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**CHALLENGES TO RECONCILE RESEARCH WITH THE TEACHING
ROLE. - A DISCUSSION OF METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH IN A
PROJECT BASED ON FURTHER EDUCATION IN COUNSELLING AND
COACHING.****Abstract:**

Guidance, mentoring, supervision and coaching are important areas of development in different types of professions. Several programs offer nowadays further education to adults who wish to improve their abilities to guide and coach. What characterizes these competencies in this specific program from the students' perspective and how do they develop their competence in this area? The focus will address the methodological challenge that the different roles of a researcher might create. The definition of the terms guidance, mentoring and coaching will subsequently be outlined in the course of the study. Definitions of these concepts differ in the literature, but some characteristics are present when we describe the process. Some characteristics are that the process is formal, pedagogical, client centred and based on voluntary interaction with other people. The focus is on empowerment, reflection and development of the client(s) (Tveiten (2006), Skagen (2011), McLeod (2007)).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss and present preliminary results from an on-going research project about further education in guidance and coaching and the development of competencies in this area among the students.

The teaching in this program is also the research field. Therefore, the students are co-researchers and participate in the data collection and data analysis. The group of students consist of professionals from different professions such as teachers, nurses and child protection educators. The theoretical framework of the study is social constructivism (Cresswell (2007)) and methodological approach in the frames of phenomenological and grounded theories building on both Moustakas and Charmaz.

The research intends to answer questions such as:

What is the meaning of mentorship for the students?

What do the students think a mentor competency should consist of?

How do students assess the program based on their experiences?

The data for the study consist of students' logs, interviews with the students, video recordings of the students' mentoring at the workplace, texts from the students' exams, and the teacher's own log after 2 years of teaching with the students.

Keywords:

Phenomenology, grounded theory, researcher role, guidance, mentoring, coaching.

In this paper, I present and discuss preliminary results of a study in which the researcher has also the role as teacher. The focus of the paper is on the methodological approach employed by the researcher when she has this double role. This means that the research field is the teaching/learning process in the program. To begin with, I will make a brief presentation of the educational program in Counseling and Coaching in which the investigation took place.

The program of Counseling and Coaching

There are two main admission criteria to attend this further education program

1. The previous professional education of the candidates, who are usually teachers, nurses or child welfare educators;
2. Two years of relevant practice.

This is a 2-year part time program (60 credits). It is organized as a 2-day gathering for nine times each year, being one of the two days focused on teaching/workshops in smaller groups. The students are distributed in four groups and each group has its own teacher. The students are in the same group during the whole 2-year program. However, twice a year there is an exchange of teachers between the groups. This means that all students meet all the teachers.

We use a variety of teaching methods, lectures and workshops. There are twelve students in my group.

The students work and practice their occupation while attending the program. Their purpose is to learn how to be good counselors/mentors and coaches, and thus become better professionals. Some of them might change jobs in which they will need this kind of competence.

The academic content in the program

Guidance, mentoring, supervision and coaching are important areas of development in different types of professions. Several programs offer nowadays further education to adults who wish to improve their abilities to guide and coach. What characterizes these competencies in this specific program from the students' perspective and how do they develop their competence in this area? The definition of the terms guidance, mentoring and coaching will subsequently be outlined in the course of the study. Definitions of these concepts differ in the literature, but some characteristics are present when we describe the process. Some characteristics are that the process is formal, pedagogical, client centred and based on voluntary interaction with other people. The focus is on empowerment, reflection and development of the client(s) (Tveiten, 2006; Skagen, 2011; McLeod, 2007).

The education for becoming a counselor and/or a coach is organized under different forms and in various contexts. Some examples are individual coaching, coaching groups, coaching in other areas, and organizational development. There is a specific focus on different practical exercises besides a good understanding of relevant theories and concepts. (We use different action methods such as psychodrama, gestalt, coaching). This area of competence requires the students' abilities and

willingness to challenge themselves, which can be quite difficult sometimes. The program also addresses questions related to how the students can use their qualifications in different areas and in their professional work.

