

LESS TRADITION FOR MORE PROFESSION: AN ATTEMPT WITH THESIS PROJECTS IN PRACTICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This research scrutinises the question whether an education profile with development-oriented thesis projects in teacher education programs can provide an increased professional relevance without losing scientific quality. The methodology used in the survey can be defined as a participatory approach in which field work, document studies and interviews form the basis for data collection. The suggested activities that students used were development-oriented methods. Before the project's implementation, instructional texts and supplementary examination criteria were written with a view to guaranteeing scientific excellence, with the main aim of improving professional relevance. The results show that the course tutor initially had some trouble communicating disposition and structure, which meant that some of the students at first had doubts. Despite this, the summary assessment is that the development-oriented approach implemented with scientific quality enhanced the students' readiness for future professions.

Keywords: education, action research, teacher training, thesis projects.

Introduction

Nearly all thesis projects produced within the Swedish teacher education program are written reports, and there is seldom a development or research project where practical development is the focus and where teachers from the practicum schools are involved in the project. In earlier evaluations, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education has pointed out that the thesis projects in the new teacher education often have a formal academic character where scientific scholarship and methodological requirements are given more attention than the central problems of the teaching profession (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2005). Similar problems have been noted in other European countries, and several researchers advocate a teacher training that focuses on professional preparation and makes a clear link to the profession. These researchers believe that professional orientation can be beneficial if the students are allowed to implement alternative variations of the degree project (Feiman-Nemser, 1990; Meeus, Van Loy and Libotton, 2004; Maaranen, 2009; Tight, 2015).

Considering this background, it is important to increase professional relevance and advance teaching development through a practical education profile without compromising the requirements for scientific quality in the thesis project.

In policy documents and other guidelines regarding higher education, there is a relatively uniform picture regarding what a scientific foundation is. In order for the instruction to be said to stand on scientific grounds, it should build on the latest research findings in the given field, with a theoretical knowledge base, and develop a critical approach toward testing knowledge (Eriksson, 2009).

There is often the argument that a more classroom-based thesis project risks being deficient in its documentation and scientific quality, while the traditional and more academic-oriented project risks decreased transferability to the real work world (Gustafsson, 2008; Reis-

Jorge, 2007; Råde, 2014). An academic vocational training should be able to fulfill the criteria for professional relevance and scientific quality also when it is aimed at the development of classroom teaching (Casson, 2015). The goal is to tie academia and work life closer to one another (Dyste, 2002; Sköld, 2016).

With the goal to develop the students' *independent ability to discern, formulate and solve problems* and to provide *preparedness to meet changes in professional life* (SFS, 1992:1423) the present study was planned in the program for compulsory school teachers with the education profile to work in leisure-time centres. In the investigation, a practicum-based and participant-oriented approach was tested in the final part of the education program, the thesis project.

As the thesis tended to become even more academically oriented and the attempt to tie the work closer to the field failed, much due to the traditional style of supervision, the goal is to find stable and creative ways toward revision.

Purpose

The aim of this research is to analyse whether a practicum-based and development-oriented thesis project can provide increased professional relevance and promote development of leisure-time centre activity without compromising scientific quality, and also encourage students to carry out new alternative documentation forms.

Methodology of Research

In order to provide the compulsory school teacher education students with a more vocation-oriented focus, they were offered the choice between two alternatives for implementing their thesis projects. The first option is referred to as a traditional-oriented project, which has been dominant for many years. This type of project foremost deepens knowledge about traditional research. The other option was to plan and carry out a development-oriented project using a theoretical basis, in order to develop the leisure-time centre activity. The development-oriented project can be likened to a systematic quality project or an action-research project where the implementation takes place in the school and the leisure-time centre, and it is designed in cooperation with the leisure-time centre teachers. The aims of the work process are to acquire new skills, document and review critically knowledge, and disseminate the experience to other leisure-time centres (Rönnerman, 2012). Development takes time, and in order for the goal of the planned change project to be accepted and understood, it needs to be processed within the educational activities (Nehez, 2015; Ellström, 2006).

