

# Key factors for teaching and learning - Teachers' experiences and reflections on literacy teaching

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## Research Article

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When this study began my institution was: Stockholm university.

Ethics board: Stockholms universitets forskningsetiska kommitté.

They state that approval for this study was not needed.

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# **Key factors for teaching and learning**

## **Teachers' experiences and reflections on literacy teaching**

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## **Key factors for teaching and learning**

A group of students were followed in a longitudinal study throughout their compulsory school years. The data collected formed the starting point for a focus-group discussion, the results of which are reported and discussed in this article.

The aim is to investigate the factors that the teachers consider especially important for the students' learning processes, and to reflect on what characterises teaching practices that promote participation and learning. The results show that the most important factor in a successful teacher's work is the ability to meet the students according to their individual needs; this also involves using the student group as a learning resource, and to adopt a critical attitude to one's own teaching with the aim of developing it. Attitude, high expectations and a positive belief in the students are key factors here, as well as the ability to stage well-balanced teaching with a focus on content, language, and language use.

The importance of collegial learning for the teacher's professional development is emphasised, as is the value of enjoying one's work and to share both successful and less successful pedagogical episodes. One surprising result is the teachers' conscious efforts to help the students adopt strategies for learning.

Keywords: literacy, teaching reading and writing; inclusion; teaching strategies; didactic skills

### **Introduction**

A longitudinal study followed a group of students throughout their compulsory school years in Sweden. The data includes documentation from a classroom study that was carried out when the students were in first to sixth class, as well as the national examinations in Swedish that the students took in third, sixth, and ninth classes. Continual contact has been maintained over the years between the researcher and the participating teachers.

The study was concluded with focus-group discussions, which were held with a few strategically chosen teachers who, in various ways, had been involved in the stu-

dent group. The starting point for the discussion was the collected data, that is, the participants' reflections on the students' learning processes, and the factors that was deemed of importance for the same.

### **Aim and issues**

This article sets out to identify the factors that teachers see as important for their students' long-term learning processes. The following questions were formulated:

- How might the acquisition of basic skills in the early teaching of reading and writing have influenced the students' learning?
- How might the teachers' subject and language knowledge have influenced the students' learning?
- What significance might collaborative working forms have had for the students' learning?
- What characteristics of the teaching practices promote participation and learning?

### **Theoretical basis**

This article is conducted from a sociocultural literacy perspective on teaching and learning. According to this, there is development in a dialectic process between the individual and the environment. Sociocultural theory tells us that learning takes place through interaction in social contexts; concepts such as *the proximal development zone*, *the mediating tools*, and *appropriation* are central (Vygotsky, 1934/1962). Proximal learning may be described as the difference between what students can achieve by themselves and what they can achieve with the support of another person, for example a teacher. Gibbons (2016) also emphasises the importance of *active participation*, by

both the student and the teacher, if successful learning is to take place. The mediating tools can be both linguistic and material; they are used to create meaning. In the socio-cultural tradition, language has a special status as one of these tools.

According to Vygotsky (1934/1962), mental processes are developed from social interaction, becoming individual consciousness functions. Vygotsky calls this process *internalisation*, that is, not only taking over something but also appropriating it, making it one's own. When this occurs, a deeper understanding has been reached, which means that knowledge can be transferred and used in other contexts.

## **Overview**

This overview begins with a description of the characteristics of successful schools, and then touches on the matter of the teacher's importance for the student's learning. Next, with attention paid to the ways in which teaching develops both language and knowledge, the basic skills required for developing the written language are examined. Finally, the characterisation of inclusive literacy practices is defined and discussed.

### ***What characterises a successful school?***

In an international study identifying successful schools, Crawford and Torgesen (2006) state that successful reading and writing teaching involves making effective efforts to help students in need of support. Ten successful schools are identified, all of which share the same seven success factors: 1) strong leadership, 2) positive belief and teacher dedication, 3) data utilization and analysis, 4) effective scheduling, 5) professional development, 6) scientifically based intervention programs, and 7) parental involvement. Seeing as all these factors were shared between all successful schools, Crawford and Torgesen view them as key factors. While not necessarily leading to successful teaching individually, they will form a success concept when combined.

The schools were equipped with systems for identifying and observing important aspects of reading and writing skills at an early stage, and for offering support to those students who needed it. Crawford and Torgesen emphasise the importance of, and to be able to adapt their teaching to suit their students' different circumstances and needs. This in turn formed the basis for the school's allocation of resources, scheduling and further teacher training, while a strong leadership was a necessity for leading this complex system.

Dillon et al. (2011) stress the weight of the teacher feeling involved when development plans are carried out, that they have a common vision and that they are given opportunities to discuss and reflect on their practices with someone knowledgeable in the field. Mention should be made here of the Norm Research Project in Norway (Berge et al., 2019), which examines how writing instruction can be organised in the classroom. It presents a more systematic type of writing instruction with increased collaboration, where researchers in cooperation with teachers formulate and develop expectation norms for writing competence. The focus is on both the students' development of writing competence, and the teachers' competence in assessing results.