The purpose of the research

To develop better programs in counseling and coaching, one has to know the kinds of competencies required by different professions. Thus, it is important to address issues that can be enlightened by answering the following questions:

- How do students develop their counseling / mentor /supervising skills?
- How does the program correspond with their development?
- How do the students describe their acquired skills?
- How important is this competence to the students?
- What should a mentor's competency consist of, according to the students' opinions/perceptions?
- How do the students assess the program based on their experiences?

The research methods

I have collected the data from field research, group interviews, video recordings and text analyses (Cresswell, 2007).

The data collected consist of:

- Students logs from the workshops and the lectures
- Transcripts from group interviews with the students, i.e., in addition to the teaching activities.
- Video recordings of the students mentoring at the workplace
- Texts from the students written exams
- The teachers' logs from the workshops

Research on my own practice as a teacher

Already in 1975, Lawrence Stenhouse claimed that the teacher is the best researcher in his/her own classroom because the teacher is an insider in the teaching field. If the teacher engaged himself/herself in research on what was going on in the classroom, he/she would become an even better and more reflected teacher (Stenhouse, 1975).

Today there are quite a few researchers doing this kind of research, such as in the studies of Jack Whitehead and Jean Mc Niff (2006), Hilde Hiim (2010), and May Britt Postholm (2007). Jean Mc Niff writes that there is a need for practice-based research executed by the teacher in order to develop teacher practices.

I am a teacher and I am researching on my own practice as a teacher. I am also collecting the student's experiences and views. The benefit of research on my own practice is, of course, that I am also an insider in the field. I know the field and I am familiar with the arena and the processes that is going on. This gives me an advantage in interpreting, understanding and finding what is interesting. Obviously, this could also be the opposite, i.e., I do not see and recognize the interesting things

because they are too familiar to me. This aspect I would have to bear in mind all the time.

According to the Norwegian researcher Hilde Hiim, when carrying out research on one's own practice, the professional concepts and examples learned during the research can develop into the teacher's professional knowledge. This kind of development builds on epistemological analyses of teacher knowledge as a form of practice knowledge. This has to be developed and documented on the premises of the professional knowledge. In the case of technical and vocational education, the teacher's knowledge in the occupation should be central in his/her work (Hiim, 2010). This kind of knowledge is one of my aims in my research. I want to find out how I can improve my teaching and moreover, what the knowledge of a mentor/supervisor/coach means and how it is practiced.

Challenges in researching on one's own practice

Since I am the teacher as well as the researcher, I have to face the challenge of having two roles simultaneously. I first experienced some of the challenge when I was teaching, and suddenly started to reflect on how I would describe what was happening in the seminar room. I was mainly occupied with how to tell the story, more than interfering with the process. In that moment I was not in the teacher role, I was a researcher and accordingly tried to observe rather than interfere. At that moment, I was certainly not in the "here and now", as Judi Marshall points out to be a problem that some first-person action researchers are reporting. In first-person action research, or self-reflective inquiry, she says that some researchers focus on the dilemmas of being in the here and now and the reflections they are engaging in (Marshall and Mead, 2005).

As a teacher, I tuned in, and interfered with the ongoing process and it made me reflect on how the researcher's role easily could become non-ethical in this sense. The good ethics is with the students learning process, I believe. Even if they have consented to be part of the research, they started their study in order to become a mentor and a coach. Therefore, I have to be committed to the students' aims and wellbeing as a teacher, before I can engage in the researcher's role. Even though, it is sometimes necessary to create the necessary space to see what is going on and to see myself in the situation from outside. When asking the students, they never reflected upon this. It was not a problem for them; they did not perceive it at all.

May Britt Postholm, who is a Norwegian researcher who does this kind of research, reports the same kind of difficulties in her article "The Teacher as a researcher or a teacher" (my translation) (Postholm, 2007), in which she presents a few ways of dealing with it, as, for example, by writing logs. I will shortly return to this aspect.

As a teacher, I am also concerned with how well the students are doing, as such, I have a personal interest in their performance. I wish them to become competent. This fact contradicts the more objective way as the research ideal. To make the data transparent, I have to recognize, and be explicit about, my agenda as a teacher. I need also to be aware about how it is influencing the process.

Pål Repstad (2007) claims that it is a problem to maintain academic distance and not take sides in qualitative studies. However, to be an expert in the field is also a motivational factor because of the researcher's personal interest. This will be an advantage in understanding the field.

