

# What works to promote classroom well-being and learning from the perspectives of students

Kevin Anthony Perry

[perry@ruc.dk](mailto:perry@ruc.dk)

# Workshop Structure

## 1. Research phase one (focus group interviews)

Purpose

Method

Findings

‘Reflective Pairs’ – 10 mins

## 2. Research phase two (classroom observations)

Purpose

Method

Findings

‘Reflective Pairs’ – 10 mins

Open discussion (time permitting)!

# What actually makes a difference in the classroom ?

## Quick straw vote

Ask the people sitting closest to you about what makes a (positive or negative) difference in the classroom (2 mins).



# Overriding research question:

*What works to promote classroom learning and wellbeing?*

*(Question opened up to what does not work) ...*



# Part One – FG's Spring 2014

Participants from 30 classes:

- 19 classes from Primary School  
(5 x 0 grade, 3 x 1, 5 x 2, 6 x 3).
- 6 classes from Junior Secondary School  
(1 x 4 class, 2 x 5, 3 x 6).
- 5 classes from Senior Secondary School  
(1 x 7 class, 2 x 8, and 2 x 9).

# Part One – Focus Groups

## Purpose:

1. Find out what it is like to attend the participants' class/school.
2. Hear student voice/experiences about what works to promote class well-being and learning.
3. Capture ideas that may lead to innovations.

# Part One – Participant Selection:

Participants selected through collaboration between researchers and the class teacher based on three criteria:

1. Parents' consent to participate and be filmed in the interview process.
2. Student consent to participate and be filmed in the interview process.
3. Students represented the class demographics (as much as possible).

# Focus group interviews:

- Methodical choice to limit the groups to six participants per group.
- Six participants worked well for most of the interviews.
- Six participants gave a good group dynamic and space for participants to air their views.

# Practical application:

- Classroom presentation by researchers and explanation of the 'big' project
- Expert help to acquire up-to-date knowledge of 'going to school'
- Took place out of classroom (meeting rooms)
- Repeated the purpose of the interviews
- Reiterated about voluntary participation
- Assured confidentiality (to the relief of many participants)

Students' perspectives on what works (and does not) to promote class well-being, community and learning:

# Good classmates:

- Quality relationships between children makes a positive difference to their learning and well-being.
- A 'good classmate' is someone who is there to play with or hang out with at break times and is there to help you back onto your feet if you 'fall' in the school yard.

# Good classmates:

*“I think it's fun to go in this class because there are so many good friends ... then you are not really left out.” (Cille 1<sup>st</sup> grade)*

*“It is important to have good classmates, otherwise you won't have anyone to play with during playtime.” (Pernille 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)*

*“It's nice going in this class ... I have many friends and I learn a lot ... I've tried to be in another class where I had no friends ... it was not nice.” (Jamie 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)*

# Trustworthy Adults:

- Fair (just) & consequent
- Demonstrate care and interest for the individual
- Physically and mentally present
- Difference between teacher and instructor (same person in all spaces)
- Make an effort to explain expectations and differentiate so that everybody can participate (so that everyone can follow the plot)

# Trustworthy Adults:

*“Their teaching shows what they want with us ... if they want to get to know us as people, you start to trust them ...*

*If they show that they are only here to teach, they only get response to their teaching ...*

*... it's also about how they behave when they meet us outside the classroom ... like in the hallway or school yard.” (Laura 8<sup>th</sup> Grade)*

# Good explanations:

- Learning experience is clearly improved when teachers are good at explaining what is required of students.
- The more transparent the teacher makes the learning goals, the more likely the student is to engage in the work needed to meet the goals.
- Teachers must formulate expectations in a patient understandable way so that every child in the classroom can comprehend. This is crucial to promoting learning.

