

*This profile is part of the EU Study on Supporting School Innovation Across Europe. It presents one of the 24 schools in the study, giving an overview of the changes and experiences in that school. Find the rest of the materials from the study at:*

[www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation](http://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation)

# Improving students' reading comprehension skills through teaching of reading strategies in Centralskolan



## About our school

- ◆ **Location:** Arvika, Värmland
- ◆ **Established:** 1940s
- ◆ **Status:** Public school that provides lower-secondary education (grades 7 – 9)
- ◆ **Number of pupils:** 470 (in 2016)
- ◆ **Website:** <http://www.arvika.se/utbildningochbarnomsorg/grundskola/grundskolor/centralskola.n.4.41bc345d121cf671c488000497.html>
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## Why did we innovate?

For Arvika, Centralskolan is a big school with students coming from the city centre and surrounding areas. Students are from very mixed backgrounds, including students from disadvantaged areas. Several years ago, the school had a significant number of students whose academic achievements after the 9<sup>th</sup> grade were not sufficient for entering an upper secondary education. One of the key issues in Centralskolan, as well as in other surrounding schools, was that the student reading comprehension skills across various subjects were poor. Subjects of maths and science have been extra prioritised by Centralskolan as student results within those subjects were especially low. Therefore, the school was looking for innovative solutions that would help to improve student achievements.



## What were our innovations?

Since 2012, Centralskolan has started practising an explicit teaching of reading strategies within specific subjects for grades 7 – 9. These reading strategies have been implemented together with scaffolding, which means that a teacher gradually empowers students to lead a reading and text comprehension exercise.

In Arvika, the state-funded project was first initiated in 2011 by a group of researchers from Karlstad University who sought to try out a designed reading strategy to test its efficiency. Centralskolan joined the initiative together with five other schools from Värmland that faced similar issues with reading comprehension. The manager of the municipal schools of Arvika played an influential role who saw the need to develop such skills and thus encouraged schools to take part in.

The teachers from participating schools met with the researchers from Karlstad University frequently before the piloting, as well as during and after the first year of piloting the initiative. During the meetings, teachers received professional training and education through short lectures and discussions of literature. Teachers could also plan their lessons together with researchers and discuss any questions. During this part of the project teachers received a set of materials and tools such as literature and articles on literacy research, guidelines for teaching and how to use texts in class.

During the initial first term, seven different reading strategies have been taught, namely: how to summarise, predict, evaluate and take a stand, question the text, visualise, compare the text to other texts and finally find gaps in the text and make inferences. The teachers were given a set of short stories to use while teaching the strategies. In addition, they received a set of instructions and guidelines for the lessons where methods were described how to use the strategies and the short stories. These instructions were discussed and adjusted during the meetings with researchers. The teachers used the majority of the lessons in Swedish for the work with the reading strategies during the first term. After this term the teachers continued to work with the new innovative approach and have spread the ideas to teachers from Centralskolan of other subjects.

In Centralskolan, the main focus for children's development is language and all teachers of all subjects have worked in study groups with the material *Greppa språket* – meaning “Get the language” – produced by the Swedish National Agency for Education. The material is about school research on literacy and multilingual students. Teachers of maths and science have been extra prioritised by Centralskolan since there has been both a local and a national need to improve results within those subjects.



## What have we achieved?

### Pupils

The effects of the explicit teaching of reading strategies were measured by the researchers (Tengberg & Olin-Scheller, 2013). They performed tests of the explicit teaching of strategies before the start of the term and after the term, to measure the effect of the designed teaching. The reading comprehension skills improved slightly for the group as a whole but for the lowest achievers there was a significant improvement of the results. Multilingual students did also benefit from the innovative pedagogy.

According to the interviewed school staff, a new pedagogical method made more students active during the lessons, and even though some of the texts initially were considered as too complex, different strategies gave them tools to approach the text and comprehend it.

## Teachers

Teachers involved have continued to work according to theories and methods that were introduced by the researchers from Karlstad University. The teachers of Swedish language always introduce the innovative pedagogy in grade 7 when students are new to the school, and the teachers continue to use it throughout the three years then.

Teachers claimed that the innovation had a positive impact on how they approach teaching and on their professional preparation to teach about reading.

The external expertise made the teachers involved and enthusiastic. Some of teachers described the implementation process together with researchers as the most rewarding experience throughout their careers.

Some of the teachers involved have been promoted and now they have a chance to work with pedagogical development in the school.

## School as a whole

In Centralskolan, the innovative pedagogy was successfully transferred to other subjects, particularly to science. This effect was not predicted before the project but was enabled through its success, the status of the teachers involved and the support from the school leader. Initially there were only teachers of Swedish that were using the explicit teaching of reading strategies. These teachers have informed the rest of the teachers and organised some internal learning clusters. Moreover, they were assigned by the school leader to engage in a specific project involving the science teachers within the school who needed to improve their teaching regarding reading text within their subjects.