Selection, Professional Role and Knowledge Area

The attempt to engage the compulsory school teacher education students having the education profile to work in the leisure-time centre, in development-oriented projects was implemented in four graduating classes at Linnaeus University during 2014 and 2015. This education program allots generous time for relationship-oriented education (Hansen, 1999; Karlsudd, 2012) and working with children's social relationships is important in this future profession (Dahl, 2014; Dahl & Karlsudd, 2015). The compulsory school teacher with the education profile to work in the leisure-time centre is counted among the new professions which are called semi-professions. The professional autonomy of the semi-professions is limited, and this status has been attained primarily by political decisions, not through scientific advancements (Brante, 2014). Leisure-time centres involve more than eighty percent of the six to nine year-olds in Sweden, a program with more pupils than the number of pupils in secondary school. This is the context and background for the present study.

Guidelines and Instructions for a Development-Oriented Project

As defined in this research, a fundamental requirement for the development-oriented project is that it is based on the needs of the leisure-time centre and is carried out in agreement with the teachers. The development area should be relevant for the education program profile and the future professional roles. The students can make use of their experiences from previous practicums. Projects can be the students' own ideas about what can be improved and developed or the problem can be based on the development needs as defined by the leisure-time centre. The documentation can be regarded as "alternative" in that it is not only made up of a traditional academic thesis.

The development-oriented project consists of two written parts, where the first part is an action-oriented and activity-based development project that is documented in a process journal (Figure 1: A). The second part is a report presenting all the stages of the development project (Figure 1: B). The written documentation should be based on scientific evidence, but may vary in extent and structure from the traditional approach.

In addition to the requirement for a written presentation in report form, documentation of the project is required in one or more alternative presentation forms. Examples of these may be a web presentation, film, exhibition, instructional task or a dramatization (Figure 1: C). The development area should be described in relation to the leisure-time centre's current state and desired development and change. The main didactic issues are to guide the project.

In a development-oriented project, current state analysis, needs analysis, goal formulation, methodology and procedures are central. The current state analysis and the needs analysis provide answers to the questions, What? and Why? What is it that will be studied and developed? Why is this interesting, relevant and important? For whom, for what? It is necessary to identify, delimit and define the development area and show the relevance of the planned interventions. What knowledge contribution and what development effects does the project strive to achieve? This next step is related to How? In what ways are knowledge and development to be achieved? It is important that the methods are related to the situation and conditions, and that the project is implemented on the basis of established development models for systematic quality development or action-oriented and participant-oriented research. The picture below (Figure 1) shows the guide used to assist the student's planning.

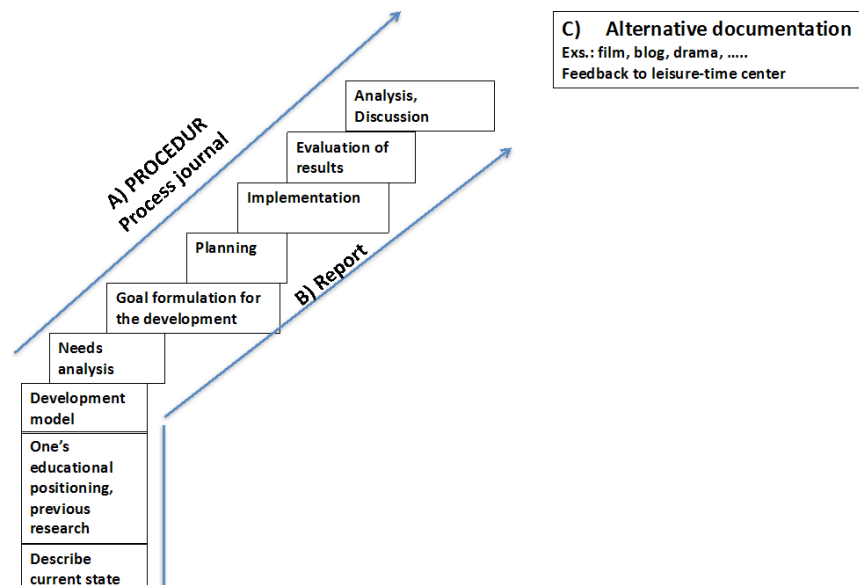


Figure 1: Model for a development-oriented thesis project.

