

How teachers can work together to help their students and organization to function better/Teija Jokinen-Luopa

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This Berlin conference emphasises psychological literacy and one of its objectives is to help individuals and organisations to function better. My topic nicely aligns with this topic as I am going to talk about several different projects which I and my colleagues (= The Study Skills Team) have implemented in my school to enhance students' learning strategies and motivation and our teaching methods.

Why did I choose this particular topic? Because I think that learning and teaching are the most important things in schools and that it is important that psychology teachers who are specialized in cognitive processes and cognitive development are involved in projects attempting to improve teaching methods and students' study skills.

Preconditions for successful teamwork

- the school atmosphere must be open, inspiring and friendly
- the principle should encourage free exchange of new ideas and teachers' initiatives
- working together for common pedagogical goals should be encouraged by the principal
- people need to feel safe to work together with others
- the whole process is based on the work of volunteers whose efforts are recognized
- responsibilities should be equally divided within a team
- the more different experts (teachers, counselors, school secretaries etc.), the more different viewpoints

Why is teamwork important in schools?

- teams may come up with interesting pedagogical ideas concerning the whole school
- team work is recognized
- being a member of a team motivates because you need to listen to others and you have to take other people's viewpoints into consideration
- working towards common goals together with others makes you feel that your work is significant and gives a notion that you belong to your workplace

Background information about the school and our students

My school, Eira High School for Adults, is a private institution in Helsinki and it is the biggest high school for adults in Finland with about 2500 students representing 98 different nationalities! So we are a truly multicultural school with a very relaxed atmosphere, flexible working practices but a

very tight teaching schedule. You can probably easily imagine that we have a lot of students with learning problems and special needs. And we also have quite a few of students who are immigrants and foreign residents and therefore may have language problems.

Our pedagogical mission: what do we believe in?

- Expertise we teachers and counselors have
- Pedagogical well-being, which could mean, for instance, that knowing your students, their special educational needs, strengths as well as weaknesses may improve what happens in our classrooms and enhance learning
- Carol Dweck, professor of Psychology at Stanford University, who claims that intelligence can be developed. She talks about a growth mindset, an idea about intelligence that can be taught and improved. She says that it is important to learn at all costs and that working hard is the key to success. It is also crucial to capitalize on mistakes and confront deficiencies. In her opinion, it should be a human right to live in an environment that helps students to fulfill their potential.
- doing things we haven't mastered yet

What have we done to confront the learning problems many of our students seem to have?

- We have had **experts** visiting our school and giving lectures on the latest pedagogical research
- We also believe in **expertise we teachers and counselors have**. Therefore last year we asked our staff in our general staff meeting to write down some of their practical ideas that always seem to work in class. We also started an online forum where people could add their practical teaching tips. People were so excited about this process that we decided to organize **a two-day seminar** around five interesting topics including student assessment, learning together, positive emotions that enhance learning and teaching of study skills that enhance deep learning. The seminar has already become a tradition.
- As an outcome of the seminar, we published **a manual** for the teachers that had all their practical ideas for every day pedagogical problems in different subjects. The manual is still in process and people can add new ideas online non-stop.
- To address the special needs our immigrant students might have with their studies, we have **two teachers working together** in some science and humanities subjects. One of the teachers is a subject teacher, for instance in history, and the other teacher in a language teacher, who is specialized in matters of language awareness.
- **In general staff meetings** that take place once in six weeks different volunteers present their **practical pedagogical ideas** that always seem to work in class.
- This year we carried out **a survey** for our students examining areas of learning in different subjects they might find problematic. The purpose of the survey was also to make the students reflect upon their learning methods. By analyzing the data we hoped to gain in-depth information about our students study skills so that we could make changes if necessary in the way we teach to better serve our students' educational needs.

A pilot survey, a two-phased questionnaire, was conducted to 10 different study groups in different subjects and the results and feedback helped us to limit the number and type of questions in the actual survey. The results were interesting in many ways. For instance,

- over 90 % felt that coming to our school was worth a try
 - many students seemed to have flow experiences in learning in our school
 - in a survey there was a question dealing with students' ability to concentrate during lessons and more than a half of the students said that it was equally important how the teacher taught and if she/he was very excited about her/his subject
 - many students also said that they highly valued teachers' abilities to explain complicated matters in a simple, understandable way
 - many students seemed to use highly effective study skills; yet, there seemed to be a lot of students with serious problems with study skills (for instance, trying to learn everything by heart, using repetition only, not planning their studies at all, having no time management etc.)
 - during lessons, 60 % claimed to be active, what about the rest?
- a word of warning: teachers should not be afraid of student dissatisfaction because 1) learning is often challenging, 2) negative feedback might result in good learning, 3) a student may learn to value tuition or certain courses much later in life, not now
 - In addition, teachers and student counselors organised a special **study skills day**, a day when the whole school was out of its comfort zone! There were no lessons on that day but only workshops where teachers together with students tried to tackle problems students might have in different subjects (PPT). The feedback from the students and teachers was very good and we plan to do it again next year when we also need to encourage students to participate in the planning process of the day. It was great that many teachers ran workshops together and thus learnt from each other and exchanged pedagogical ideas. Students also were familiarized with many different study skills, practiced them and thus seemed to learn some new skills. Together with our Student Union and their entertaining program, we managed to combine business with pleasure.

What next?

- How to deal with the results coming from the survey? What changes should be made in our teaching methods? How better to deal with a wide variety of students' special educational needs?
- How to teach students study skills and a growth mindset more systematically, across all subjects? How to encourage all our students to become learners who believe in constant effort and hard work.
- How to involve students more in planning and implementing of what goes on in classrooms?
- How to collect feedback from students efficiently and more systematically?
- How to encourage teachers to work more with one another (two heads are better than one!), even across subjects?

For further details of the survey, contact Teija: teija.jokinenluopa@eira.fi