How are research circles used in schools?

- some reflections


Mats Lundgren
Pedagogiskt Utvecklingscentrum Dalarna
Högskolan Dalarna, Selma Lagerlöfsplatsen, 791 88 FALUN
tel: 023- 77 82 81, 070 - 316 82 81
fax: 023- 77 80 80
e-mail: mlu@du.se
## Contents

1. INFORMATION SOCIETY’S NEED OF CHANNELS FOR COMMUNICATING KNOWLEDGE 2  
1.1 Introduction 2  
  The so-called “third task“ of universities and colleges 2  
  The municipalities’ need to develop the content of schooling 3  
1.2 Background 4  
  The research circle 4  
  From study circle to research circle 4  
  Research on research circles 5  
2. PURPOSE AND DELIMITATIONS 7  
3. METHOD 7  
4. THEORETICAL BASES 8  
5. HOW ARE RESEARCH CIRKELS USED IN SCHOOLS? 9  
5.1 “Meeting research through education“ 10  
5.2 The Smedjebacken group 10  
5.3 The Mora/Orsa groups 11  
5.4 The National Agency for Education’s report 13  
6. DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS 14  
6.1 Reasons for using research circles in schools 14  
6.2 Research circles as an arena for developing competence 15  
6.3 Research circles as an arena for developing activities 16  
6.4 Research circles as an arena for a meeting between practitioners and researchers 17  

References 18
1. INFORMATION SOCIETY’S NEED OF CHANNELS FOR COMMUNICATING KNOWLEDGE

1.1 Introduction

It is often stated nowadays that we are living in an information society while at the same time we live side-by-side in both agrarian and industrial societies. Just as persons were marginalised for different reasons in earlier forms of society new groups will become outsiders in the society that is now taking shape. It would appear that it is the professional groups that will primarily dominate and will therefore be the group to ‘reap the rewards’ (cf Perkin, 1996). There are strong indications that the contact between the academic world and practitioners will develop quickly and for the professional classes this is of the utmost importance in enabling them to carry out their work but also in defending their positions. What do the paths to this desired knowledge look like? In order to cope with such a question I will limit it to one area, namely education. In this case the focus will be on research circles. I will firstly touch on the bases for how research circles in schools can be seen as an expression of two different needs, one being the ‘third task’ of universities and colleges and the other the need to develop and change the content of education, a question which the municipal authorities are now wrestling with.

The so-called “third task” of universities and colleges

The need to spread knowledge in an information society has given rise to wide-ranging discussions on the importance for universities and colleges of coming closer to society at large both to inform on the results of its research but also to adapt the education that is being offered to the needs and requirements of the labour-market. If we focus specifically on the school sector “Questions regarding the spreading of research results, their accessibility and
usefulness for teachers and others belong to the more difficult and almost eternal questions” (Skolverket, the National Agency for Education 1995:1). Hultman and Hörberg (1994) point out in an overview of research regarding the use of knowledge in schools that research-based knowledge has surprisingly little impact on practice in schools. We are also aware that in-service training of teachers seldom leads to the desired effects on the activities at the school (cf Ekholm, 1989). A further aspect is how the training that is carried out at our universities and colleges is able to adapt to the changing needs that occur in an information society. Given such a perspective it would appear desirable to investigate what role research circles can play in schools in functioning as a ‘bridge’ between researchers and teachers and how this can influence school practice.

The municipalities’ need to develop the content of schooling

The Swedish school has been transformed from an earlier strongly state-steered system to goal-orientation and the decentralisation of responsibility to the municipalities. The increasing diversity of available knowledge and the rapid growth of new knowledge has led to a situation where more and more people are talking of the need for schools to be ‘learning organisations’ (cf Senge 1990). Changes in the world around us influence the inner-workings of the school system. One example of this is the new agreement between the teachers unions (Lärarförbundet and Lärarnas Riksförbund) and the Swedish Municipal Employers organisation, Svenska Kommunförbundet, in 1996, which includes two interacting components but with differing status; firstly a non-binding collective agreement ‘Satsning till 2000’ (Target year 2000) and secondly a five-year binding collective agreement called ‘Agreement 2000’ with regulations regarding teachers’ salaries and working hours. These are regarded by the parties concerned as a ‘school development package’.
1.2 Background

I begin by discussing the concept research circle and then compare the motives behind the traditional study circle with the ideas that the research circle rests on. Finally I briefly touch on the research that has been carried out on research circles in Sweden.

