

STORYLINE – a Strategy for Active Learning and Adapted Education - a partnership project between teacher education and practice schools.

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Abstract:

This paper presents data from a project on Storyline, a strategy for partnership and active learning, involving teacher students, their practice teachers and teacher educators. The aim was to reduce the gap between theory and practice and to prepare the students to do storylines as qualified teachers. A practical induction course, given to both teachers and students, was followed by implementation of the strategy in the following practice period. A follow-up evaluation demonstrated the value of both the practical induction course and the implementation part. Storyline was also found to be well suited to reach important aims for compulsory schooling.

Key words:

Teacher education, Storyline, Active learning, Basic skills, Adapted education, Cooperation in teacher education.

BACKGROUND

Active learning and so-called progressive methods have had a strong position in Norwegian Curriculum Plans since the 1930s and have also influenced the curriculum plans for teacher education. A number of studies, however, have demonstrated that students, having acquired positive attitudes towards such methods during their training, turn to more traditional teaching quite soon after becoming certificated teachers. This is explained with the need for control and the need to be perceived as competent in their new school (Solstad 1991, Stålsett 2003, Hauge 2002, Hoel 2004.)

Progressive methods and active learning jointly imply a form of teaching which combines opportunities for independent thinking, partnership and choice-making for the children, together with a teacher who has a sense of structure and expectations, who builds on the children's knowledge, and helps them to reflect and to construct learning strategies. The evaluation of the Norwegian Curriculum Plan from 1997 (L97) demonstrates that whilst teachers support progressive ideas *in theory*, traditional methods still dominate the classroom. Progressive thinking has, however, influenced classroom teaching, but in ways that may have led to the low position and lack of esteem which such methods seem to inhabit to-day. Ideas about active learning, partnership, research-based teaching, etc. seem to have been interpreted as free activities overseen by a passive and non-interventionist teacher. There may be a lot of activity, but often more for the sake of doing something, than for pursuing planned learning activities. (Haug 2003, Solstad 2003. Dale & Wærnes 2006.) Haug (2004) suggests that teachers do not have the necessary skills for organising active learning and progressive teaching.

The research quoted above indicates that students may not have had the opportunity to acquire experience and knowledge about how to organise and structure active learning processes which stress support and learning outcomes. This lack of experience is especially interesting in view of Clark and Petersons' research (1986) which has demonstrated that in their approach to planning, teachers develop conceptions of what to do based on what they have seen and done before.

A possible conclusion, based on research such as that quoted above, is that if students are to be prepared for implementing active learning methods as future teachers, they must not only hear about them, they must also have direct experience of such methods in their own learning. Further, and perhaps most important of all, is the necessity for them to have the opportunity to plan and implement such teaching activities with children during their practice teaching.

This is the background to the project *Storyline in Teacher Education – a cooperative project between university and practice*, which started in 2004.

Why Storyline?

Storyline is a strategy and method for active learning, adapted education and partnership which was first developed in Scotland as a cooperative project between teacher educators and teachers. The learning process is built up through episodes which form a story line. The process is directed by key questions and well planned activities focusing on learning experiences and outcomes. Key questions are open questions intended to challenge what the children already know about the theme that is to be researched, thus leading them into their next developmental zone (Vygotsky 1978). A storyline starts with establishing a visual milieu where things are going to happen, and creating the figures that are involved in the story, thus creating identity and ownership. In principle, a storyline gives the teachers control of the learning process at the same time as the pupils participate, do their research and make their decisions. (Cresswell 1997, Eik 1999, Falkenberg og Håkonsson 2000.) Thus, Storyline can be described as a progressive method which seems to possess qualities that may help counteract some of the negative consequences of progressive teaching that have been pointed out above.

APPROACH

If all our student teachers were to undertake a Storyline approach during their next teaching practice, we had to involve the classroom teachers as partners. A meeting with the teachers indicated that most of them were positive in the matter of letting the students do a storyline in the following practice period, which, for all the students, was in levels Primary 1 to 4. Next, the teachers were invited to a practical induction course to Storyline. The same course was later made compulsory for all our first-year students. The course was followed by reflections, discussions and evaluation, and formed the first part of the project which can best be described as action learning (Tiller 1999).

