

ABSTRACT NFPF 2011

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Appreciation as fuel for school improvement

Research topic

Different perspectives are important in school improvement processes: national and international evaluations of schools, steering documents as well as experiences from within schools. Teachers' responsibilities include supporting student learning, encouraging students to develop an ethical attitude toward others, and promoting health and well-being. Thus, important aspects of teacher responsibility are learning, ethics and health. The grown-up perspective has dominated school research for a long time, even if students' perspectives are more common nowadays. In recent years research has shown the benefit of student voice (Reed, 2007; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Our own experiences also underline this as we found students trustworthy, capable and competent in describing their school experiences (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009). When we listened to students and teachers we found them explaining how acts of appreciation had improved their personal experience in school (Bergmark & Kostenius, in press).

Aim

The aim of this paper is to explore appreciation as fuel for school improvement.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is the phenomenology of the life-world in the areas of health and educational research. This philosophy is a branch of the phenomenological movement, which derives from Edmund Husserl's work (Bengtsson, 1998; Bengtsson, 2005; Todd, 2003), as further developed by others such as Emanuel Lévinas (1969), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1996), and Max van Manen (1997).

Methodology/ research design

We have re-analyzed the results from our doctoral dissertations (Bergmark, 2009; Kostenius, 2008), which focus on ethical and health issues in schools. The phenomenological analyze

process we used was inspired by van Manen (1997) and included three steps; seeking meaning, theme analysis and interpretation with reflection.

Expected findings /conclusions

In the analysis we found three themes important for building positive and learning environments in schools. These themes are: (i) *Meet me*, (ii) *See, hear and respect me* and (iii) *Let me influence*.

When exploring teachers' responsibilities and students' experiences in school the opportunity for an appreciative attitude emerged. This attitude includes the importance of meeting others where they are, care about them, have faith in their abilities, letting them influence, and encouraging and recognizing them.

The challenge, as we see it, is first of all discover the power of appreciation and then consciously use it as fuel for school improvement. Therefore we will discuss possible practical applications of an appreciative attitude, which focus on building relationships that makes people learn, grow and feel well.

Keywords: appreciation, school improvement, student voice, teacher responsibility