### ***The importance of the teacher***

School researchers in various disciplines emphasise that the by far most important factor for student learning is competent and didactically skilful teachers (Alatalo, 2011; Forsling, 2019; Hattie, 2009; Pressley & Allington, 2015). The way in which the teacher designs the learning context is of vital importance for the student's knowledge acquisition and motivation.

What is distinctive about skilful teachers is their ability to combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience and translate this into work in the classroom (Tjernberg, 2013). Success factors that are observable in the pedagogical context are

that the teacher uses different methods and techniques to meet the great variation in the students' circumstances, and to provide challenge and support according to each student's situation and need. Additionally, the teacher must be prepared to change methods if something does not work. This point is made by Timperley (2019), who believes that teachers develop their teaching by reflecting on it in relation to the way each student learns.

Complex differences can be managed by creatively working with language development and multimodal methods, and by a flexible employment of methods and learning tools (Tjernberg & Heimdahl Mattson, 2014; Tjernberg et al., 2020). From an inclusive perspective, the use of collaborative learning processes also is important.

There are many skills that have proved to be important if we are to be well prepared for formal reading and writing instruction. Among them are phonological awareness – the ability to observe the formal aspects of language (Moats, 2010). Students also need to develop phonemic awareness and to automate the correspondence between phonemes and letters. This is fundamental for both decoding (reading) and encoding (writing). The ability to write phonetically spelled words both by hand and with a keyboard is also fundamental.

Just as the ability to decode is fundamental for the development of reading, being able to write fluently is of decisive importance for the development of writing skills (Tjernberg et al., 2020). When students have learnt to read fluently, their energy can be devoted to understanding the text; and when they have learnt to write fluently, both by hand and with a keyboard, their energy can be devoted to developing a creative writing process. Students also need to be given the opportunity to develop word, text and reading comprehension so that they can reflect on the content of what they read and write (Schmidt, 2013). These skills are vital for being able to express one's own experiences,

thoughts and opinions in speech and writing. In order to be able to take in the content of a text with understanding, and produce texts themselves, the students need to learn strategies and skills. Here, the teacher plays a decisive role when teaching and assessing the student's learning (William, 2019). According to Matre and Fottland (2010), when the students are given plenty of opportunities to write for a range of recipients and with varying content, they discover how a text can be written for different purposes, and that the various aspects are dependent on each other.

The content of a text is expressed and emphasised with the help of its form and according to the text's function –in other words, the type of text and the purpose of the text, who the recipient is, and what thoughts the text will arouse in the person who reads it (Rose & Martin, 2012).

### ***Teaching strategies for language development and learning***

In language and knowledge development instruction the students meet and use spoken and written language in many different contexts, where both the form of the language and its function are in focus (Pressley & Allington, 2015). Working with language development involves using, investigating and developing language on the basis of the students' experiences and knowledge (Liberg et al., 2010). Thus, the students' engagement and participation are central. Rose and Martin (2012) state that clear, structured and systematic teaching promotes the development of language and knowledge in all students. According to Cummins and Persad (2014) language is of the utmost importance for learning and creating identity, as it is also for making one's voice heard and being able to participate in democratic processes in society.

Cummins' (2001) model for classroom interaction and language use in meaningful contexts has three focal points: content, language, and language use. Learning and development take place and identities are created in the interaction between teacher and



student. When study results improve, the student's self-esteem increases, which in turn affects study results positively. Cummins also emphasises the importance of the teacher creating teaching contexts that engage the students, making them active participants. In classroom interaction, the students are given opportunities to develop their knowledge of the teaching's content, their awareness of language and their skills in using language. Thanks to this kind of language and knowledge development, the students learn their own strategies for learning.

### ***Inclusive written language practices***

Inclusive written language practices are defined by Howes et al. (2005, s. 146) as “those which tend to reduce barriers of learning and participation for all pupils”. This means that the activities are designed to give every student good opportunities to participate and learn optimally. Here, it is evident that it is not the student who must adapt to already existing teaching practices; it is the teaching and the didactic environment that must be designed to meet the students' various circumstances and needs (Tjernberg & Heimdahl Mattson, 2021). A prerequisite for learning is a feeling of participation, that one has something to contribute. That is why one needs to be given opportunities to acquire understanding of how to interact with other participants. Teaching that lives up to these criteria is, according to Calkins (2001), more a matter of the relationship between teaching and learning. In this context she points out the importance of the teacher having a positive belief in the student's ability and arranging reading and writing activities that arouse motivation and a feeling of pleasure. When the students are involved in their own learning, this develops their ability to acquire knowledge and produce their own texts for different purposes and contexts. Many researchers emphasise writing as an activity that creates identity; they claim that creative writing promotes the development of a positive self-identity (Cummins, 2021; Matre &

Fottland, 2010; Rose & Martin, 2014; Wedin, 2019).