The data

As stated above, an important aim with the project was to prepare our students for using Storyline as educated teachers. Within a paradigm steered by objectives and national and international tests, our proposition is that teachers will have to legitimate their choice of learning strategies and learning activities within the frames given in the tests. We also needed to know if the use of time spent on the practical course was worthwhile. The other part of the

project was, therefore, a survey directed to all the students and their practice teachers and carried out after the practice period was finished. The questions concerned the respondents' experiences with Storyline as a strategy for teaching literacy and numeracy, and for approaching the main principles stated in the Curriculum Plan, of adapted education, research-based teaching and partnership, as for example: *How did you experience Storyline as a method and strategy for the teaching of literacy?* We also wanted to learn about the participants' attitude to the project as a whole, and to the use of Storyline in the future.

All the questions in the survey had four alternatives. These might, for example be *very well suited, well suited, not so well suited, or not suited*. In presenting the results, the two best and the two weakest alternatives are classified together. All the questions had room for comments, which most of the respondents employed. The data which are presented also comprise comments collected from the evaluation of the induction course and from a discussion on our electronic learning platform.

60% of the teachers and 65% of the students answered the questionnaire. 50 of the 58 students had done a Storyline in the practice period, while 17 of the 18 teachers had allowed the students to do a storyline in their class.

RESULTS

The practical induction course

The data demonstrate that both practice teachers and students gave good credit to the short induction course to Storyline. Both groups saw the method as interesting and challenging, and emphasised that they had learned new ways of thinking about teaching and learning. The students appreciated doing new methods instead of only hearing about them, of being active in their own learning process, while the teachers pointed to the value of being introduced to new ways of teaching via the same method later to be used by the students. Both groups declared that, without the practical course, they would have been sceptical about implementing a Storyline in the classroom. One student commented thus: *"The experiences I have had will help me a lot when I am going to implement Storyline with pupils"*, while another one admitted that, *"Without the course, I think none of us would have wanted to do a storyline. She [the teacher] is too conservative, and I do not like to do things I do not understand."* The importance not only of listening but of doing as well, was also demonstrated by one of the teachers: *"I had heard about Storyline in my teacher education, and have often wanted to try. The induction course was that little nudge I needed to get started."*

Of the 58 students only 2 were negative about the induction course which they judged to be a waste of time as they could have learned the same in a 3-hours lecture, and *"Of course it was fun, but fun is for my spare time activities."* While one of these two students was rather negative to all aspects of Storyline through the whole project, the other one reported good experiences from having done a storyline in practice, and said she would do storylines in the future.

Attitudes after having implemented Storyline in class

Both teachers and students were very positive after having implemented storyline with pupils. Comments stress that it had been extremely interesting and exciting, and a very good experience to draw on later: *"It has been absolutely super, I shall use this method in my future job". / "Both the pupils and I have learnt a lot". / "A really good way of teaching"*.

One student admitted that she had been sceptical: “... *Could Storyline really be done with these wild Primary 2 pupils? But I must admit that I was surprised. This way of working was just right for them, and I was very inspired to do storylines in the future*”.

Though most comments were very positive and demonstrated that the implementation of Storyline had been successful, they also revealed ways of improvement. Many students would have liked more time for implementation of the storyline, thus extracting more learning opportunities. Others said that they should have spent more time on planning and the making of good key questions, while some mentioned they had been too lax about structure. One student emphasised the importance of having a wide knowledge in the field, because “*without the faculty to see connections, it will be difficult to make good key questions which challenge what the pupils already know in a way that lead them to their proximal development zone*”.

Comments and reflections like this are the keys to improvement. In this way, the Storyline project represents action learning for the students, from which they have gained conceptions on which to base further planning and teaching. In line with our assumptions, one of the teachers stated that, “*It will be safer to do storylines later when one has tried and seen what worked and what did not work*”. Storyline was a new way of teaching for the teachers as well, thus the students have met teachers who were willing to reflect on their own teaching and to try new methods. These are important aspects of teacher professionalism. However, we must stress that this investigation does not reveal if the students and teachers together have discussed matters like those mentioned above.

