experienced as boring, which is the opinion of some teachers. Since the method is based on a clear handbook and systematic exercises it places higher demands on a teacher’s competence. Especially since the Witting method has no “fixed” material. Teachers are expected to understand the theoretical basis of each exercise and the order in which the various exercises are expected to occur. An adequate knowledge of Swedish language is an absolute prerequisite but also the ability to analyse and reflect about the pupils’ progress. Experienced teachers, with a broad and deep competence, might well be able to use whatever teaching method they wish. On the other hand, a teacher that might have difficulty in using the Witting method would probably have difficulty with any method. This dilemma may perhaps explain why individual schoolwork has increased along with all sorts of materials to fill the school day. This has led to a large market for commercial teaching material that has evolved without any basis in research (Kroksmark, 1994; Österlind, 1998; Granström, 2003; Lindkvist, 2003).

The notion of ensuring literacy through didactic arranging fits well into other research about teachers support to pupils’ literacy development (Harm, McCandliss & Seidenberg, 2003; Block, Gambrell & Pressley, 2002). Classroom collaboration between teachers and their pupils enables students to use meta-cognitive thinking about their learning process. They are able to talk about their own learning and knowledge when they are made aware about what they have learned, what they still need to learn and what they yet have not learned. They are also aware about special difficulties in their reading and writing development. A common language and shared concepts about literacy is needed in order to understand how students deal with their learning (Dewey, 1916/1997; Vygotskij, 1934/1999; Marton & Both, 2000). Time-on-task was also shown to be important so that students can come to know what they are doing and going to do at any given moment (Langer, 2002).

The importance of the grounded theory generated in this study explains how teachers handle the duality implied in their assignments, serving both societal and individual needs. Though the theory has emerged from empirical data gathered in a substantive field and focusing on a specific activity, namely re-learning literacy, it cannot immediately be generalized. The theory may however be modified as new empirical data accrues or as it is subjected to empirical testing (Glaser, 1978). Ensuring literacy through didactic arranging can hopefully contribute to new perspectives on teaching reading and writing and also on teachers’ competencies. Investment in teachers’ competencies and in ensuring adequate teacher education programmes are important factors in enabling students’ reading and writing development. This also serves societal needs for well-being and having a well-educated population (Darling-Hammond, 1997). All pupils have a “legal” right to succeed in their reading and writing and have support as early as possible. Students in Finland perform on top in PISA and one reason for this is that a high percentage of students in first grade are recognised early to be in need of special education (Sarroma Hausstätter & Takala, 2010). If the students in this present study had have help much earlier in compulsory school they could probably have reached a national program at upper secondary school. Now they have had re-learning in an individual programme at upper secondary school and their self-esteem and self-confidence have increased as long as their reading and writing skills improved. More research must be done about the situation for older students that due to different reasons have failed in earlier grades. It is stated in the Swedish school law and curriculum that all education shall be grounded in research and experiences. This put new demands on teacher as well as the scientific society.

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