The research circle

According to Holmstrand and Hörnsten (1995) a research circle can be seen as a study circle in which one or more researchers participate. The research circle is thus a forum for researchers and practitioners where they can exchange views from their respective perspectives. This will suffice for the moment as a definition of the concept research circle. Holmstrand and Härnsten point out that hardly any mechanisms have existed up until now for exchange, dialogue and communication between researchers and people working professionally. “The appropriate arenas for such meeting to take place have still to be developed” (Holmstrand & Härnsten 1995:122). They believe that it is rigid, hierarchical patterns and a firm division of knowledge in both ‘worlds’ that prevent the building of ‘bridges’ which are sorely needed. At the same time they state that the research circle is an interesting method to “join knowledge from researchers to that of ‘practitioners’ and create a forum for the exchange of ideas” (Holmstrand & Härnsten, 1995:122).

From study circles to research circles

The link between research and working life is clearly nothing new. Within the workers’ movement the experiences of researchers have been spread through for example extra-mural lectures and study circles. One can ask the question why a research circle develops as a phenomenon and why the traditional study circle is not suitable. It could be postulated that the study circle was a phenomenon that was well-suited to industrial society and in the same
way the research circle could be seen as well-suited to information society. Not unexpectedly the study circle developed concurrently in many parts of the world (cf Bild, 1983). I believe that the same can be said today of the research circle

The need to obtain knowledge that the growth of the study circle illustrates is present today but has a different starting point. The basic knowledge needs that characterised the study circle have been replaced by the need to have access to knowledge as ‘fresh produce’ and as meaning-creating structures in an increasingly complex society. This can probably only take place through direct access to the world of research. While the study circle gradually came to use specially-adapted and prepared study materials the research circles makes use of the scientific approach and scientific methods to produce own knowledge and is a tool to gain access to the latest developments within a specific area of knowledge. It is however interesting to note that study circles had another purpose during the early twentieth century. The starting point for the study circle was the concept of education, with special emphasis on self-education. This means that the participants themselves interpreted and acquired knowledge without any helping hands. This could for example lead to situations where the participants in the study circle did not use textbooks but went directly to the sources themselves (Arvidson, 1996).

**Research on research circles**

Holmstrand and Härnsten (1995) state that there are research circles in many places in Sweden today and that researchers from many different disciplines and universities are involved in these activities. There are now a considerable number of short reports from different circles, along with scientific articles and conference documents as well as some
analyses of the method as such. Holmstrand and Härmsten (ibid) further claim that as far as they are aware research circles were not used in the education sector before 1995.

When the first research circles began in the mid-seventies they differed in a decisive manner from the attitude that researchers had traditionally expressed. Instead of traditional ‘researching’ it was stressed that the researchers’ theoretical and the workers’ practical knowledge had the same value. The usefulness of this was mutual. Roos (1997) describes the development of the research circle idea in three waves: The first wave was a pioneer project carried out in Lund in the seventies. The research circle functioned in the context as “an organisational framework for information on research. Planning of research and development work of various kinds” (Roos 1997:4). The research circles had links to the unions in an attempt to create a counterweight to the employers’ advantage in the field of knowledge and were focused on changes in the surrounding world. The second wave of research circles which began in the eighties meant that the model that was developed in Lund spread to other parts of the country maintaining the link to local trade unions. At the end of the eighties the first research circle was started in a residential area of Malmö. Roos claims that this is the beginning of the third wave of research circles. The participants came from various social sectors and different positions in hierarchies in order to commonly define problems and cooperate in finding solutions through development work in the residential area. The research circle was now locally anchored. It might be possible to claim that what we are now observing is the fourth wave of research circles where semi-professional and professional groups cooperate with researchers in order to acquire new knowledge with the aim of strengthening their own positions and influencing the reality they are working in. It is now possible to be more precise about the purpose of this paper.
2. PURPOSE AND DELIMITATIONS

