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Teachers' conceptions of literacies during and after a school library development project

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This paper presents some of the central results of a case study of a project called ˋShool Library of the Information societyˊ (SLI), which focused on changing schools' operational culture by developing teaching methods using the possibilities of school libraries and information and communication technology (Oulun kaupungin opetusvirasto 2001, 3). The project was carried out in Oulu 2002–2004. The data consists of teachers' and principals' annual reports of eleven elementary schools during the project, and group interviews of teachers and principals in the same schools in 2009. The study contributes to Information Studies by providing a perspective to teachers' thinking and teaching of information literacy (IL) in a school culture where there are no qualified full-time teacher-librarians at a school.

Activity theory (Engeström 1987, 78) serves as a theoretical frame work to examine the school culture's different dimensions, which are: 1. teachers and principals as **subjects** of the teaching process, 2. teaching and learning process as the **object** of development efforts, 3. school library and teaching of IL as **tools** for better learning, 4. written and unwritten **rules** of the schooling, 5. school **community** and 6. **division of labour**, which includes collaboration and resources. (Kurttila-Matero et al. 2010[1])

The school's operational culture can be described as an activity system as follows:

TOOLS: School Library,
ICT, IL, Exercises,
Teaching methods and
models, Teacher education

OBJECT: Teaching
process, focus on
literacies

SUBJECT:

Teachers and
Principals

sense

OUTCOME:
Succesful
teaching of
literacies

meaning

RULES:
Curriculum,
Timetables,
Hidden curriculum,
Architecture of the
School building
Strategies and
Visions

COMMUNITY:
Teachers,
Pupils,
 Parents,
City Library,
Other schools,
City department of
education

DIVISION OF LABOUR:
Collaboration of
teachers, students and
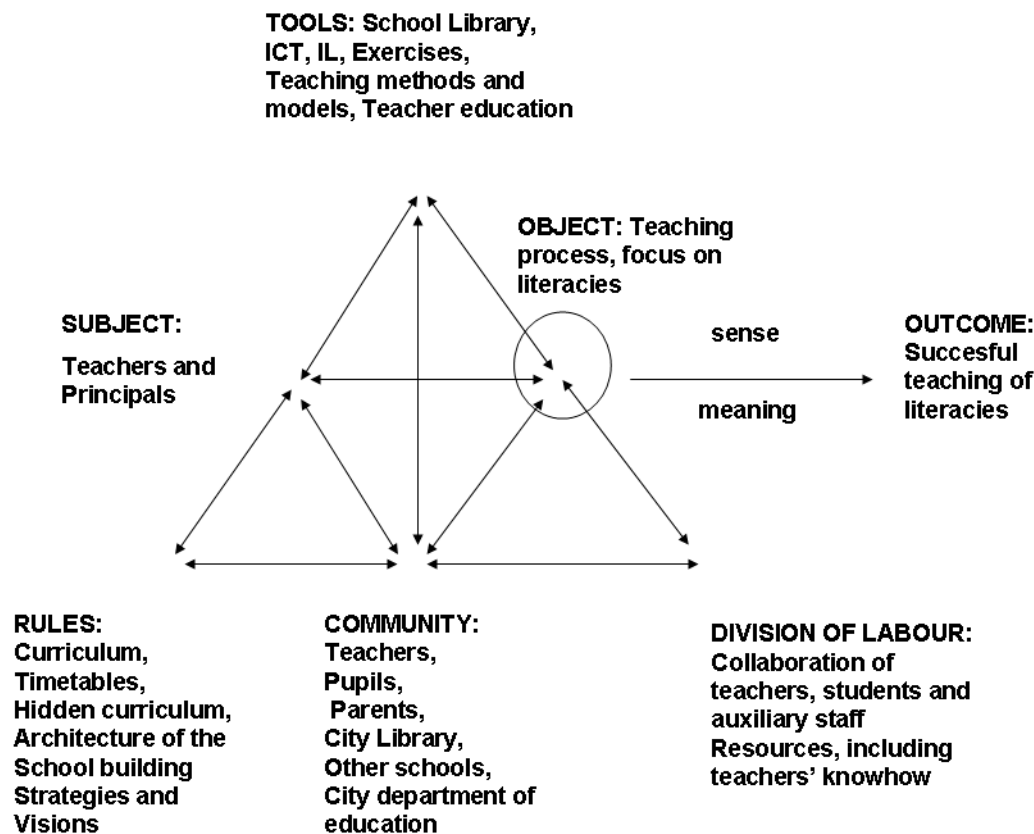auxiliary staff
Resources, including
teachers' knowhow

Figure 1. The structure of the activity system, which forms the school's operational culture. (Kurttila-Matero et al. 2010[2], 209, modified)

As a central dimension of the teaching process, teachers' conceptions of literacies were under examination.

Preliminary results

The analysis shows that the teachers concentrated in their reports (data set 1) on the process, where pupils are learning to search for information to create knowledge using inquiry-based learning. They emphasized the importance of teaching pupils to find versatile sources for their projects. The second- and third-years' reports concentrated on describing the learning tasks. The teachers were considering the need for developing their own teaching skills: "Every teacher considers topics that relate firmly to the curriculum and are suitable for developing information search skills. Moreover, it must be considered, if the cross-curricular theme requires training yourself." Teachers expressed their learning of the rich possibilities offered by the information search process during the SLI project. They also recognized that it is challenging to learn to outline and manage information, and that these are the most integral skills required for the future citizenship. Teachers described information search process as condensing information, considering the value of information, and evaluating the accessibility, nature and credibility of information. Teachers' considerations of teaching and learning of IL show that they have a rich understanding of IL, though they don't use the same terminology (or use it otherwise) as the information professionals or LIS researchers. The usefulness of inquiry-based learning came up even in the learning of foreign languages. Teachers argued that "the understanding of the text as well as pupils' own creation of text advances kind of unnoticeably".

In the interviews (data set 2) it was possible to learn about teachers' conceptions of literacy. Teachers consider literacy more widely than for example the UNESCO (2004, 13) definition of literacy does, and they include the dimensions of source criticism and conceptual development in their definition, thus moving closer to the definition of IL. As Lundh and Limberg (2008, 94) suggest,"a sociocultural perspective on IL offers a view on IL as a dimension of literacy, a way of analysing what it means to be information literate in different practices, but also a critical analysis of the concept itself".

According to the interview data the good literacy skills involve the mechanical literacy but also the critical literacy. The media literacy is emphasised. More and more important is reading literature to relax, and to use ones imagination when reading. This is a challenge because children get the fantasy readily available in different media. In the project schools teachers read to children and with children to stimulate their imagination, and they have found out that pupils produce text and narratives easily and their language is rich. From the first school year, literacy means to learn conceptualizing and classifying, and to learn to combine and differentiate for example natural or everyday phenomena.

Conclusion

The concept of literacy has got versatile and profound dimensions in teachers' perceptions during and after the SLI project. The simultaneous reform of curricula gave a good opportunity to rethink also the use of school library. Teachers have well internalized the curriculum's conception of literacy, which merges the different literacies in literacy skills (National Board of Education 2004, 44-50). The analysis of the rich data still continues to get more exact results.

Acknowledgements

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