Clarification of the Examination Requirements

When the format of the thesis project differs from the common academic tradition, it is extra critical to design valid criteria and examination forms. In order to clarify the requirements, supplements and re-formulations were therefore made of the assessment criteria valid for the previous more traditional thesis. Mainly clarification was involved of the connections to the leisure-time centre activity. The described criteria thereby aimed to direct the project toward a more didactic assessment and analytical approach, as well as toward the third mission of the university, which is to interact with the surrounding community.

Document Analysis and Interviews

In order to create a discussion and reference framework regarding the documentation of the two possible educational profiles, a simple quantitative document analysis was performed (Table 2). The review included projects from four graduating classes, and the analysis covered all nine development-oriented projects as well as the corresponding number of traditional thesis projects randomly selected and in proportion to the number of development-oriented projects assessed with "Pass" and "Pass with distinction."

Five supervisors and two examiners were involved with the development-oriented projects. All supervisors were interviewed about their experiences with the implementation and quality in comparison with the traditional academic thesis. In order to capture the students' views on how they perceived working on the development-oriented thesis, telephone interviews were conducted with eight of the nine students who carried out development-oriented theses. With the help of a number of open-ended questions focusing on the advantages and disadvantages of the development-oriented approach, the conducted interviews took an average of thirty minutes. Among the leisure-time centre teachers who participated, eight people were interviewed representing the same number of theses.

Reliability

The research was carried out by a course work team with extensive experience of supervision within teacher education. The work method in this study has been participant-oriented, meaning that the supervisors in the course have been both researchers and co-workers. This relationship naturally has some risks since the approach involves interaction between the participants and the researcher. Such a relationship can lead to imbalance and risks such as the researcher or the participants favouring a previous or a new practice (Kemmis, 2014). In order to limit this risk, discussions were continuously held with colleagues within and outside the work team. In order to rule out a dependent posture and reduce the interviewer effect (Bryman, 2011) interviews were conducted with the students, supervisors and leisure-time centre teachers approximately eight months after the education program was completed.

The Development-oriented Projects and Selected Problem Areas

A total of nine development-oriented theses were conducted. This type made up 21% of the total number of thesis projects completed in the timeframe for the course. The majority of the students who carried out the development-oriented theses have used methodologies such as action-research and participant-oriented research with references to such theorists as Rönnerman (2012) as well as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011). Some work refers to systematic quality control or school development with reference to Håkansson (2014), and Carlström and Hagman (2006). Examples of the methods used in the current state analysis are interviews with children and staff, observations, document analysis, interviews, study visits, surveys, parent meetings, field notes, journals and photography. The alternative presentations are represented by film, handbooks or manuals, photos, slide shows, blog posts, and "local advice".

Results of Research

Out of all nine conducted development-oriented theses (Table 1) two aimed at testing and developing "digital activities" for learning in the leisure-time centre. The results in one thesis show that these activities offer learning that stimulates problem-solving, practice of mathematical concepts, orienteering skills and creative ability. Another experience as a consequence of the project is that digital activities could inspire a social movement, outdoor recreation and creativity.

In the second digital-oriented project, the purpose was to highlight which skills are revealed when pupils play the computer game, "Minecraft." Starting a theme project at the leisure-time centre that engaged both pupils and teachers was expected to reveal experience about the learning potential of the game. The results of the project are mainly that the staff obtained a better understanding of the functions of the game and that it is possible to figure out how to continue developing, especially in math.