Storyline as a strategy for learning

Our proposition is that new methods, to be put into practice, must be seen as relevant for reaching goals stated in the Curriculum Plan. In Primary 1-4 relevance will first of all be judged in relation to the acquisition of literacy and numeracy. The data present experienced teachers’ and students’ evaluation of learning outcome in these fields. This investigation does not however, probe into how the pupils’ learning outcome is measured.

The survey shows that the great majority of both teachers and students look at storyline as a good method for learning in general. Besides learning about the theme and the skills incorporated in the storyline, the respondents report that the pupils have learned about relations and working together, i.e. democracy in practice. The majority of the respondents also found storyline to be well suited for research-based teaching and partnership between teacher and pupils. For example, one of the teachers states that she will do more storylines because the method opens up for possibilities for pupil participation and more active pupils.

Storyline and the teaching of literacy

Literacy forms the basis for all learning and, as such, is perhaps the most important task of the schools in the early years. Traavik (2003) claims that practising reading and writing in a meaningful way with texts that children find interesting, is central to literacy. The question in this investigation is whether Storyline is regarded as a relevant instrument for developing literacy.

More than 90 % of the students, who did a storyline, and 15 of the 18 teachers, found it either to be a very good, or good, method for teaching literacy. Working with Storyline has included many areas of the Curriculum Plan for Norwegian, such as reading, oral presentations, the learning of new concepts and writing in different styles. The pupils have recorded facts, they

have made log-books and written expressive stories. Other students reported on pupils who enjoyed making their own texts and on pupils who found that they could write creative stories together, and “... *they asked for more homework because they would tell more about Karlsons’ visit to Pippi ...*” (P2).¹

One student remarked that storyline did not work with P 1 because the pupils did not yet read and write. This student did not have a practice teacher who informed her about how she could use pictures, stories, dramatising, role play, drawing etc. as tools for communication, tools which could also reduce the gap between the forms of communication they mastered and the new and abstract written language. Another student, also in P 1, had a better experience: “*Even if we tried this [a storyline] in Primary 1, we expected them to write a little every day. I think they were motivated to write because they enjoyed what we were doing.*”

To sum up, ticking and comments demonstrate that both teachers and students found Storyline well suited for teaching literacy, and that the method gave many opportunities to practise the written language in a meaningful and interesting way. The investigation does not explore the nature of the grounds on which the evaluation is based. Nor do we know if, and in what way, the teachers have responded to the texts. However, Traavik (2003) asserts that up to P 3, what counts is that children get positive feedback independent of what they write and how they write. The main thing is that they do write.

Storyline and the teaching of mathematics

Even if both teachers and students found it more problematic to combine Storyline with the teaching of numeracy than with the teaching of literacy, more than 80 % of the students and about 75 % of the teachers agreed that the approach is very well, or well, suited for the basic teaching of numeracy. One teacher reflected that in Storyline the problem-solving is practical, which is good for young children, and another admitted that she felt freer to let the pupils explore and find out things themselves. Some respondents insisted that it was easy to integrate mathematics and that they did a lot of work with practical problems and problem-solving, while seven students found Storyline to be not so well suited to the basic teaching of mathematics.

The development of the storyline, steered by the key questions and chosen activities, determines which aims and subject content are to be covered. If Storyline is to be a good tool in the basic teaching of numeracy, key questions and activities must lead the children to use, explore and acquire new knowledge in the field. In a storyline the idea is that the problems prompted by the key questions should be 'real' problems as they are experienced by the figures who take part in the story. This is the strength of the method, and is in line with Alseth and Røsselund (2006) who claim that real problems should be the starting point for teaching basic numeracy.

Storyline and adapted education

Adapted education is a main principle in the Norwegian Curriculum Plan, which means that all sides of the learning situation are supposed to take care of variations among pupils’ abilities, social and cultural background and interests. In this investigation, the concept of adapted education was not discussed with the respondents, which mean that the answers and comments may conceal different interpretations and refer to different actions. If Storyline is judged as consonant with what each individual interprets as adapted education, the probability

¹ Pippi and Karlson are beloved figures in books by the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren.

for later implementation increases.