My starting point in this context is that research circles can be seen as one of several different ways of developing different areas of competence of school staff and thus also develop the activities. They could also be regarded as ways of developing contacts between researchers and practitioners belonging to semi-professional and professional categories. The following questions will be focused on:

- What motives can be identified for using research circles in schools?
- Do research circles work as a method for developing the professional skills of teachers?
- Do research circles influence the pedagogical activities in schools and if so in what manner?
- Can research circles function as a method for practitioners and researchers to come closer together and thus create an arena for pedagogical discussions which are based on a researcher perspective?

I will limit my investigation by just studying how the research circle has been used in the Swedish school system.

3. METHOD

There are a number of different possible approaches based on the aim of studying how research circles are used in schools and what effects they are felt to have. In this case I have chosen to analyse four different reports in order to obtain an empirical base. The four studies are a) “Meeting research through education“ “Att möta forskning genom utbildning“; an evaluation of the four groups in the school year 1993/94 who participated in a research-circle type professional development run by Dalarnas Kommunförbund (The Dalarna Municipalities Association) and Skolledarhögskolan in Falun (Tydén and Kåks, 1995). A total of around 50
persons participated in this course. b) The second report concerns seven teachers at Bergaskolan in Smedjebacken who began a research circle in the spring of 1996 which is now in its third year (Arvidson, 1997). The research circle has been “action directed“ and is about running development projects and documenting their effects at different levels in a scientific manner. c) The third report deals with three research circles running in Mora and Orsa during the spring and autumn terms 1997 (Nyström, 1998). All in all around 30 persons participated in the three circles. The research circle also integrated a course on research information called “theory and practice in cooperation“.

Finally a report from the National Agency for Education was used entitled “Schools and researchers“ “Skolan och forskarna“. The report is on a project that was carried out between 1993 and 1995. The University of Umeå, the Teacher training college in Malmö, Kristianstad College and the municipalities of Vännäs, Umeå, Varberg and Hässleholm were all involved. The National Agency for Education functioned as the coordinating partner.

This approach means that it is neither possible nor my intention to generalise from the results. On the other hand it is possible, as I see it, to gain a better understanding in this way of what factors are of significance regarding how research circles function in practice.
4. THEORETICAL BASES

In order to discuss the question of research circles and how they function as meeting places for researchers and practitioners and for developing competence and programmes at schools some basic concepts need to be discussed. Firstly I will try to clearly define the concepts “knowledge“ and “competence“ and finally briefly deal with the concept “developing activities“.

The concepts knowledge and competence are both complex and thus also difficult to handle. Knowledge and competence can not been seen as fully synonymous. The concept of knowledge is a precondition for being able to define the concept competence since the latter expresses a relation between a certain individual’s knowledge and a task that person is expected to carry out. It is clearly a problem that every type of attempt at operationalising the concept competence tends either to be so general that the definition is unusable in practice or if it is made precise risks being ‘shallow’ in relation to the full depth of the concept. Competence is related to a situation and a context where the actor finds himself and where the action is carried out; it is linked to the individual and also has an organisational significance. Competence can therefore be said to exist on two different levels. Competence is here defined as the ability to act adequately in a specific situation.

From one standpoint it is rather easy to define the concept ‘developing activities’. One could say that developing activities is the same as improving the activities in some way or other. How can we know that an activity is being developed? If some interested parties claim that there has been an improvement in some respect and others claim that things have got worse, for example through the introduction of a new form of organisation, has there been any
development of the activity? I will however not enter here into a discussion of this more complex question of what to regard as the development of an activity.