One development thesis was directed toward creating pictures. The purpose was to test how picture-creating activities at the leisure-time centre can be designed practically to promote an entrepreneurial approach. The results show that the attitude of the teachers and the design of the activities are of great importance for the children's imagination, and that creativity should be given time and space.

In three development-oriented theses, the recess activity was in focus. One of these worked with developing ways to reduce harassment. The results show that adults have an important role for ensuring that children feel safe during breaks, and that with the right interventions, children's own initiatives, social climate and contact areas can benefit. Another project had the purpose of student-teachers and pupils at the school together developing meaningful break-time activities. Answers were sought to such questions as, how do pupils describe meaningful break-time activities, and what can teachers do to meet these needs? The results show that it was difficult to engage the older pupils and those pupils outside the social community. The third project on break-time activities involved an experience-based, experimental, exploratory approach. The purpose of this development project was to improve the motivation and attitude of the pupils toward being outside during break, as well as to expose the school's outdoor environment and the opportunities for being outside. The results of the development project show that there are fewer conflicts and that well-planned outdoor activities are appreciated by the pupils.

One project used dance as a tool for breaking stereotypical gender perceptions at the leisure-time centre. During a five-week dance project, pupils participated in eleven dance opportunities based on learning dance routines and creating their own choreography. The results of this completed development project point to an increased confidence among several of the participants, contributing positively to a change in the children attitudes toward dance from a gender-equality perspective.

Improving responsibility and cooperation was another goal of a development project. The project was based on the staff's perception that the pupils at the leisure-time centre showed a lack of cooperation ability, respect and responsibility for friends and school materials. The results of the development thesis show that the pupils began to take more responsibility for their behaviour. The development work had a goal description with these previously mentioned concepts in focus: relationships and sense of community. The goal was to give pupils tools through the planned activities to establish new friendships and increase a sense of community among the pupils at the leisure-time centre. The results of the activities verify the opportunities of the leisure-time centre to create an arena where pupils develop through communication and interaction.

Table 1. Development area of each of the nine projects included in the research.

Digital activities To develop “digital activities” for learning, such as, geocaching, mystery caching, QR-coding.	Digital activities To reveal the knowledge/ skills when pupils play the computer game “Minecraft”.	Entrepreneurial picture-creating To test visual art activities with an entrepreneurial approach.
Recess activities To test how recess activities can decrease harassing attitudes and conflicts among pupils.	Recess and pupil influence To develop meaningful recess activities through dialog with the pupils.	Recess activities and experiences To develop recess activities using an experimental, exploratory approach.
Dance as a tool To use dance as a tool to break stereotypic gender perceptions.	Sense of responsibility To improve the sense of responsibility and cooperation in a systematic quality project.	Relationships and community To strengthen relationships and sense of community with specially selected activities.

Traditional-oriented Projects as a Quantitative Reference

The table below (Table 2) presents the scope of the written thesis reports and how they are distributed across the parts that usually make up a scientific report. Here is also a presentation of the references with the extent and distribution of the different types of references expressed in number. The table lists the number of the least and the most pages and the types of references for the two different kinds of projects. This quantitative review has relatively high validity regarding measuring the scientific quality of the academic theses, and it often provided the basis for the quality discussions of the supervisors and examiners. In addition to this review, the examiner performed a qualitative assessment based on the grading and assessment criteria valid for the independent project.

Table 2. Comparison between the development-oriented and the traditional projects.