# Flip side:

Katja: *“I think that many [students] get ‘lost’ during teaching because of a lack of good explanations ...”*

KP: *“Explain”*

Katja: *“Yeah in a way we get lost, because it is not explained in teenager language, it’s in an adult way, so four or five of the class can’t follow”*

Freja: *“Yeah [name] she explains things really theoretically[...] instead of translating things into everyday language ... she should tell us about why we should learn things and give us some examples about how we can use them in real life ... it really affects our motivation to learn.”*

# What hinders Learning?

Most participants named casual relief teachers (CRT's) as 'challenging'.

Most students spoke about CRT's negatively and associated them with:

- negative learning experiences
- Ipad's and free time
- high noise levels and classroom disturbance
- lack of classroom management and lack of consequences

# Favouritism

- Some teachers have favourites amongst students
- Favourites get asked more questions during lessons and are more included in the lesson than the rest of the class
- It is clear to the students when a peer is in favour or out of favour with the teacher
- The students that feel excluded lose motivation and give up

# An Example of Favouritism:

*“When you sit like that [illustrates hand in the air] for 15 minutes ... .. [sigh] then you just cannot be bothered anymore ... you give up ...  
... our old English teacher only helped those who she really liked ... she really liked 3 kids and so she only focused on those three. The rest of us could just piss off ... we did not learn very much.” (Oliver 8<sup>th</sup> grade).*

# Students Evaluate Adults:

- Every person who enters the classroom (group) is evaluated by the students and the group behaviour is regulated in accordance with their evaluation.

*As David from 7th grade says, “It’s all about which teacher you get ... if you know that it is just an idiot or someone that you couldn’t care less about, then you just piss on them.”*

# Focus Group Summary:

- **Good classmates** – Everyone needs at least one good friend during the day to feel valued, acknowledged, cared about and part of a fellowship
- **Trustworthy and consistent adults** – trusted, mentally present who demonstrate that they want to be in the classroom
- **Take time to explain assignments** so that everyone understands what is expected of them.
- **Focus on active learning** that takes students on a journey between theory & practice

# Reflection

Interview your 'partner':

Discuss how the findings relate to your classroom experience.

How can these findings inform your current practice? (5 mins per interview)

# Part Two: Classroom Observations



# Part Two: Classroom Observations

- Two weeks of classroom obs. in 5 different classes: two 1<sup>st</sup>, two 4<sup>th</sup> and one 7<sup>th</sup> class
- Two observers (observational validation)
- General focus of observations – factors that promote and hinder classroom well-being, community and learning
- The main focus was on how students reacted to their peers and to the adults they encountered in the learning environment

## Part Two – Purpose:

- To test the findings from phase one 
- To get close to the everyday 'classroom life' and observe the micro-processes that promote and/or hinder well-being and learning
- To zoom in on some of these processes as they develop and investigate them firsthand to gain a deeper understanding of how they either promote or obstruct learning and well-being



# Findings:

- Consistent with the results from the first research phase, the second research phase identified themes around human relationships as crucial to promoting or obstructing learning and well-being.
- In the second research report, five themes relating to human relationships were identified.

# Inclusive adult-child relationship:

- The inclusive morning ritual (promotes well-being, community and lays the foundations for learning by familiarity and focusing on the individual & community)

[The teacher calls out the students' names from her iPad. Every time she calls a name, she asked a personal question to the child which reinforces that she recognizes and welcomes the child's presence in the class. For example, Did you sleep well? Have you eaten breakfast? How's your horse? How did football go on Sunday? (Observation Notes Winter/ Spring 2015).

# Differential child-adult relationship

Child-adult relationships either promote or hinder class welfare, a sense of community and learning.

## Main Points:

- Students evaluate the adults they encounter in the classroom
- Students adjust their behaviour towards adults based on their assessment
- A 'good relationship' with the teacher is crucial to students' behaviour in class
- The class group is not a 'fixed' entity, rather it is fluid and the dynamics change depending on the teacher
- Class Culture is all about relationships and learned behaviour

# Differential child-adult relationship

[(Name) enters the room and gives the impression that she does not want to be here (there). Her non-verbal communication signals a lack of confidence and that she feels uncomfortable. Compared to the previous lessons of the day with other teachers, this teacher is received with disrespect by several students.