## **Methods and execution**

Data gathered from the longitudinal study formed the basis for the concluding focus-group discussion, which is reported and discussed in this article.

### ***Focus-group discussion***

A focus-group discussion was chosen for the data gathered since this is a method that collects data from a group's interaction round a specific topic (Wibeck, 2010); this agreed well with the purpose of the study and its theoretical basis. Interest focused on the group's assembled knowledge and experience of the particular student group, of teaching and learning and of managing the complexity and variety of the teaching situation. In a focus-group discussion, it is the process, what happens in the discussion and what emerges from the interaction between the participants, that forms the core (Wibeck, 2010). Thus, in the opinion of Krueger and Casey (2015), it is the overall picture that is the aim of the focus-group discussion.

A focus-group discussions as a method of collecting data enabled us to find out the teachers' understanding and shared experiences of the students and their learning process. The discussion created a deeper understanding of the topic in hand – which is one of the strengths of the method. It is also advantageous if the participants, as in this study, have a similar background, since this gives room for more detailed information on the topic in hand (Wibeck, 2010).

### ***Selection***

The teachers who took part in the focus-group discussion have long experience (16–35 years) of their profession; all of them have special competence in the field of reading

and writing. Several of them have had further training in reading and writing instruction, language didactics and special needs education. All of them have also taken part in intermunicipality school development work in the field of literacy. Two of them taught the student group in first to sixth classes. The other members have, in various ways, been involved with the student group. The teachers are well acquainted with each other as, over the years, they have worked together and taken part in different projects.

As for the present student group, it is not the case that all of them had good circumstances from the start; they were in fact a completely normal group. Their families had various socio-economic backgrounds, and they had different conditions and needs of support for learning.

The students' school during the study was a municipal school with students from the preschool class up to ninth class. The school is in a rural area in a medium-sized Swedish municipality. At the time of the study, it was among the best with regard to target fulfilment. For example, in 2010 it had the municipality's highest credit values for students leaving ninth class; it has also received awards for its successful language, reading, and writing teaching.

### ***Execution***

The purpose of the focus-group discussion was, on the basis of the data gathered, to reflect on the factors that may have been of importance for the students in question. Five teachers and the researcher took part in the discussion, which had been carefully prepared in several introductory conversations with the teachers involved. Written agreement to participate had been reached at the same time as they were given information about the purpose of the focus-group discussion and how it would be carried out; they were also provided with the documentation. The discussion was held in a calm and, for the participants, neutral place. The role of the researcher was to keep the focus on the

topic, clarify statements and sum up the discussion.

The focus-group discussion lasted just over two hours, with a break in the middle. It was documented in a sound recording and written notes. After the discussion was over, the notes were checked and the whole of the recorded material was transcribed; thereafter the material was analysed.

The analysis was made qualitatively in the form of sentence categorisation (Denscombe, 2009). The investigation of the material and the search for recurrent themes was started, and soon various patterns, words and concepts emerged. To begin with, the material was sorted according to the discussion's questions, but later it could be arranged based on the themes that had emerged from the analysis (Ryan & Bernhard, 2003).

#### *Participants in the focus-group discussion*

Teacher 1: Primary school teacher, with a great interest in the teaching of reading and writing.

Teacher 2: Primary school teacher with long experience of teaching. She was the class teacher of the student group in first to third classes.

Teacher 3: Middle-school teacher with long experience of teaching. He was class teacher for the student group in fourth to sixth classes.

Teacher 4: Primary school teacher, remedial teacher specialising in reading and writing development.

Teacher 5: Teacher of Swedish, Swedish as a second language, and media.

## **Background**

Here, an overview of the data that formed the basis for the focus-group discussion is presented. This basis, presented orally and in writing for the participants before the discussion, consists of a study in which the classrooms work of students and teachers was examined (classes 1–6), and the national tests in Swedish.

The study, which forms part of the collected data, was conducted over the course of several years through observations in the classroom and reflective discussions with the students' teachers.

The classroom study showed that the teachers used several different methods and techniques in order to meet the great variations in the students' situations. This didactical approach is characterised by a high level of activity among both students and teachers. One surprising result of the study was the teachers' conscious use of oral presentation in various subjects and genres.

### ***National tests***

Here, the data from the national tests in Swedish that the students took in third, sixth and ninth classes is presented. This data formed part of the information that the teachers were given before the concluding focus-group discussion. Since the focus in the present study is on the student group's collective learning process, the choice was made not to go in at the individual level.

As the students were in the preschool class, linguistic screening was carried out. The results indicated that six of them were in the risk zone for reading and writing difficulties. In the spring term of 2011, when the students were in third class, they for the first time took national test in Swedish. All of them passed the test and with overall

good results, including from those who had needed special support in first class (Figure 1).