Content	Development-oriented				Traditional-oriented			
	Min	Median	Ave	Max	Min	Median	Ave	Max
Number of pages	17	25	25	32	27	31	31	39
Number of words, without appendices	4793	10994	10426	15503	8728	12438	13174	17695
Previous research (%)	11 %	20 %	19 %	36 %	22 %	34 %	33 %	47 %
Method (%)	8	16	17	26	10	17	17	23
Current state analysis (%)	4	6	9	23	0	0	0	0
Procedures/Results (%)	21	35	32	41	21	33	30	34
Theory for analysis (%)	0	5	5	12	1	6	6	11
Discussion (%)	9	12	15	25	9	14	14	16
Other (%)	0	1	3	13	0	0	0	0
Number of references:	15	22	23	32	21	32	34	51
Dissertations	0	2	3	9	1	4	4	7
Referee-reviewed articles	0	2	2	7	1	4	4	7
Of which are in English	0	1	2	7	0	(3)	3	7
Policy document, review	1	2	2	4	2	4	5	10
Course literature	1	5	6	11	4	6	7	16
Methods literature	2	5	5	10	2	4	5	9
Other literature	0	5	4	8	2	8	7	20
Literature 2010-2015	(8)	(11)	(12)	(19)	(9)	(13)	(14)	(18)
Webpage	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Film/TV/Photo	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2

The development-oriented projects are somewhat smaller in *scope*, with the median value as reference point, six pages fewer. Regarding disposition toward research, the development-oriented projects have a somewhat less proportion dealing with previous studies (14% difference). In terms of method, result, theory and discussion, there is very little difference in the two variants (1% to 2% difference).

In comparing *references*, the development-oriented projects have ten fewer references according to the median value. Dissertations and referee-reviewed articles are reported more frequently in the traditional projects, but the differences are not large. Regarding the development-oriented projects, which show the most references with dissertations and refereed articles clearly represented, there is no difference between the two different kinds of projects; the distribution follows the same pattern.

The scope of the theory does not differ much between the different project types, but is presented in different ways. In the development-oriented projects, the theory is presented with the author's educational positioning, while the theory in the traditional work is a separate chapter which is subsequently referred to in the discussion. The presentation and feedback are mostly weak. All the development-oriented projects have clear suggestions for educational implications, and one specifies proposals for further research. Eight traditional projects give suggestions for continued research, while only one project addresses educational implications.

Interviews with Students, Supervisors and Leisure-Time Center Teachers

Developing independence

Most of the students and supervisors emphasize the positive opportunities of being able to test an educational idea at the leisure-time centre with the development-oriented thesis projects. From the students' perspective, it is a personal and professional challenge to attempt to implement an educational idea at the end of their education program. Not all students are willing to take on this challenge according to the interviewees, the reasons for this attitude being that the development projects can encroach on one's comfort zone and there is some sort of safety in carrying out a traditional thesis project.

The project is perceived as an exciting, independent educational challenge, which through its design offers students the possibility to spend more time in a concrete professional exercise. Supervisors express a desire to deepen their knowledge and competence regarding supervision of the development-oriented projects. A challenge for those responsible for this education program has been to clarify the differences between the development-oriented project and the traditional project. The students, supervisors and leisure-time centre teachers in the compulsory school reflecting on the development-oriented project, say that it has greater potential to capture the complex aspects of the concrete professional practice in comparison with the traditional thesis project. A traditional-oriented project mainly builds on a number of interviews with teachers. The students state that getting to test and develop an educational idea in the leisure-time centre has greater value in a future perspective. If the student shows his or her ability in a development-oriented project, this may lead to employment after graduation.

Developing a didactic model

Another motivation for the students to choose the development-oriented project is the intention to develop an idea or a model that leads to change. Their plan includes identifying a problem, following up the process and changing the leisure-time centre activity. The students must experience the problem themselves, and their procedures must lead to change within a five-to-eight week timeframe. Being able to capture and document the progress is another challenge. The student interviews demonstrate that the students do not consider the project to be a simple exercise, but something that requires hard work in order to achieve results.

At some leisure-time centres, there was a joint discussion between the participating teachers and the student-teachers about what was possible to develop and implement. At the same time there was a risk that the student-teachers could “step on someone’s toes” and the development intervention could be perceived as a criticism of the teachers’ work.