It's almost as if she is invisible. After the teacher came into the room, three boys hid on the floor behind some of the others and started to play iPad. The teacher signals a lack of confidence and appears weak with no class management. It seems like the only tool she has available is 'shhhhhh' while holding a finger over her lips – it does not have the desired effect most students totally ignore the teacher]

# Differentiated adult-child relationship and favoritism

Can make some children feel excluded from the lesson and this affects their learning experience negatively.

Main Points:

Favoritism involves an experience where the teacher gives unfair preferential treatment to one or more persons at the expense of others.

Students who feel excluded in the lesson tend to feel unmotivated, give up and exclude themselves from learning.

For some students, the experience of exclusion and perceptions of favoritism are strongly connected.

# Differentiated adult-child relationship and favoritism

[The lesson is almost done. It is noteworthy that the teacher only interacts with the three boys (all sitting at the same table). Sometimes the teacher asks one of the three boys about what they think or asks them to give you an example on the subject in focus. Other times, one of the three students volunteers to answer a question. I observed something similar in the last lesson during this class. My impression is that the three boys are very committed in this subject and may affect the teacher's attention, so that teachers tend to forget that there are other students?

I suspect, those boys think that it's a great lesson with all the attention they get from teach – that is obvious by their smiling faces and enthusiasm when they answer questions. But during the lesson, the teacher seems to have lost the other students in the process – they sit with their hands under their chins and stare out the window. One boy sits with his head resting on his iPad as if it is a convenient headrest. I wonder if these pupils would have been just as excited as the three boys whose teacher had tried to include them in the lesson?]

# Children helping children

When children help each other, the feeling of classroom well-being, a sense of community and learning is advanced.

## Main Points:

- The quality of the relationships between the students is crucial to their experience of classroom well-being.
- There are many different ways students help and support each other i.e. emergency situations, play ground inclusion, and sharing in the learning environment (pens, pencils rulers etc).
- Classroom well-being is also enhanced through mentor-like situations where students help each other with schoolwork and in positive peer relations to prevent/stop conflicts.

# Children-helping-children

An example: (from Art Class):

- Three boys runs up and down the corridor (in an attempt to dry their paintings faster).
- Drying of paintings by running up and down the hallway provides some of the more active boys to burn a little energy of.
- During this activity, there is a boy who confronts one of the other boys (he had apparently bumped into him and now he wants revenge).
- The two stare at each other for a few seconds, and it seems that a fight is about to start.
- Out of the blue is one of the other boys slides between the two and take the confrontational boy's hand and leads him away with a simple maneuver, *"Come with me, I have something to show you"*.
- The timing was perfect, and he solved this minor conflict without the teacher noticing.
- This is a good example of how children help each other during the day, without being prompted.

# iPads as a teaching medium:

- iPads can be creative, constructive and beneficial for both individual and collective learning. They can also put some students on an equal footing with the others.
- On the other hand, iPads can be a disruptive factor in the classroom as some students sit and play games without being detected.
- For some students iPads become a tool to exclude themselves from the teaching and fellowship.
- Some CRT's use iPads as an easy option when they cover classes.

# Conclusion:

The analysis of the first two years of data clearly shows that the relationship between the adults and children is a significant and decisive element in relation to children's well-being, sense of community and learning on a daily basis in school.

# 'Reflection Pairs'

- If a similar research project was carried out in your school, what do you believe the findings would show?
- What inspiration will you take away from this workshop and try out in practice?

# Contact Info:

[perry@ruc.dk](mailto:perry@ruc.dk)

Tel. +45 24 22 13 54

[www.linkedin.com/in/kevin-perry-81479b43?trk=hp-identity-name](http://www.linkedin.com/in/kevin-perry-81479b43?trk=hp-identity-name)