A school's operating culture in open learning spaces – An ethno-graphic study on moving to a new school building

La cultura operativa de una escuela en espacios abiertos de aprendizaje: un estudio etnográfico sobre cómo mudarse a un nuevo edificio escolar

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Introduction

According to Finland's national core curriculum, pupils should be seen as active players who set goals for themselves and interact with other pupils and adults at school and with external communities (Finnish National Core Curriculum 2014). In other words, pupils become the subjects of teaching, and teachers enable and steer their learning processes (Hellström, Johnson, Leppilampi & Sahlberg 2015). According to Sahlberg (2015), this new approach involves less traditional learning in a classroom setting and more work based on integrated themes, phenomenon-based learning, joint projects and workshops. Pedagogical practices are undergoing renewal, which also creates pressures for schools to further develop their physical learning environments (Mononen-Aaltonen 1998). Learning environments should enable and support multifaceted study methods and ways of working (Chism 2006; Krokfors, Kangas, Vitikka & Mylläri 2010). According to Lonka (2015), learning environments should support both learning and educational interaction, with the entire community and operating culture shaping the operating methods. In such cases, the creation of learning environments is not about classrooms, but about varied spaces intended for different activities (Pearlman 2010).

International studies show that even if pedagogical approaches focus on pupils' creativity, critical thinking, use of technology, problem solving and interaction, little attention has been paid to achieving these ideals in learning spaces (Pearlman 2010; Phillips, Laren & Dakin 2013). According to Kuuskorpi (2012), designers of new schools and learning spaces in Finland have also been slow to adopt new types of learning environments, and they have paid little attention to the significance of the physical learning environment for the teaching and learning processes. Teaching has remained largely unchanged until recent times, when globalisation and the digital transformation have forced a change of direction (Hellström et al. 2015). Flexibility, adaptability and experiences are often identified as the essential properties of the school of the future (Teräväinen 2010).

According to several studies, learning environments, such as physical environments, are significant in terms of both the

pupils' learning results and the pedagogical methods used (Barret, Zhan, Moffat & Kobbacy 2013; Blackmore, Bateman, Cloonan, Dixon, Loughlin, O'Mara & Senior 2011; Walker, Brooks & Baepler 2011; Oblinger 2006). However, a new type of learning environment may not necessarily have a direct effect on pedagogical methods and the school's practices. Changing these requires active work (Cleveland 2011). Rather than there being a linear connection between learning spaces and learning results, facilities have an indirect effect through the conditions and the meanings arising from them (Blackmore et al. 2011). Learning spaces serve as conveyors of the relationship between teaching and learning, as well as social practices; they are just one factor affecting the complex relationship between teaching and the learning that results.

Purpose of this study and methodological points

This study focuses on examining physical learning environments and on learning spaces in particular. Its topic arises from the increasing construction of new types of open learning spaces and desired changes in operating culture. The purpose of this ethnographic study was to describe and understand processes related to the formation of an operating culture when moving to new, open learning spaces. In this context, an open learning space is a semi-open facility that serves as a home classroom but can also be combined into a larger, shared space. The study examined the formation of a school's operating culture through ideals around the use of facilities and furniture that arise from new, open learning spaces. I was particularly interested in users' tensive relationships with open learning spaces and the opportunities to use them in day-to-day teaching. In previous studies, open learning spaces and their use have primarily been studied in terms of acoustic suitability, learning or the pedagogical approach applied. While operating culture is considered to be an important factor with regard to the use of open learning spaces, it has been studied only very little. This study meets that need. Its field of study is education, particularly research into schools' operating cultures and physical learning environments.

The study was carried out in a school where the personnel and pupils moved to new, open learning facilities at the beginning of the spring semester. The team participating in the study consisted of five special education teachers and six school assistants. In addition, two supervisors were interviewed. The material was collected by observing the team in learning facilities on ordinary school days over a period of five months. The team were interviewed five times as a group, and each supervisor was interviewed individually once. Material-based content analysis was used as the analysis method in this study. The following research questions arose during the analysis process:

1. What measures are taken to prepare for a change in the school's operating culture when moving to new, open learning facilities?
2. How is the school's operating culture formed in the new, open learning spaces?
3. What types of ideals for how facilities and furniture will be used are generated through the official plans for the new school building and by the management?
4. What types of tensions and potential solutions are expressed by teachers and school assistants concerning the ideals for the use of the facilities?