5. HOW ARE RESEARCH CIRCLES USED IN SCHOOLS?

In the following section there will be a presentation of the four cases/evaluations regarding research circles that form the empirical basis of this study. The results will be presented through individual summaries of the four reports.

5.1 “Meeting research through education“

The study made by Tydén & Kåks (1995) showed that most of the participants had benefited considerably from the course on the level of knowledge acquisition. The participants stated they were pleased that they had acquired ‘tools’ which they thought they would be able to use themselves in further work. For a few the circle had also influenced their basic attitude. One of the problems Tydén & Kåks (idib) observed was that the literature used was characterised by a traditional view of the role of research in society with emphasis being laid on the pre-emptive right of interpretation to scientific research results in relation to knowledge acquired by other means. Their conclusion was that course literature can in itself militate against the goal of training critical and self-reflecting consumers of research and that this makes it more difficult to create meeting places for contacts on an equal basis between researchers and practitioners. The criticism that was put forward concerned primarily the time pressures the participants felt and that there was little time for guidance. One aspect they note is what type of individual participates in this kind of activity. Tydén & Kåks (ibid.) claim that those who are driven by an inner will to develop themselves will always be on the alert and participate in these kinds of activities. These persons are as a rule easy to reach. It is the other groups who need support to take the mental step that is necessary in order to begin training of this kind.
The study shows that in those municipalities where there is a “good climate for education“ they have also succeeded in recruiting many participants. It would seem that the attitude of the school head is of great importance.

5.2 The Smedjebacken group

Arvidson (1997) has evaluated the research circle that exists at Bergaskolan in Smedjebacken. He notes that the motives for participating in the research circle vary. A couple of the teachers seem to regard the research circle as a way of carrying out development work in general and tone down the research aspect. One factor that Arvidson brings to attention is the contradiction which exists between the in-built openness of research and the participants’ unwillingness to present their results. This could possibly be interpreted as some participants feeling a certain fear of showing others what they were doing and thereby risking criticism. Those participants whose views are presented in Arvidson’s report are however extremely positive to what their work in the research circle has given them. Arvidson also looks at the time aspect, that is how much can a teacher devote to this type of activity. One of the participants states: “Well yes, the disadvantage of research circles is in that case that it is time-consuming“ (Arvidson, 1997:12). Arvidson draws the conclusion that the purpose of research circles is not to make researchers of the participants but is instead a kind of heightener of awareness. This expresses a view which implies that the research circle can be seen as a pedagogical method which makes the participants critical members of society from a kind of emancipatory view of knowledge.

5.3 The Mora/Orsa groups

Nyström found in the groups in Mora and Orsa that the pedagogical starting point for the research circles was to acquire “pedagogical tools“ to give the participants an instrument to
produce their own knowledge - a kind of aid to self-assistance, or if one wishes, an attempt to motivate participants for “learning in an everyday context.“ The participants had a somewhat different view of what kind of knowledge their participation in the research circle would lead on to. A number of them stated that they saw the research circle as a possibility for deepening their knowledge in a subject area, something it is not possible to do in the daily work situation. The research circle was even regarded as a means for further professional training. The participants stressed that the research circle influenced them all. Some mentioned that they now reflect more on how and why they do things in a certain manner. One person stated “I have obtained an instrument to work with. My motivation for my job has also increased.“ (Nyström 1998:18). A number of groups said that they felt a greater confidence in their work. However some expressed some doubts regarding the possibility of making use of the experiences in the research circle. “Work is not organised in such a way that it is possible to make use of newly acquired knowledge“ (Nyström, 1998:18). Many of those interviewed said that they could very well consider continuing studying in some form. Thus the research circle seemed to have inspired them to further studies on a more general level. One interesting spin-off effect from a knowledge perspective would appear to be that almost everyone stated that they had learned to use the computer as a tool for work since they had had to write their reports on a computer. Another effect was that those who had access to computer communication also learned how to use e-mail. One of the participants stated that she had long been thinking of taking a course to learn computer skills but felt now that she had got this knowledge as an extra without having to set aside any special time.