Developing the leisure-time centre

It has been found that for some of the leisure-time centres it is not unusual to work in a project form, and it is seen as part of developing their activity. Sometimes the students have implemented their development-oriented projects on their own without having discussed the identified problem to a great extent with the leisure-time centre teachers. It is a difficult balancing act between not “disrupting” the leisure-time centre with one’s project idea and taking on an independence.

Even if the project idea is supported and the class is inspired to continue, there are several obstacles along the way. Often a lack of time is emphasized as a reason for not continuing to develop a project. Another reason is that there is a lack of knowledge and competence about current subject content. However, all the participating teachers express that to various degrees, the results of an intervention effect and influence the leisure-time centre.

Discussion

This research shows that thesis projects with a development-oriented approach where educational implications are the focus, can attain scientific quality. The students who have carried out the development-oriented projects consistently express a willingness to improve and develop the educational activity with their interventions. How well the students have succeeded with their ambition seems to depend on the development effort being anchored in the leisure-time centre. A symmetrical relationship is prerequisite, where the student has had a significant independent role in the common interest of promoting local knowledge-building in the leisure-time centre (Elström, 2006; Dyste, 2002; Casson, 2015).

Both students and supervisors state that the development-oriented projects lead to the opportunity and challenge to try out what it means to be on one’s own as an active teacher. Among the problem areas that the students focus on in their development-oriented projects with connections to the leisure-time education knowledge field, five of the nine projects direct interest toward social relationships. Two projects focus on digital tools, and the last two are on aesthetic forms of expression. The overwhelming interest in choosing the area “work with children’s relationships” is strongly connected to the social-educational discourse that dominates the leisure-time centre activity (Lager, 2015). The results also show a more nuanced image of the profession compared to an earlier study by Willen Lundgren and Karlsudd (2013), where a large proportion of the students formulated a relatively naive and simplified approach toward their future profession. One possible reason for this increase in quality can be due to these current students being given a real challenge and the concrete possibility of testing their own didactic plans through their development-oriented projects.

The greatest differences appear in the quantitative review between the two project types where the traditional thesis holds a larger proportion of previous research, while the development-oriented thesis places greater emphasis on the methods and on writing about educational implications. The informants in the study who chose the development-oriented project, state that they really want to try to develop something together with the pupils in the leisure-time centre.

Several of the interviewed students state that it can feel more comfortable and secure to sit behind a computer and process five teacher interviews, for example, than to venture out into a practical teaching situation. These directions and instructions felt unclear at the outset have certainly influenced the choice of which orientation. This is thought to be remedied now as the

majority of the students choose to work in the development-oriented projects after they have been presented with the experiences from this project.

Conclusions

An aspect that has been discussed regarding the examination of development-oriented projects is to strive for an alternative review process. It has been shown that the traditional opponent procedure is not the most suitable, since the tendency is to be too focused on an assessment of the written work. When the student largely uses herself as an “instrument” in the implementation phase of the study, it has been found that a higher degree of self-reflection is likely to be required in comparison to the traditional-oriented project. The supervisors and leisure-time centre teachers must stimulate and attend extra to this reflection. Another issue that is discussed is how supervisors and examiners can better maintain the contact with the participating leisure-time centres. One possibility may be that teachers at the practicum schools act as co-assessors in the final examination, which could strengthen the criterion of a proven experience.

In a society characterized by rapid and significant changes, the leisure-time centres are going to face some major new challenges. Teachers who work at the leisure-time centres must therefore have knowledge and experience of the development and change process. This is an educational challenge that this type of project promotes. A development-oriented thesis project seems thereby to strengthen independence and the student’s taking responsibility in preparation for the future profession (Sköld, 2016). There is, therefore, a reason based on this investigation, to develop and evaluate further this endeavour that has begun.

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