The school leader has also underlined the effects of the project on developing language skills. The commitment and interest among the teachers involved allowed to steer the school into further pedagogical development with a clear focus on literacy skills.



## The process of change: what helped us succeed?

### School level

Support from the school leader was one crucial enabling factor. Although he did not take a leading role, he still kept himself informed and was engaged in the process. After the initial stage of the project the school leader encouraged participating teachers to engage their colleagues into the initiative. The overall process of change was alleviated by the fact that the school leader has worked in Centralskolan for seven years. During this period, he managed to create stability and trust within the organisation, as well as to invest needed resources into teachers' development.

Commitment and strong personalities of the individual teachers taking part in the project was another key success factor. They have become the spokespersons for teaching of reading strategies.

A whole process went smoothly also because the students were generally positive about the new pedagogical approach. Their parents, however, were not actively involved in the implementation of the project but they gave their consent to the initial introduction of the innovation.

## Municipal level

Besides the manager of the municipal schools of Arvika, the person working with pedagogical development in Arvika was crucial, as she knew the researchers from Karlstad University, and discussed the participation in the project with the school leader and teachers. She also clearly saw the benefits of the project and how it could contribute to improved reading comprehension of students.

## National level

The reason for this innovation being so well-perceived is related to a growing general interest in Sweden for reading research and developing student reading skills, as the Swedish PISA test results have dropped considerably. As a result, the Swedish government has initiated a national schools' development programme (2015–2018) for improved literacy.

The Swedish National Agency for Education has also developed an extensive educational programme for teachers of all subjects working with children all of ages. Although the described innovative pedagogy was initiated by researchers at Karlstad University and funded by the Swedish Research Council before the national programme, it also contributed to creating a favourable environment for its further implementation.

Initiative and inquiry of the researchers from Karlstad University was crucial to implement the innovative pedagogy while their continuous support enabled participating teachers to gain knowledge and confidence. Teachers had a possibility to discuss their teaching experiences with the researchers on a weekly basis during the project.

The material researchers provided to teachers was easy to use, which helped to transform theory into practice and provide actual teaching as part of a complex process.



## The process of change: what limited us?

### School level

At first teachers felt insecure to try new teaching methods as they believed that chosen texts were too complex and advanced for students. Moreover, as the innovative pedagogy was introduced through a research project, teachers had the researchers in the classroom conducting observations.

Not all teachers wanted to participate because of various reasons: being afraid of change, putting themselves in a situation which they have no control of, or simply being tired of all changes. The tiredness and lack of motivation felt by teachers to embrace changes can also be related to the number of projects taking place.

Lack of knowledge was another barrier, both among the school leader and among teachers. Often there was no responsible staff member to keep up with school development by spreading necessary knowledge on time.



## Sustainability of change

The teaching of reading strategies proved to be sustainable. It started in 2012 and five years later it has become an important part of the way of teaching in Centralskolan, particularly within the Swedish subject. When the school employs new teachers, they are instructed on how to use the innovative

pedagogy. During observations, it was evident that the students were also well familiar with the explicit teaching of reading strategies.

One can predict the innovative pedagogy in time will change slightly as it might be adapted to new research, and teachers will add new knowledge and experience. The observation showed that teachers have held on to the initial methods more than could be expected after five years, possibly because of the written guidelines which are easy to follow and still in use.

The innovative approach has not been transferred to any other schools or regions directly from Centralskolan. It has been, however, presented at conferences, lectures, in articles and in a book. One of the teachers has been filmed for the national educational programme in the context of this project.



## What did we learn in the process? Key messages

A specific employee should be assigned to be responsible for the project at a school level to reach the best results. This person should have time to coordinate the process of innovation, but this is also a matter of cost and priorities. The project leader and the school leader should meet regularly. If the project is organised on a municipal level, there should also be a person responsible on a municipal level to support the process.

Pedagogical leaders/developers are needed on both municipal and school levels. To avoid *ad-hoc* decisions it is important that people have the time and the knowledge to initiate and transfer pedagogical innovations. These persons should be updated on research and on news regarding education.

To have a successful outcome the teachers need to be engaged. They need to be encouraged and motivated, that could be boosted by acquiring knowledge about the innovative pedagogy and theories behind it.

The funding is crucial for success: it is especially relevant for giving the teachers time they need to embrace changes and for their in-service training. The funding is also crucial for implementing innovations and sustaining the overall process of change.

## Further reading

- **A full report** 'Supporting School Innovation across Europe' explores the conditions in the school education system that can enable or constrain positive change in schools.
- **12 case studies** explore the national approaches and individual school innovations. They include the perspectives of key national education experts and stakeholders who were interviewed and took part in workshops.
- **24 individual profiles** give a quick view of the changes and experiences in each school.

Available here:

[www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation](http://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation)

- The school profiles also feature as part of the [European Toolkit for Schools](#), alongside a range of materials and many other inspiring examples of practice from European countries.

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