All students once more obtained good results in the national tests in Swedish in the spring term of 2014 (Figure 2). The overall good results were repeated for a third time in the spring term of 2017 (Figure 3), when the students were in ninth class and took their final national tests in Swedish.

It should be mentioned that two of the students moved to other schools during the senior level. For this reason, they did not take part in the above-listed test for ninth class. However, as both

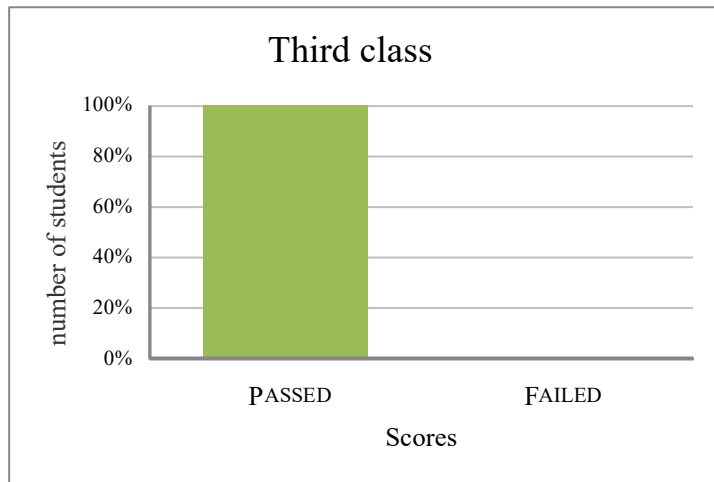


Figure 3. Results of the national test in third class.

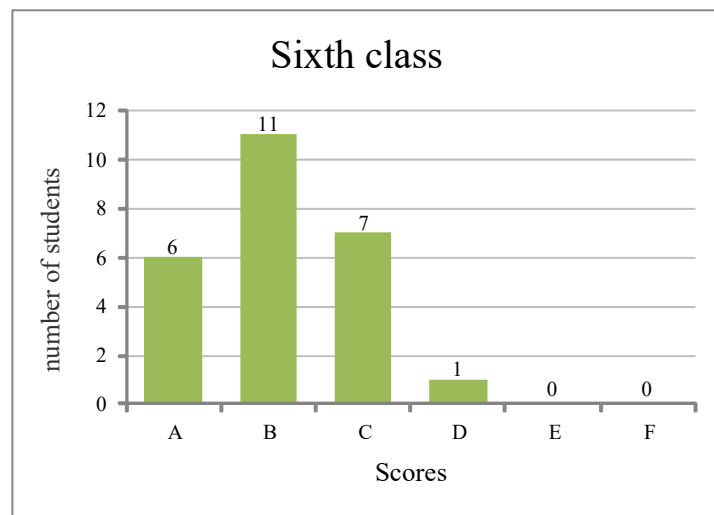


Figure 3. Results of the national test in sixth class.

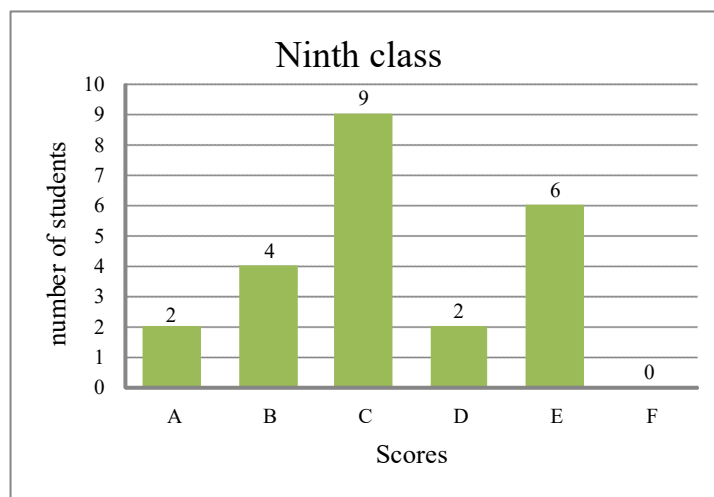


Figure 3. Results of the national test in ninth class.

students were overachievers, their results would probably not have affected the good results negatively.

To sum up, the students had good results in the national tests in Swedish throughout, even though the results from the preschool screening indicated that some of them were in the risk zone for reading and writing difficulties.

## **Results and analysis**

The report of the results is structured around the themes that were identified in the data. The themes reported are: 1) basic skills, 2) the teachers' subject knowledge, 3) motivation, participation and learning, 4) collaborative forms of work, 5) the organisation of the activities and school leadership, and 6) the teachers' teaching strategies.