Among the leaders of the research circles there is some uncertainty as to how much methodological issues and overarching theory of knowledge questions need to be dealt with. Someone attempted to lead a discussion on this but found that the participants were chiefly
interested in discussing their own work based on considerably more practical and concrete perspectives. Only one participant stated that there was something lacking in this area. All others felt that they had received the knowledge they needed to carry out the work. When the participants worked on the theme “research and practice hand in hand” they stated they had received knowledge on how to distinguish between different types of research, how to present research results and to pay attention to who had ordered the research done. The motives of the participants for being part of the research circle were primarily to receive new impulses but also the possibility of trying out new ways of working.

Both the research circle leaders and the participants describe their work in the research circles in a highly positive manner. A significant contributory factor to this is that the questions the participants worked with were related to perceived problems and/or interesting aspects of the daily work and that many participants expressed that they had experienced a direct use for the newly gained knowledge. The fact that the work was spread over a long period of time was experienced by most of them as positive since this allowed time for reflection and the possibility of working practically in between meetings. The participants are described as motivated and interested. One problem was however noted and that was that the participants often had difficulty in expressing themselves in writing. None of them however stated that it had been difficult to accept comments on their work. “We have dared to comment on each others’ work. It feels as if we have dared all of us to be open and frank” (Nyström, 1998:16).

The leaders of the research circle have been experienced as knowledgeable and interested by the participants. They were very positive to the fact that they came from the college. “It has been very good to have teachers come from the college, they have another view on reality and
appear to be interested in what we have done” (Nyström, 1998:17). It would appear the research circle has given opportunities to bring together researchers and practitioners.

5.4 The National Agency for Education report

A report from the National Agency for Education (1995) shows that an interest in carrying out research-based studies has been awakened among a number of the teachers who participated. The result was that the participants throughout claimed that the project had resulted in a well-functioning dialogue between researchers and the teacher group. The authors believe that research circles where researchers meet teachers are an embryo for a new kind of in-service training. According to this report the teachers mean that working in research circles is about an attitude to knowledge and teaching - an attitude that is characterised by active reflection.

In order to put together a more qualified form of development work in schools it is desirable according to this report to find ways beyond “a career as a school head“. One way would be to give teachers a greater responsibility for development work in schools and this could also be linked more closely to teacher training and the research that is done there. In this way research circles could be one of the methods which could be successfully used.

In the Agency’s report it is stated that experiences form the project show that it is necessary to firmly anchor what is planned through detailed agreements among all parties concerned in order to help the planning and establishment phase. These contacts require considerable time to establish. Another experience is that it important to have inspired individuals in the development work of this kind but that this is not a sufficient precondition for successful work. One important reason for this is pointed out in the report namely that the project work that is carried out tends to be isolated from other activities.
6. DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

I will attempt in the following section to address the questions raised.

6.1 Reasons for using research circles in schools

Motives for using research circles in schools must be sought both at the organisational and individual level. For universities and colleges those institutions that carry out teacher training courses have an obligation to increase their cooperation with schools. Research circles appear to be a suitable alternative to achieving at least part of the task. The municipalities are bound by a development agreement with the teacher unions regarding developing forms for the internal work of the school. Besides this there is a comprehensive ‘push’ from a number of different sources for schools to change and develop. Research circles are naturally one of the many possible alternatives for doing this. On the individual level there are of course persons who claim that it is important to forge increased links between theory and practice. These are found among researchers who wish to get closer to the reality they are studying at the same time as they wish that their research should be put to use. Among the school staff there are individuals who are interested in developing activities and who see in the research circle a possibility of achieving this.