About 75 – 80% of the respondents find Storyline well suited for taking account of differences and variations among the pupils. Some point to the fact that, in Storyline, the pupils participate in the development of the story. Others mention that all the pupils can contribute within their abilities and skills. Some argue that Storyline is a way of meeting different learning styles because problems can be tackled and carried out in many ways. Two students assert that storyline is very good in multi-grade schools, while others found that in Storyline pupils from other countries were able to use their abilities and to participate in an appropriate way.

Generally the comments reveal that, pupils who had problems with adapting to the school situation, functioned well in this project: *“There were pupils in this class who generally were not interested in school work. Especially one pupil, who always resigns from discussions, became really enthusiastic. Pupils, who generally have problems with keeping the focus on school work, had long periods when they worked well.”*

“There was much practical work which suited some of those boisterous boys very well.” / “Pupils, who generally do nothing, became very active and engaged.”

Comments like these, point to an interesting question: Is lack of concentration a quality in the child, or is it the result of the situation in which the pupil finds himself/herself?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our project had as its starting point a positive view on progressive methods, although we were fully aware of the pitfalls demonstrated in the evaluation of L97 (Haug 2003). Our proposition was that if new teachers are going to use progressive methods in their future teaching, they have to practise them as student teachers, and to judge these methods as conducive to the acquisition of basic skills and as tools for meeting the over-arching aims for compulsory schooling as stated in the Curriculum Plan. The central idea with the Storyline project was, therefore, to let students, and their practice teachers, experience a progressive method where aims, demands and the learning of skills are apparent. We judged Storyline to be one such method and strategy.

As we have seen, the majority of the students found Storyline to be a very good or good method and strategy in the teaching of literacy and numeracy, but this investigation has not explored the grounds on which these statements are based. Reading, writing and the acquisition of basic numeracy are, however, central to the development of literacy and numeracy. If these activities are done with enthusiasm and motivation, the probability that the pupils will read, write and do more mathematics increases. All the same, it is important to remind the readers that storyline, as with other methods, if it is to be conducive to learning, needs teachers who sum up, give meaningful responses and clarify aims for the pupils.

The evaluation of the L97, demonstrates that the common method for complying with the principle of adapted education, is variations confined to the amount of work to be done. This investigation has shown Storyline as a method where the pupils can deploy all their different qualities and skills, and where everyone can contribute to the solution of the problems which arise and the tasks to be undertaken. Such an approach motivates pupils and enables them to experience a feeling of mastery. Perhaps we can assert that Storyline may have given new

dimensions to the concept of adapted education, and that there are reasons to conclude that these teachers and students have found Storyline to be a good method for such teaching.

A main question is whether this project has increased the probability that these students, when qualified, will include Storyline in their repertoire of methods. A great majority of both groups said that they would certainly do storylines later on. Many of the students actually did this in their practice teaching the following year. 90% of the students stressed that we had to continue both with the compulsory induction course and with doing storylines in the practice periods. Most of the practice teachers agreed to this.

The study indicates that the induction course and, even more so, the practical experiences with pupils, have provided the students with a good foundation for subsequent use of the approach when practising as qualified teachers, and, further, that it was right to combine the two approaches. They have gained concepts and skills as a base for later planning and an initial understanding of procedures and context. They have experienced active learning in practice, and they have reflected on their experiences and how to make improvements.

Analysis of the teaching process, and reflection, are seen as central to the effectiveness of teachers. They are, therefore, important participant processes for the students to experience. The responses have demonstrated that both the students and the teachers have reflected on their experiences with Storyline and pointed to ways of improvements. We do not know, however, if the teachers and students jointly discussed questions of structure, the relevance of the themes for the story, how the key questions worked etc. as a basis for learning and improvement. This ought to be a field for further cooperation, development and investigation.

Munthe (2005) emphasises that we cannot make the assumption that students have experienced pupil participation and different methods for adapted education in their own schooling. Thus, teacher education has to take the responsibility for preparing students to teach in line with the Curriculum Plan. The dilemma, as pointed out earlier, is that students learn about progressive methods distinguished by active, mental learning, pupil participation and developmental responses *as theory*, but that their experiences *in practice* do not necessarily support their theoretical understanding. The question is whether the sort of cooperation between the university college and the practice schools which this project represents, can reduce the gap between theory and practice at the same time as the students gain competence for implementing progressive methods as qualified teachers, in a way conducive to learning.

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