### ***Basic skills***

The teachers emphasise the importance of the students acquiring the basic skills of reading and writing. Language screening gives the teacher valuable information:

Thanks to screening I became aware of what I need to focus on, and I can quickly provide the right support. (Teacher 1)

To be able to follow the students' learning at the right level, it is vital to know about the development of their literacy and learning processes. At an early stage the students need to understand the connection between phonemes and graphemes and break the reading code. That is why they begin the conscious and structured work with phonemes as early as in preschool. Teacher 2 says that she discovered the value of working with writing in parallel with reading. The analysis of writing often proved to be easier for the students to understand than the synthesis of reading. This meant that writing became a way forward for reading. "They wrote correctly because they sounded their way." Teacher 2

describes a student who started in her class in the spring term in first class and who hadn't made much progress in the development of his reading skills:

Writing was a great help for this student. He could sound the words and then write them out on the copying machine. After a while he could read them. He learnt to read by beginning to write. (Teacher 2)

Teacher 2 emphasises the importance of positive feedback to help improve self-esteem:

“I could see that under his fringe he smiled – that he took in everything I said, even the tiniest compliment.”

Another success factor mentioned by the teachers is working out where each student stands, in order to be able to offer support at the right level. The teaching was organised so that during the autumn term in first class the students were in a half-class three times a week; on these occasions there were two adults in the classroom. This made it possible to individualise, listen to each student and provide support where needed. The flexibility and adaptability were valuable: “It meant we got that extra bit of energy, and the students got attention, and they could work at just above the level they were at – where they needed it.” (Teacher 2). Another important factor was to get all the students involved right from the very start: “They got a lot of support and encouragement so that we quickly got everybody on board the bandwagon.” (Teacher 2)

Teacher 4 also emphasises the value of having more adults in the classroom and having half-class periods in early reading and writing instruction. “The students need a lot of adult time, group work and support from their home”, she adds. Teacher 2 continues:

I know exactly what gave this group such a good start. There was a positive spirit. We read small books; the students were allowed to choose books at their own level and according to their interests. (Teacher 2)



Teacher 2 emphasises the value of reading regularly and a lot: “Quantity counts”, she says, and her colleagues agree with her. For example, the class had reading homework twice a week as well as voluntary home reading. A positive attitude to reading and writing developed, and this meant that the students were glad to have this voluntary reading assignment. The students were drawn into the positive attitude to reading and writing that developed in the class:

There were other students too. You know, the guys with attitude. But it became cool to want to have that extra homework for Fridays. “Me too, me too!” They couldn’t stop themselves; they just followed the happy spiral. (Teacher 2)

Teacher 4 continues: “It’s mostly a question of motivation too – that they want to succeed.” Teacher 1 agrees and emphasises again the importance of feeling that learning is something positive and enjoyable.

The teachers thought that this way of working also made it possible to identify students whose learning was blocked even before the students themselves became aware of their difficulties – and give them support.

The teachers return to the importance of motivation for learning, and the value of feeling part of the social context. It is vital to acquire the basic skills, but it is just as vital not to lose self-esteem and the motive to learn, says Teacher 4. It can be difficult to repair this damage later on:

As a remedial teacher I meet students who have lost motivation and belief in their own ability; they have already experienced failure. That’s when they develop a negative attitude towards reading and writing in general – but also build up an attitude to cover up their problems. There are many ways to try and hide oneself and one’s inability. So, I think it’s really important to provide encouragement all the time, for every little step forward. (Teacher 4)

### *Teachers' subject knowledge and knowledge of the learning processes*

Knowledge of subject, of language and of learning processes is intimately connected.

Every subject has its own specific language that the students need in order to acquire the content of the teaching:

If I teach another subject than Swedish – maths, for example – my command of the subject is obviously extremely important, as well as the language, since each subject has its own specific language. I must have a command of the subject language and how I communicate it to the students – and how I explain it, because it is an abstract subject. This is extremely important in all subjects. (Teacher 5)

The students need to learn reading and writing strategies. They also need to get a deep understanding of the strategies they learn, the teachers point out. In order to organise this in the teaching, they often move from teaching to the whole class – when the teacher is the model – to letting the students try for themselves, first under the teacher's guidance and then on their own. In this way they gradually learn the skills:

When I hear you talking, I think to myself: How aware you seem to be of the importance of the students developing their own strategies for how they themselves should learn. They look at what other students do, they look at what they have done themselves and they evaluate it. After all, they have been given training in *how* to learn. That's fantastic! But it depends on the teacher understanding the importance of positive feedback, of noting that little step forward – and highlighting it. (Teacher 4)

The teachers express their awareness of the importance of the students acquiring strategies for learning – and therefore of letting the students get training in doing so. This means that the students get a deeper understanding and can translate and use the strategies they have learnt in other contexts as well. The teacher needs “to have an enormous amount of subject knowledge and an enormous amount of didactic knowledge as well. It is certainly not a question of either or”, as Teacher 4 points out.