6.2 The research circle as an arena for developing competence

It appears that the research circle provides possibilities for practising and using scientific tools and approaches, theories, methods and a systematic and reflective stance towards knowledge. By producing one’s own knowledge the individual’s capacity to gradually understand and integrate knowledge that others produces is increased. The step between knowledge and its being put to use is shortened. Since the practitioners themselves produce knowledge their awareness of the difficulties attached to this both on the scientific theoretical and
methodological levels is heightened. The researcher-practitioner can begin with more insight taking up in a deeper manner a critical position in relation to the knowledge that is produced and relate it to ‘facts’ and values. The great benefit would be when the individual together with his working group can produce own knowledge for practical use while at the same time increasing awareness of the relative nature of knowledge thus leading to a critical reflective attitude. This is an expression partly of a utilitarian aspect, namely that increased knowledge would be noted in the form of changed practice and partly of a theoretical/philosophical interest, namely increasing the ability of the individual to reflect on the nature of knowledge along with an increase in the competence of interpreting and understanding contexts the individual is in. Goodson (1995) however sees a danger in this, the risk that a teacher who just investigates his/her own practice can at best criticise and break out from a narrow approach but leaves the interpretation of other aspects to other groups.

6.3 Research circles as an arena for developing activities

What would be required so that the work in research circles could also lead to the development of activities in the whole school? In contrast with the activities carried out at a school in general the research circle provides time and the necessary space during a considerable span of time to engage in discussions on a specific defined question. It is naturally not obvious that this leads at the same time to pedagogical development but I would claim that the research circle creates the necessary prerequisites for this to be possible. What then are the limitations of the research circle? An obvious weakness is that research circles will only attract a rather limited group of interested individuals keen on developing activities. The research circle can thus hardly be expected to be a ‘broadening’ instrument. At the same time working in research circles can provide ‘good examples’ and thus serve as a model and guide. Another problem with research circles is that they must often take place at times that
are inconvenient for teachers and will thus only attract the most interested individuals and those who do not have everyday duties that prevent them from attending. This can also be experienced as a signal to the staff that pedagogical development is not important. I believe this is highly regrettable for the development of schools. A third difficulty is that working with pedagogical development is a demanding task and takes time, a lot of time. It is furthermore difficult to integrate a scientific attitude and use methods researchers use to try for example to assess the effects of pedagogical action research projects. The usual time available to a research circle is too short for this which means that levels of ambitions have be adjusted downward and this in turn affects the results.

6.4 The research circle as an arena for a meeting between practitioners and researchers

Finally some factors that in one way or another give rise to problems or are experienced as problematical in the meeting between researchers and practitioner are discussed. The research circle is however not just a meeting between researchers and practitioners. For the practitioner it is also a meeting with different “research cultures“. It is probably obvious that the researchers who seek out practitioners for a dialogue are aware of and interested in the conditions of practitioners and take these into account. To generalise and perhaps to some extent overstate the case some of the problems practitioners experience can be described as follows:

“It is clearly easy as a researcher to drift off into technical jargon. Or is it just that we are envious that we as professional teachers do not have our own language. Or do we have one?”. (teacher, Smedjebacken)
What are the possibilities of speaking to each other if we speak different languages? Is it the practitioner that must learn the researcher’s jargon in order to be admitted or should the researcher speak to the learned in Latin and with farmers in the vernacular? Or is there a need to develop a researchers’ Esperanto? There are probably good reasons to support any one of these strategies for easing communication between the researcher and the practitioner. There is clearly no single answer to the question. Is it not so that the same question has many different answers? Perhaps this depends on the context we find ourselves in. As in all other contexts when people communicate with each other it is a matter of wanting to communicate, that is, it is primarily not a question of finding techniques. It is a way of being, a desire to conduct a conversation.
References


Stockholm: Nerenius & Santérus Förlag.


Tydén, T. , & Kåks, H. *Att möta forskning genom utbildning.* Falun: Dalarnas forskningsråd, DFR-rapport, 1995:3.