Main findings

Based on the results of this study, moving to new learning facilities, combined with changes in the operating culture, was stressful for both the personnel and the management. Certain ideals were set for the use of the facilities as part of

the official objectives and by the management. However, these ideals were not communicated to the employees, and only some of them were put into practice. In the light of this study, a new operating culture was created through tensions in relation to ideals, as well as through various experiments and the solutions arising from them. Tensions related to the use of facilities included whether to ensure 1) flexible or peaceful spaces, 2) openness or privacy, 3) control of pupils or the provision of options, 4) adaptability or stability of spaces and furniture, and 5) the use of all facilities as learning spaces or the appreciation of designated spaces. The new, open learning spaces challenged the personnel on both the individual and group levels. The personnel expected clearly expressed goals and their shared reflection from the management, as well as support with the adoption of the new facilities. Personnel involvement was perceived differently by employees and management. The employees wanted to participate in the planning to the extent that they felt competent and could spare time alongside their ongoing work. Some involvement practices, such as signing off on the facility designs, were seen as superficial. The management, on the other hand, thought they had involved the employees and helped them prepare for the new facilities in the best possible way. For the most part, the employees were satisfied with the advance coaching, but it was inadequate for successfully adjusting to the new facilities and changing the operating culture.

From employees, transferring to open learning facilities seems to require flexibility, open-mindedness and a tolerance of mistakes (Blackmore et al. 2011). The same learning space solution is not necessarily suitable for all user groups (see also Lahtinen et al. 2016). Special attention should be paid to the need to work undisturbed and adequate space for work that requires peace and concentration, as well as sound insulation and acoustic planning. With regard to new facilities, it is a good idea to jointly agree on rules and practices, as change often also means new ways of working and a new work culture. New learning spaces usually involve certain expectations for the use of the facilities. Such expectations and assumptions may come from the architects, the developer, the management or society (national curriculum). When designing spaces, attention should primarily be paid to the employees' day-to-day activities (Mattila & Miettunen 2010) and to teaching practices and the national curriculum, as well as the pupils' and employees' needs and wishes (Gislason 2011). Changes in operating culture – as well as the underlying values, norms and attitudes in particular – are difficult to identify and therefore difficult to implement. Even if advance coaching is available, reflection and training, as well as support from the management, will also be needed after the move to the new facilities. Joint agreements or issues that need to be addressed do not seem to arise until day-to-day activities have started.

Discussion

According to Florian and Rouse (2010), changes in practices require 1) information and expertise, 2) skills and practical experiments, and 3) trust and the right attitude. This model is probably also suitable for supporting a new operating culture in new learning spaces. To ensure the efficient use of shared facilities, there must be adequate information and expertise regarding pedagogical models and co-teaching. Trust and the right attitude are needed through self-reflection, participation in the planning process and discussions about the nature and goals of the change. Skills develop from open-mindedly experimenting and gaining experience through cooperation and the use of various facilities and new pedagogical operating models. Moving to new learning facilities and managing changes in operating culture are demanding, complex processes that require of management not only multifaceted skills, self-reflection and the design of physical facilities, but also the re-examination of learning and teaching processes as a whole (see also Kuuskorpi & Nevari 2018).

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Resumen. _____

El propósito de este estudio etnográfico fue describir y comprender procesos relacionados con la formación de una cultura corporativa cuando se muda a un nuevo espacio abierto de aprendizaje. El estudio se llevó a cabo en una escuela donde el personal y los alumnos se mudaron a nuevas instalaciones con espacios abiertos de aprendizaje a principios del semestre de primavera. El material se recopiló mediante la observación de un equipo en las instalaciones de aprendizaje en días escolares ordinarios durante un período de cinco meses. El equipo fue entrevistado cinco veces como grupo y cada supervisor fue entrevistado individualmente una vez. Basado en los resultados de este estudio, mudarse a nuevas instalaciones de aprendizaje, combinado con cambios en la cultura corporativa, fue estresante tanto para el personal como para la administración. Se establecieron ciertos ideales para el uso de las instalaciones como parte de los objetivos oficiales y por la gerencia. Como indica este estudio, se creó una nueva cultura corporativa fruto de las tensiones con los ideales, y a través de diversos experimentos y las soluciones que surgieron de ellos. El personal esperaba objetivos definidos con claridad y la reflexión compartida de la gerencia, así como el apoyo en la adaptación de las nuevas instalaciones.

Palabras clave. Paisaje educativo; Ambiente educativo; Espacio abierto de aprendizaje; Cultura corporativa; Etnografía.

Abstract. _____

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to describe and understand processes related to the formation of an operating culture when moving to new, open learning spaces. The study was carried out in a school where the personnel and pupils moved to new, open learning facilities at the beginning of the spring semester. The material was collected by observing one team in learning facilities on ordinary school days over a period of five months. The team were interviewed five times as a group, and each supervisor was interviewed individually once. Based on the results of this study, moving to new learning facilities, combined with changes in the operating culture, was stressful for both the personnel and the management. Certain ideals were set for the use of the facilities as part of the official objectives and by the management. In the light of this study, a new operating culture was created through tensions in relation to ideals, as well as

through various experiments and the solutions arising from them. The personnel expected clearly expressed goals and their shared reflection from the management, as well as support with the adoption of the new facilities.

Key-words. Learning landscape; Learning environment; Open learning space; Operating culture; Ethnography.

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