Here Teacher 5 adds that it is important for the students to learn to write different kinds of texts well: “In the national tests, I often think it is decisive if they have learnt to write various kinds of texts well. To understand the value of that, you can look at this student group, which was given opportunities to learn how to write different kinds of texts even in the early classes, but with a clear progression through the intermediate level.”

Teacher 2 continues: “Right from the age of seven these students have been writing factual texts. That’s different from only writing stories.”

### ***Motivation, participation and learning***

The teachers return to the importance of creating a feeling of “us” in the group. In their opinion unity is vital; all the students should feel they have something to contribute. Support from home is also important, they say. The parents need to show that school is important.

Teacher 3 took over the student group in fourth class and describes the class’s feeling of unity at that point in time:

It was fantastic to take over this class after [Teacher 2’s] foundational work. They kept this lovely unity. And as [Teacher 2] said earlier, they helped each other, because it wasn’t okay to say no to an assignment and it wasn’t okay not to do homework. It was in their blood. I think they pulled each other along a lot, and it became more and more so. And this, naturally, as we said before, was thanks to the parents who also helped. Just as a student group supports each other strongly and refuses to accept that one student falls behind. ... It was great fun. (Teacher 3)

So, the students supported each other and encouraged each other’s progress: “This boy who came in the spring term, when he stood up and read a text, the class gave him a round of applause. It was incredible!” says Teacher 2.

The teachers highlight the value of using several different ways of working and various methods. This allows the students' different abilities to be expressed, showing that everyone has something to contribute. Teacher 3 says that "the students were used to [Teacher 2] arranging small theatre scenes and making illustrations for what they did. And it was easy for me to continue. I don't think I have ever sung so much with a class as with them." Teacher 4 adds that you get to be a better teacher when you have a good group "because then you really let yourself go, you vary things more and you feel happier. If you have created a good culture, the spiral keeps going upwards."

Teacher 5 agrees and points out the importance of developing a positive relationship to each student: "You have to see much deeper, create that relationship to the student. That's the be-all and end-all of learning, I think."

### ***Collaborative forms of work and collegial learning***

The teachers highlight the importance of oral presentation for the students' learning and point out that it is vital to learn how to act both as a presenter and as an audience.

Teacher 3 adds that it is just as important "that the listener respect the speaker, so that they dare to speak". Teacher 2 continues: "... and you can expect some questions at the end and then you have to be on your toes to answer them. I think the students were quite fantastic at that." However, this presumes that there has been conscious work right from the start, as she points out.

The students learnt at an early stage to present an argument and put forward their opinions, which they did in various collaborative assignments. This led to them taking the initiative and arranging things in their own way when they wanted to do something. One example is when they decided they wanted to take part in a work experience program:

They fought for a work experience program for the middle school. They got to speak to the principal as well as the manager, and in the end it resulted in them getting to take part in a work experience program. This student group organised a lot themselves – and they organised it well. (Teacher 3)

Thus, the students had learnt at an early stage to present an argument and their ideas. It also meant that they had to be able to foresee the opponent's argument and meet it.

### ***Collegial learning***

It is a complex business to acquire professional skills; several factors are involved. The teachers emphasise the importance of feeling secure in the staff room, that there is a permissive atmosphere there: “Having fun together, daring to go beyond the bounds” (Teacher 2); “and daring to abandon what you had thought of in the planning, which had got too ambitious”, Teacher 5 adds.

The teachers also argued, that by sharing pedagogical situations and having pedagogical discussions, you get new perspectives. They described how they shared pedagogical situations in their classrooms with each other and looked at them together to get some new perspectives. This applied both to positive situations and to situations that hadn't gone as planned. “Why didn't this activity go so well? Why did the students feel involved and listened here?”

In their working team the teachers also organised various happenings, which contributed to the feeling of unity and “us”, say Teachers 2 and 3. For example, they had a much-appreciated fairy-tale theme, they sang along, and they organised an election debate while the present student group were there. This created a feeling of belonging between and in the classes: “It was fun and meaningful for those who took part”, says Teacher 3. “Actually, the teachers had fun, too”, adds Teacher 2. “We had the energy for it because we had such a good feeling of unity.”

Other success factors that the teachers highlighted in the method used when the students were in first to sixth classes were that it gave a community perspective, it was multidisciplinary, it overarched the classes, and “we had real recipients.”

The value of collegial collaboration was emphasised:

I think it's important that we could also share what didn't go so well, because that gives us colleagues a feeling of security with each other. And the fact that you can get things wrong, you can learn from that too. (Teacher 2)

Teacher 5 agrees:

It's really important to test things out on each other, to get support from each other and to dare to try again. You do something and it doesn't work in that group. So perhaps I can do it in another way. A relaxed teacher is a better teacher. That's why it's important to feel secure. (Teacher 5)

### ***The organisation of activities and school leadership***

The way in which activities are organised and led proves to be significant. The teachers believe that the commitment and interest of the principal imbues the activities: “It sets the agenda, it affects the atmosphere and the possibilities” (Teacher 4). It is important that the principal gives feedback on the teachers' work and has a positive attitude towards the teachers. “If you are seen, you feel glad, you grow”, says Teacher 2.