Even though, it is disturbing that my need for reassurance that the students learn what they are supposed to, can be reflected both on my logs written after every workshop and in the students logs – also written after every workshop. The problem has been addressed in the group interview and the students have responded to it. The students do not see this as a problem, of course. Anyway, by mentioning it to the students, they will probably think about it when writing their logs.

Postholm claims that when the teacher systematically collects data, the teacher can reflect upon them instead of relying mainly on the memory. She points out that it is important to use tools that do not lead the teacher away from the action. The tools could be of good assistance when reflecting upon the processes, and understanding them (Postholm, 2007). I think this would have to be taken care of after the closure of the teaching situation. Otherwise, I can get into the difficulties that I have just mentioned.

The students as co-researchers

I wanted the students to be part of the research in a way that they were co-researchers more than researched upon. This is important in this kind of research. It has to do with building confidence and to include the students in the process. To do so, I invited them to participate in group-interviews for examining statements from the logs. This is also a way of creating thick data, using the terminology from Cathy Charmaz. (Charmaz, 2014).

I also used the so-called "Free spaces". Free space is a technique of counteracting the asymmetry, says Kurt Aagaard Nielsen, who is referred in an article written by Eva Schwencke, where she examines the possibility to create a space for democracy in practice (Schwencke, 2006).

Free space originates, from the future creative workshops (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006). Even though I do not use this kind of workshop, I use the part that has to do with creating the democratic room to facilitate the student's collaboration.

I think that the "free space" facilitates the participation of the students, who can act and talk freely about what is in their minds. To counteract the fact that I am the teacher, I ask them directly after we have discussed for a while: "Is there anything you think you ought to say, even if it is something negative you have experienced here, please try to articulate it". The students often say things in this context they usually would have hesitated to do otherwise, due to exposure of their personal stuff and the need to be critical as well.

As Eva Schwencke says: "the empowerment processes could be set in motion through opening up more free spaces" (2006, s.383). In this way, as we also do when doing exercises in the workshops, the "free space" supports the students building their self-confidence. It encourages them to engage in this collective and democratic context.

Eva uses the term “free space” in referring to the importance of creating spaces that enhance social imagination and stimulate the participants to discuss the alternatives in their wished-for futures. In doing so, I think they also create “democratic forms of knowledge” as Nielsen and Nielsen (2006, s. 66) interpret, when speaking of Kurt Lewin’s heritage and the roots of action research.

When I use the term, “free space” I think of it as a space where the students can express their feelings and make their reflections about the development of their expertise for becoming a counselor and/or a coach. “Free space” gives the possibility to become self-confident and facilitates the democratic process.

Validity

So can I believe in what comes forth in the empirical data? How trustworthy are the texts written by the students? If so, to what extent?

Constantly I ask myself the following question: Do the students write what they actually mean? Their texts, I think, will depend on how they interpret the circumstances within which the texts are written. The students say that they are writing mainly for themselves and their own reflections upon what they experience and how they will use it further. They do not think about me as the reader. But as one student said to me: while laughing: “I don’t write it all, you know.” Another said: “I don’t think about who’s reading it at all – that’s not interesting to me”. Therefore, this differs and is something to discuss more closely. On the other hand, I am an insider and so I have the opportunity to interpret the texts in a way that the students will recognize and hopefully agree with. Otherwise, they can correct the data material when they get them to read. They will get the “story” composed in a way so that they do not recognize each other’s statements. Hopefully they will comment on it, and they are pointing out what they see as important in the texts.

Communication and influence between researchers and the researched ones can be controlled, in order to minimize the researchers’ influence as stated by Olav Eikeland (2006, s.196). Thus in my research, I try to minimize my influence. But I find that this is difficult because I am not able to step out of the context. I am the teacher and I do have the power and authority in the situation. As I can not escape from that, I make attempt to strengthen the validity. My aim is to do that by the efforts described in this paper. Throughout the research I constantly make attempts to meet the epistemological standards and to communicate findings that are valid and reliable.

I will end with this citation:

“---- The interpretation of language ----- is only possible when the interpreter and the interpreted individuals ----- share some kind of practical case or interests,” says Hans Skjervheim, a Norwegian philosopher, back in 1957. Here cited from Nielsen and Nielsen (2006, s. 67).

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