

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

Nurturing students' critical reading skills through teaching to read argumentative texts in Kyrkebyskolan



About our school

- ◆ **Location:** Arvika, Värmland
- ◆ **Established:** 1995
- ◆ **Status:** Public school that provides lower-secondary education (grades 4 – 9)
- ◆ **Number of pupils:** 430 (in 2016)
- ◆ **Website:** <http://www.arvika.se/utbildningochbarnomsorg/grundskola/grundskolor/kyrkebyskolan.4.41bc345d121cf671c488000505.html>
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Why did we innovate?

The academic results of students in Kyrkebyskolan varied, and compared to other schools the students were not performing very well in terms of their grades. As part of the development process to enhance student results, Kyrkebyskolan participated in a research project initiated by Karlstad University that led to an innovative change of teaching on reading argumentative texts.



What were our innovations?

The key innovation in Kyrkebyskolan concerns the reading of argumentative texts, both verbal texts and multimodal texts. The main focus is on reading and analysing non-fictional texts. This innovation in Kyrkebyskolan was introduced in 2013, after the group of researchers from Karlstad University have approached several schools and proposed innovative teaching strategies.

In Swedish schools, it is a common assignment to write argumentative texts, but it is rarely taught how to read an argumentative text. The innovative pedagogy aims to teach students how to identify the thesis and arguments in argumentative texts, how to analyse arguments and how to evaluate their relevance. Teachers introduce reading strategies by explicit instructions on how they work and through modelling how to use the strategies in various texts. Students work both in groups and individually with the strategies, have discussions in class and occasional written assignments.

The school is also maintaining several other initiatives: didactics development in the subject of Technology, a digital project in which all students and teachers have access to and use iPads, and finally a project to improve literacy skills.



What have we achieved?

Pupils

During the period of time when the researchers from Karlstad University were involved, the effect of the teaching was tested and proved to be very effective. The students improved considerably when it comes to detecting theses and arguments in various argumentative texts.

The school staff also underlined that students have become able to apply the reading strategies and critical reading skills when they read texts in all subjects, and in their spare time.

According to the interviewed teachers, students feel better prepared now for further studies in upper secondary grades. Several previous students have visited the school and informed the teachers that the teaching on reading argumentative texts has been very helpful as they have become more critical readers.

Teachers

Teachers learned to plan and discuss teaching and pedagogy together with their colleagues in addition to capability to apply modelling and scaffolding (gradually releasing the responsibility to the students) in their teaching).



The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

The innovative pedagogy was implemented through a collective process, supported and initiated by researchers from Karlstad University but individual effort of one of school teachers was also very important to the process. At Kyrkebyskolan, one teacher worked part-time as a Coordinator of Literacy Developers in the Province of Värmland providing continuous valuable knowledge and experience to her colleagues.

All parents were informed in the beginning of the project and the teachers never experienced any complaints. Instead, teachers felt more professional in their contact with the parents since they developed their own skills and professional language.

Municipal level

The fact that the literacy skill developer in Arvika worked as a teacher in Kyrkebyskolan was another enabling factor. With her knowledge, she could continuously support and motivate her colleagues. At a municipal level the innovation was acknowledged but not actively supported.

National level

The implementation process was well-structured and supported by the researchers from Karlstad University functioning as external experts. Participating teachers had eight two-hour meetings with researchers who provided texts to analyse and to discuss, articles to read and lectures on argumentative analyses. Many teachers considered the content area as difficult and therefore the researchers provided them with texts to analyse and to discuss, articles to read and lectures on argumentative analyses. The teachers also received guidelines on what and how to teach.

Moreover, as the initiative came from the researchers with a high status, the quality of the innovations and theories behind them were never questioned. It also meant that there were no costs for the school to use external expertise. The school could have benefited even more if there had been a plan at the school or at a municipal level on how to maintain and transfer the innovative approach.

The Swedish National Agency for Education had a key role in promoting school innovations as there are several major free web courses for schools or national programmes to train school staff.



The process of change: what limited us?

School level

A change of the school leaders and loss of one influential teacher had a negative impact on sustainability and transferability of the innovative approach. In case key staff members have only an informal role in the project, it might bring vulnerability to the initiative.

No staff member was assigned to monitor or evaluate the implemented innovation. More thorough monitoring and evaluation might have contributed to even better achievements.

The lack of time to continue the work has been a barrier for teachers and is connected to the lack of an assigned pedagogical leader to maintain the process.

Not all teachers were secure enough on the new knowledge and mixed it with former practices. These teachers mainly looked at the approach to improve students' argumentative *writing* skills instead of keeping the focus on the advanced *reading* skills.

Community level

There was no parental engagement in the innovative pedagogy, nor any engagement from the local community or social partners. The local community is rarely involved in schools in Sweden unless such a collaboration is a specific aim



Sustainability of change

Teachers who initially were involved still work according to the innovative approach but since the approach has not been transferred to other subjects or is not a part of any official goals for the

pedagogy at the school, there is a risk that the innovative approach loses its impact if teachers leave the school.

In the group interview, some of the teachers explained that they had changed their work with the innovative approach to the degree that some of its impact is lost. The reason for this is that they felt not secure enough about the new knowledge and mixed it with former practices. These teachers mainly looked at the approach as a means to improve pupils' argumentative *writing* skills instead of keeping the focus on the advanced *reading* skills.

Innovative approaches are both monitored by the school leader and at a municipal level. The school is obliged to present all work to improve quality on a yearly basis to the municipality. Many decisions on project engagement are decided on a municipal level involving all schools. But the school leader has the mandate to make decision on extra engagements if there is a particular need or interest.

Kyrkebyskolan, as most schools in Sweden, works according to directions from Swedish National Agency for Education with a systematic quality improvement process, using a circular model with the four phases: *plan, carry out, follow up* and *analyse*.



What did we learn in the process? Key messages

To maintain different projects, teachers need time to plan evaluate their own learning process and the outcomes.

School innovation is successful when it is initiated by the teachers themselves. If the teachers are motivated and interested in the process, the outcome is highly improved.

Skilled and engaged teachers must be regarded as resources on both a school level, a regional level and a national level.

A staff member should be assigned to lead the changing process and have sufficient time to plan this work and time for evaluation.

Expectations of short term effects when working with long term processes might pose a risk. If visible results are expected from local school leaders or politicians and such effects cannot be detected, there is a risk that process is cancelled.

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

- 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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