One of the organisational factors that are highlighted is the advantage of having a longitudinal working team. According to the teachers, this is a success factor that also creates good conditions for functional transitions. The teachers get to know the students and the students get to know the teachers in the working team. In this context the teachers also mention the mentor system which existed in the working team when the students were there. The younger students read, for example, their reading assignment

aloud to the older students, which was good for both parties since it made the older students feel important.

Since Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 were in the same longitudinal working team, they worked close together during the students' time in first to sixth classes. They were in each other's classrooms, and they discussed pedagogical matters at the working team's meetings and every day at school as well. Teacher 1 believes this may have contributed to the successful development:

I believe that another success factor is that they had a close relation – you [Teacher 3] knew how she [Teacher 2] worked when you took over her class. You were in the same working team ... You saw what she did, and you took over from there. (Teacher 1)

Teacher 2 says that she felt great pleasure in being in her working team: "There was a positive atmosphere and we developed our teaching together. This gave us positive energy, which meant we could do just that little bit more. A great pleasure!" Teacher 1 adds: "If the positive energy has already started, it's easy to take over."

Another organisational factor that the teachers mention is the allocation of resources:

So, allocate the resources in time – plenty at the beginning – and be very positive about it. If we think about this student group, it looks as though things have gone well. The resources allocated from the start were valuable. (Teacher 1)

Finance is a risk factor, the teachers say, and it is important to invest already in the preschool class. "Otherwise, you have to extinguish fires later", says Teacher 2, and Teacher 1 agrees: "It is vital to discover a problem early, that you identify students who are in the risk zone and give them support in various ways. If you have this knowledge, you can work preventatively." Teacher 4 continues:

And that one is aware of the damage that can be caused if one fails... Don't let the students live with a feeling of failure – that can be difficult. It is important to retain the desire to learn and not to lose self-confidence. (Teacher 4)

### ***The teachers' teaching strategies***

To meet the student's different circumstances and needs and to provide support in the closest development zone, the teacher needs to understand what is going on in the reading and writing process: "See where the student's interest lies at that moment and be able to catch it" (Teacher 3).

Teacher 3 thinks that it is important to be flexible as a teacher, to have several tracks to follow, that is, have both targets and sub-targets and on the basis of them consider and choose. You must be able to see connections, to vary your teaching. It also means linking up with the students' experiences. The skills that the students learn need to be put into a context so that they can clearly see the functions they fill:

If I have a lesson that follows this line, and then a student says something that doesn't fit in with what we are doing, I have to make a decision. Shall we continue to talk about it? Or shall we go back? Or shall I keep my target for this lesson; and this sidetrack which went *there* – I have a target there too, which is somewhere over there. And perhaps I can already teach about that now. It's very important, I think, that you have that clear in your mind when you go in to teach – that you have several tracks. (Teacher 3)

The teachers highlight the importance of the students developing a meta-language so that they can talk about learning. When the students took the national tests in sixth class, they got excellent results (Figure 2). According to Teacher 3, the conscious teaching of formative assessment may be an explanation.

They practised assessment a lot, both with [Teacher 2] and with me. They evaluated what others had done, whether they were reporting or had read each other's



texts and given their response. So, they were used to using assessment vocabulary and how to give a response. (Teacher 3)

Thus, the students practised right from the start how to give a response and learnt what it is important to focus on:

When the students see how the teacher responds to a classmate, they learn how to give a response. So, the teacher acts as a model. This is the formative form of teaching in which assessment plays a natural part – instead of being something measured at the end. (Teacher 2)

Modelling parts of teaching creates engaged students, says Teacher 2, and the other teachers agree.

In seventh class the student group was divided in two. A question arose: Was the base the students had got during first to sixth classes stable enough? All the students in the student group passed the national tests in Swedish in ninth class (Figure 3). “All the same”, Teacher 2 points out, “we know that there were students in the group who were not that strong. There were problems.” Teacher 4: “But don’t you think that this might be due to their having so much pre-knowledge? They had strategies so they knew *how* to learn new things – and on top of that they wanted to succeed.” Teacher 2 again emphasises how important she thinks it was to get everyone on board the reading and writing train right from first class – that nobody was left behind. She also highlights the importance of getting support from the parents, having access to special teachers and – as a teacher – getting response for her efforts. It is also vital to draw attention to what is positive, say the teachers, instead of focusing on what doesn’t work. That applies to the students as well as the teachers: “We have looked at the positive, to find a way in, to give ourselves strength. ‘Well done!’ And to express in words *what* I am good at”, says Teacher 1.

Another success factor mentioned is the shared professional language, which avoids misunderstandings at the same time as discussions about teaching and learning processes are made possible at a deeper level.

