OUTI KYRÖ-ÄMMÄLÄ

RESEARCHER-TEACHER AS THE SUPPORTER OF VARIOUS PUPILS

“There would be quite quiet in a forest if only those birds who would sing the best could sing.”

- Henry van Dyke

THE BACKGROUND FOR THE BIRTH OF MY THESIS

The roots of my research are in my work as a teacher due which I have been able to meet a variety of pupils. Already after graduating as a special teacher at the beginning of the 1990s, I came up with an idea about a doctoral thesis about supporting pupils’ cognitive skills. As I was working with children, I many times had to think whether there was any “sense” trying to increase the contents in subjects for children because often the reason that slows learning down is the lack of attentiveness or slow cognitive development. Would it not be more important to pursue developing children’s basic learning-to-learn skills and information processing skills, would it? Along with my teaching experience and in-service training, my interest in this research theme strengthened. However, I did work over ten years until my dream of doing research came true.

In my research, my purpose was to meet the challenge that originates in practical work: how could a teacher support in an optimal way in general education those pupils who underachieve and how to remediate their cognitive skills, and simultaneously, their learning and working skills? I still consider this challenge concerns the whole teacher corps: supporting various pupils cannot be defined as concerning only teachers in general education or only special teachers. Pupils are different and need different kind of teaching. However, diversity does not necessarily mean that a pupil was that “special” that he/she would need special education separately from general education. When approximately every fourth pupil at elementary schools in Finland is in special education (see Statistics Finland, 2009), can we even talk about “special” education any longer?

COMBINING RESEARCH WITH OTHER LIFE

When I started my doctoral research, I worked as a special teacher and my roles as a mother and a teacher did not leave me much free time. An obligatory pause for working as a teacher – namely, infected vocal cords – turned into a deciding factor for starting the doctoral research. My sick leave became epochal as I contacted the future custos of my public defence whose way of supervising had become familiar.
to me already when I wrote my master’s thesis. Her quick reply and warm welcome to participate also in a doctoral seminar inspired me to embark the job.

After having got started, my research process advanced relatively fast. The theme with its background theories was firmed up. Since I already had considered research methods, my work started well. Indeed, my Supervisor said at the end of my research that “Outi’s research has been going on all the time like a train: constantly chugging and along the select rails”. I had wondered and deliberated the theme and gathered practical experience for a long time, over ten years, and I believe that is the reason why starting and implementing the research fared painlessly – yet, not in a totally straightforward way.

The everyday life and summers of our family went during the research process almost wholly on the researcher-mother’s terms by giving space, supporting, and understanding the mother’s dream. As the mother of the family, I often felt guilty because I spent almost all my free time with the research work. My six-year-old daughter’s words for her visiting friends still ring in my ears: “Yes, sure you can come to play in my house but you have to be quiet because my mom does research.” Hearing that utterance stopped my thoughts several times in the midst of research work: what is important in life and whose terms we live on? Similarly, the moment is etched in my memory when my youngest child after my doctoral process told her friend “my mom and I, we went swimming” – without knowing that it is probably quite a usual way of spending time together in many families. However, it had not been something our family did in the summers during my doctoral process.

Alongside working in my position as a special teacher, my doctoral process took about three and a half years, altogether. Of that time period, I was on leave two spring semesters as I luckily got The Rector Grant from the University of Lapland twice. I was able to concentrate on my doctoral thesis free of work and at least my daughter’s school days’ worth. In addition, I got a peaceful study from the Lapland University Library to do my thinking and writing work.

When working as a teacher, I was able to collect the data as well as carry out my research as an action research at my own school. I got the research permission from the director of education of Rovaniemi, the school rector, and the pupils’ parents. In addition, I agreed about the implementation of my research with those two class teachers whose pupils participated in the research. When doing the research, I was, at the same time, a researcher and a teacher whose one goal was to develop her own work. The starting point originated in practice: a researcher-teacher’s desire to develop in her work professionally and simultaneously develop her work as well.

A TEACHER AS A RESEARCHER

In the school world, action research has been known for a long time. Among others, John Dewey implemented this methodology in his research work already in the 1910s and 1920s. His pragmatic educational thinking focused on the role of action, experimentation, and repetitious experience as the bases of learning and developing knowledge. According to the master of action research, Kurt Lewin, science should not be buried in universities but it should be practiced among