Teacher 2 also believes it was significant that there was close contact with research over a long period:

[The researcher] could put theoretical terms to it, and then it became obvious for me how important professional language is. I became aware of what was good and why, and could develop it – and make less of what was not so good. And that is exactly the way I work with the students too. (Teacher 2)

## **Discussion**

One conclusion drawn from the study is that a decisive factor in a successful teacher's work is to be able to meet the students according to their individual needs when using the group's resources. In addition, it is important for the teachers to have a critical attitude towards their own teaching, with the aim of developing it. They have to be able to manage several different ways of working and strategically choose the method that is most suitable for each student, situation and context. They must be ready to reconsider their teaching if it turns out that something doesn't function.

### ***The teacher's teaching strategies and the students' learning***

The results show that it is important for teachers to have a good theoretical basis and the ability to combine their theoretical understanding with practical experiences. In this way they can develop their work-oriented knowledge – a continuous internal process (Tjernberg & Heimdahl Mattson, 2014). This is in accordance with Timperley (2019), who claims that both teaching and learning develop when the teacher meets the student in the learning process and chooses teaching strategies in relation to the student's need. The didactic form that emerges in this study makes it clear how important it is to let

each student work in his or her closest development zone. This, together with the teacher's positive belief in the student's ability and engagement, are fundamental factors for a form of teaching in which every student feels competent, appreciated and participating. The importance of having high expectations and a positive attitude towards the students' abilities is highlighted by several researchers (e.g., Cummins & Persad, 2014; Pressley & Allington, 2015). In the discussion the teachers emphasised the importance of giving the students opportunities to succeed in the social context, since, in their opinion, this strengthens their self-esteem and gets them to want to learn more. This is in agreement with Cummins (2001), who argues that learning and identity development take place in the interplay between teacher and student at the same time as knowledge and abilities develop.

The teaching that emerges in the study is characterised by having a focus on language, content and language use; the value of balanced language and subject teaching in all school subjects and classes is advocated by Liberg (2009). The teaching the teachers describe is structured but does not therefore exclude the possibility of allowing spontaneous features when the teacher notices that possibility and is able to catch the didactic opportunity. It depends on being able to notice where the students' interest is at that moment – while clearly retaining the lesson's aim.

Teaching and learning take place in a complex interplay which is dependent on many different factors. Here, several researchers highlight the teacher's teaching strategies as by far the most important component. However, a number of factors need to interact if there is to be a success concept (Berge et al., 2019; Crawford & Torgesen, 2006; Forsling, 2019; Schmidt, 2013).

According to the teachers it is important to reflect continually on one's teaching in order to develop it. They claim that otherwise the teaching can become routine. It's

all about attitude, having high expectations and a positive belief in the student, but also about designing balanced teaching with the focus on content, language, and language use. It is in agreement with several literacy researchers (e.g., Dillon et al., 2011; Langer, 2004; Gibbons, 2016). It is equally important, say the teachers, to have an adequate command of the subject. This subject knowledge is intimately connected with the ability to back up the student's knowledge development, whose progress is, in turn, a condition necessary for participation – that is to say, like Cummins (2001), to see education as a way to learning, identity creation, and critical thinking. A surprising discovery was the teachers' conscious efforts to get the students to acquire strategies for learning. This means, according to Langer (2004), that the students acquire a deeper understanding for content; and that means that knowledge is internalised and can be transferred and used in other contexts.

### ***How are teachers' skills maintained?***

A factor that teachers highlight as important in their professional development is collegial collaboration, where they share experiences, raise important didactic questions and take part in the teaching in each other's classrooms. It is valuable to feel pleasure in work and to share both successful and not so successful pedagogical episodes. Thanks to these pedagogical discussions, the teachers say, they are continuously developing their teaching. In turn, this way of working promotes the students' learning (Timperley, 2019).

The teachers emphasise the feelings of strength, security, and pleasure in the staffroom. Their different competences stimulate creative conversations and lead to thinking along new lines. This, however, presumes a secure working climate where people listen to each other and share their pedagogical experiences. Hattie (2009) also points out that failures can result in valuable opportunities for learning.

### *A threefold win*

The study highlights the value of having, over time, close contact with a researcher. This creates conditions for discussions in which theory and experience are linked together, making research understandable and usable for the teachers in their work. This is also highlighted by Berge et al. (2019).

The results presented in this study show that when a researcher goes into the classroom and contributes theory and puts words to the teachers' knowledge and experience, research questions that arise from the teachers' practices can be formulated and defined. Thanks to this accumulation of knowledge, the students are given increased possibilities to develop their proximal learning, which in turn arouses further research questions (Tjernberg & Heimdahl Mattson, 2017). Thus, there is a development of both the scientific base and the teachers' teaching strategies, and this in turn promotes the students' development of proximal learning. A continuous progression in learning at three different levels take place, and a threefold learning process has started.

### **Disclosure statement**

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